

Australia: Indian students boycott Victorian Labor government's "Walk for Harmony"

By Patrick O'Connor
13 July 2009

Indian students boycotted yesterday's "Walk for Harmony" in central Melbourne after the Victorian Labor government of Premier John Brumby refused to allow them to address the rally. This outrageous act of censorship laid bare the real agenda of what had been billed as an official show of support for diversity and equality: to help secure the lucrative inflow of international students' tuition fees by organising a public relations exercise advertising Victoria as a safe and attractive place to study.

Indian students held protests in Melbourne and Sydney in late May and early June following a series of racist and violent attacks. Amid ongoing coverage of the issue in the Indian media, the federal and state Labor governments became increasingly concerned over the potential impact on the \$15 billion education market. Brumby responded by announcing the Walk for Harmony. The event was timed to coincide with a tour of several Indian cities by a high-level delegation—including federal and state government officials, university representatives, and police—aimed at countering negative reports about the situation confronting international students in Australia.

The exclusion of representatives of the Indian students from the Walk for Harmony platform reflected the fact that every aspect of the stage-managed affair was designed to prevent discussion of the issues raised by the racist assaults. Such a discussion would immediately pose the question as to how the Labor Party could posture as a champion of equality, inclusion, and fairness, while at the same time presiding over the most ruthless exploitation of international students. Facing systematic and institutionalised discrimination, students from overseas pay exorbitant tuition fees—several times higher than those paid by most Australian students—are unable to access Medicare and other social welfare programs, and are even refused permission to access public transport at student concession rates.

The Brumby government's cynical calculations suffered a serious blow when the media reported early Sunday that the Federation of Indian Students of Australia (FISA) was staging a boycott.

FISA spokesman Gautam Gupta told the ABC: "We think the government is now basically using it as a political media stunt," he declared. "Nothing more than that. Unfortunately

they are trying to dilute the main issue, and we don't want to be part of any dilution. We want the debate to be basically focused on the victims, the unsafe streets, and the rising crime rate and the failure of the justice system."

The government's absurd pretext for silencing the Indian students was that "harmony walk" speakers were to be restricted to "umbrella groups that aren't ethnic or religion-based". Brumby declared that a selected member of the Federation of International Students would be allowed to participate—but in the end even this was restricted to allowing a young woman to speak before the walk, when most people were still assembling and unaware that they were being addressed. The official platform erected in central Melbourne's Federation Square was restricted to Labor and Liberal politicians and the police.

A small number of leading FISA members attended the rally, but stressed that they did not do so as participants. Gautam Gupta later told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "I attended as an observer, and I covered my mouth in protest at not being able to speak. FISA had four or five people there—we were hoping till the end that we would be invited to speak. The march was a political stunt."

FISA president Amit Menghani spoke with the WSWWS at the end of the "harmony walk".

"Instead of addressing the facts, instead of having debates, instead of coming up with solutions to these particular problems, what the government has tried to do is divert the whole situation," he explained. "They have tried to eliminate the debates that were going on in terms of students' safety concerns. We support multiculturalism but we will not support any politician's PR exercise towards this particular rally.... They have clearly said they are not letting any of the student bodies speak. They are eliminating the student factor in this thing. Now if you look at the rally how many students are here?"

"Nobody is here to listen to us. They don't want to discuss anything on the real issues. They are just diverting themselves, contradicting themselves after each new statement. At the end of the day, we all know that the education system is one of the biggest sources of revenue for Australia after iron and coal—it's the third biggest industry. Now they're just having some task force ready, holding some committee meetings—it's basically

going round the table, passing the ball from one person to another, until at some point they say, 'OK, let's have a harmony walk'. So what's the point of it? There was no use in having this sort of harmony walk."

As Menghani indicated, very few university students attended the event. About 5,000 to 10,000 people participated, many as part of officially invited national, ethnic, and religious groups. Among the largest delegations were the Chinese religious sect Falun Gong, exiled Vietnamese flying old South Vietnam flags, and members of the Ethiopian Oromo group.

The entire event had a contrived and artificial atmosphere. Large numbers of Walk for Harmony marshals distributed official balloons, t-shirts, stickers, and small Australian flags. No handmade banners or placards were visible. No doubt in response to the Indian students' boycott, there was a definite attempt to shift the emphasis of the event away from the issues surrounding the international students and towards a more general support for "multiculturalism".

Labor Party state parliamentarians and their staffers, together with local mayors and councillors, made themselves prominent. Also attending were many uniformed police officers with their partners and children. This attempt to present cops as being "part of the community" was all the more grotesque given the actions of dozens of police on June 1, when they viciously broke up a sit-down protest staged by Indian students and their supporters at a busy intersection outside Flinders Street train station, just metres from where the official Walk for Harmony speeches were made. Unsurprisingly, the event's organisers made no mention of the police assault.

Police Commissioner Simon Overland addressed the crowd. He appeared alongside two young immigrant children who had been dressed up in police uniform as part of the shameless photo opportunity. Without directly raising the assaults on Indian students and the widespread reporting of police indifference to these crimes, Overland mentioned "recent challenges", and declared that the police "understand our responsibility to deal with those issues and we take those responsibilities seriously".

The other speakers were Melbourne Lord Mayor Robert Doyle, state opposition leader Ted Baillieu, and Premier Brumby.

Brumby declared the walk "a great event for our state" that sent "a very loud, clear message out to the rest of Australia, and around the rest of the world" about Victoria's support for diversity. The premier made no direct reference to the Indian students, but declared that "we condemn racism in whatever form that it takes" and said that, "in relation to our international students", the government would create a new "one-stop shop" to assist with "counselling, accommodation, and welfare support".

This measure will do nothing to address the real problems confronting international students and, like the harmony walk itself, is only intended to bolster the state's international

image.

Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and International Students for Social Equality distributed hundreds of leaflets, "Violence against Indian students in Australia: the class issues" and "The Victorian government's 'Walk for Harmony': a cynical exercise in damage control".

The latter explained: "The International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), the student movement of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is fundamentally opposed to the reprehensible treatment and exploitation of international students by the Rudd Labor government and its state counterparts, which flows directly from their pro-market agenda.... The ISSE demands that all students, whether born in Australia or overseas, be provided access to free university education, high quality accommodation, a living allowance, full transport concessions and healthcare. To fight for their most basic rights, students cannot rely on the state or federal Labor governments, but turn to the development of a powerful and unified movement of the international working class—cutting across racial and ethnic lines—that will reorganize society along socialist lines, making available its vast resources to fulfil these urgent social needs."

The ISSE's perspective was advanced in direct opposition to the various middle class protest groups, which made every effort to shore up the Labor government's flagging credibility and provide a "left" cover for the event. While the Indian students took a well-publicised, principled stand and boycotted what was nothing more than a government-police public relations exercise, the Socialist Alliance and Socialist Alternative decided to support it, mobilising their members and supporters, and marching, under their banners, behind Brumby, the police and co. Their participation served to underscore the hostility of the so-called radical organisations to an independent political perspective based on the working class, and their increasingly craven role as the left flank of the political establishment.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>