

Thousands join March for Science demonstrations in Australia

By our reporters
24 April 2017

Some 12,000 people participated in March for Science protests in Australian state capitals and regional cities on Saturday to oppose government attacks on science, scientific research and education.

The largest rallies were held in Melbourne and Sydney, where an estimated 4,000 and 3,000 people attended respectively. Hundreds participated in other cities. Scientists, researchers, university and high school students and families joined the protests, many carrying hand-made banners and placards.

In line with the international protests, March for Science organisers in Australia called for universal literacy, open communication of scientific knowledge, government policy based on peer-review evidence, and stable public investment into scientific research and development.

Rally speakers denounced US President Donald Trump, appealed to the Australian government to “take action” over climate change, and called for greater funding for scientific research.

University of Sydney Emeritus Professor of Public Health Simon Chapman told the Sydney rally that 500 years after Galileo Galilei was tried for heresy, Trump was “the new inquisitor and in charge of the world’s most powerful nation.”

Trump had “issued orders gagging scientists” in his first week as president. Chapman asked: “Is there anyone here today who doesn’t expect Trump very soon to put conditions on the funding of state universities to weed out any science that might hinder his ambitions? Well, he has already begun.”

Chapman said the majority of attacks in Australia were on climate-change science. He pointed to other science funding cuts by former Liberal-National Prime Minister Tony Abbott, but failed to mention cuts to scientific research and education imposed by Labor Party governments.

Both Jonica Newby, a science writer and former host of ABC television’s “Catalyst” program, and former Liberal Party leader John Hewson couched their speeches about science funding in terms of potential benefits for new

sources of profit for Australian business. “We know that it will be science and technology that will help our economy surf the change and transitions rather than drown but it requires public support and political will,” Newby declared.

None of the speakers in Sydney or Melbourne raised the threat of war or referred to the use of science under capitalism to engineer the increasingly sophisticated weapons developed to destroy and maim. The omission was particularly striking given the recent dropping of the Massive Ordnance Air Blast by the US on Afghanistan, the largest-ever bomb used since the US nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II.

Peter Doherty, an immunologist, told the Melbourne rally that science was “not a political issue.” Anyone who attempted to “inject politics” into the issue was betraying the cause of science. He claimed that Trump could be restricted by the US Congress and hoped the rallies would ensure that sections of the Congress, “particularly the more conservative section,” would see the necessity to support science.

These attempts to suppress political discussion, promote complacency and sow illusions that governments would withdraw their attacks on science were in contrast to the concerns of the marchers. Their hand-made placards included “Schools, not stock markets,” “Money for science, not tax breaks for business,” “Protect the voice of independent science,” “Science, the self-correcting search for truth” and “Science was always political.”

Socialist Equality Party campaigners distributed hundreds of copies of the *World Socialist Web Site* Perspective—“Science and Socialism”—at the Sydney and Melbourne events.

In Sydney, **Madeleine**, a PhD student researching protein changes in the brain that cause epilepsy, carried a placard calling for more than one-year employment contracts for scientists. She explained the difficult financial conditions facing scientists in Australia.

“A science degree plus a PhD is eight years of university education but if you don’t get a fellowship you’re pretty

much only offered a 12-month contract anywhere. Without a fellowship, you can't get a permanent job... There's no real tenure track in Australia.

"You can get a university position where you teach, but a full-time position in research doesn't exist. My PhD supervisor—he's a professor—has a five-year job, and that's the maximum you can get in research. And then you have to apply for your funding again, and there's no guarantee you'll get it.

"Last year only 10 percent of all applications for grants were successful and they were mostly in clinical research. Basic research, the research that leads to clinical research, is dying in Australia."

Madeleine also opposed the Turnbull Liberal-National government's new restrictions, announced last week, on work visa rights for people coming from overseas. "There will be a brain drain and the changes to 457 visas mean that life scientists, biologists, marine biologists and so on, can't come to Australia.

"Most people I work with, after they finish their PhDs, don't go into science. You just can't. You can't get a mortgage if you're on a 12-month contract... The best way to fund science is to pay salaries and we need people to keep the machines running, support staff. A team of people is the best way to fund science."

In Melbourne, **Donna**, a high school student, said she joined the rally because she was concerned about climate change: "Now they're [the government] considering building new coal mines and that just feels so backward and contrary to what we need to be doing.

"The politicians know that climate science is real. They don't deny other research or scientific discoveries but because climate science has the power to disturb big businesses in the mining industry they say it's not real."

Referring to the WSWS Perspective, "Science and Socialism," Donna said: "I think what this leaflet is saying about capitalism is important. There is an argument that capitalism is human nature, and people are greedy. But that's a kind of insult to the thinking skills and development of the human race. It's just like saying we're all animals and are clamouring to the highest positions. We're smarter than that. It's not human nature. It's the people at the top."

Commenting on the danger of war, Donna added: "All this war now is so pointless and stupid. Now we have the bomb—the big 'mother of all bombs' that the USA dropped on Afghanistan—which cost millions. American society is so bad right now—they don't have healthcare for everyone—and they could have spent that money on better education, infrastructure and healthcare. Instead they spent it on this bomb.

"Most people want world peace but you get civilians being

killed because of the interests of these few. Trump wants to reaffirm the US position as the dominant world superpower."

Alex, an archaeologist, attended the Melbourne march with his partner, Sarah, a scientist. "I came to the rally because the idea is that science needs a sharing environment in order to thrive," he said.

"You need people who can express their ideas, whatever they may be. Science occurs through constructive criticism and discussion. Any kind of gag—be it political or social—is detrimental to research. The main barrier to that today has orange skin and a very bad hair-do. And he has very similar lackeys in Australia."

A WSWS reporter commented that the attack on science did not simply stem from Trump, but from the subordination of every aspect of society to the profit interests of a tiny corporate elite. "Indeed," Alex said. "Whoever puts the most money in any issue of science—that's where the 'truth' is. It can't be disengaged from any financial gain."

The problems of poverty and social inequality, he added, could only be solved once social planning was divorced from the profit motive. "I'm convinced that this is something that needs to be completely disengaged from profit. There should be a community of scientists working together with the global human beings' support, to solve all these problems."

Alex has travelled extensively to conduct his scientific research. "I lived for a long time in Italy," he said, and noted that the attacks on immigrants and refugees internationally "have been going on for years... We have to go beyond state barriers today. We have to get to a point where we realise that it's just the one global community."

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>