

Tens of thousands of Australian students join climate strike protest

By Oscar Grenfell
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Tens of thousands of Australian high school students participated in strikes yesterday, demanding immediate action to address climate change and environmental destruction. The rallies were part of a series of protests around the world, including across Europe and in the United States.

The demonstrations were the largest in Australia involving high school students since at least 2003, when there were mass protests against the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq.

An estimated 30,000 participated in Sydney, with similar numbers in Melbourne. Around 10,000 protested in Brisbane, the state capital of Queensland, while thousands rallied in Perth, Adelaide and Hobart. In Newcastle, a working class regional city north of Sydney, at least 2,000 demonstrated. Dozens of smaller protests were held in country towns and regional centres across the country.

The size of the rallies makes clear that young people, who have grown up amid endless war, soaring inequality and an assault on the working class, are being propelled into political struggle. They are animated, not only by concern over the destruction of the environment, but also the dominance of the banks and corporations over every aspect of social and political life, the rise of militarism and the turn to authoritarianism by governments around the world.

In the lead up to the strike, senior politicians and the corporate press, expressed the fear and hostility of the political establishment at the emergence of a movement among young people. Members of the federal Liberal-National Coalition government denounced the students as “truants,” while the Murdoch media ran a stream of articles, claiming that the protests were the result of “left-wing indoctrination” in high schools. Teachers who publicly supported the rallies were threatened with punitive measures.

Bill Shorten, the federal Labor leader, also condemned the protests, demanding that students demonstrate outside of school hours. His comments underscored the fact that Labor and the trade unions are no less hostile to independent political action by young people and workers than their Liberal-National counterparts.

Other politicians, however, including NSW Labor leader Michael Daley and leading Greens representatives declared their support for the rallies. This was one expression of a coordinated attempt by Labor, the Greens, the unions and middle-class environmental groups to subordinate the movement of high school students to the very parties that are responsible for environmental degradation.

These efforts were on display at the rally in Sydney, which was tightly controlled by the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC), a non-government organisation with close ties to Labor, the Greens and the union bureaucracy.

The AYCC was established ten years ago. It is closely linked to GetUp!, an organisation that operates as a campaign lobby group for Labor and the Greens. GetUp! was founded prior to the 2007 federal election to channel mass hostility to the federal Coalition government of John Howard behind the election of a big business Labor government. Like GetUp!, the AYCC has substantial financial resources and a full-time staff of at least 68 people.

High school students who addressed the Sydney rally condemned the continuing use of coal, including the establishment of the Carmichael mine in central Queensland by multinational corporation Adani.

They denounced the close ties between the major parties and the coal industry. Some denounced Labor MPs for refusing to commit to ending the expansion of coal mining and to action to stem climate change. Others spoke powerfully on the devastating impact of climate

change on the Pacific Islands, and on the dire plight of Aboriginal communities, partly resulting from environmental degradation and a lack of clean water sources.

Reflecting the influence of the AYCC, however, the student speakers called on young people to pressure the official political parties, including by calling and texting Bill Shorten's office.

The official line of the rally, and of the AYCC, was most graphically demonstrated by the decision to introduce Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore as the keynote speaker. Moore has been mayor since 2004. She was previously an independent member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly from 1988 to 2012.

Moore is part of the political establishment, with the closest of ties to Labor, the Greens and the unions. She has built a base of support among privileged layers of the upper middle-class on the basis of identity politics—race, gender and sexual orientation—and by posturing as a defender of the environment.

Moore's speech centred on calls for the ouster of the Liberal-Nationals in the upcoming New South Wales and federal elections. She noted that most of the students present were not old enough to vote, but pathetically called upon them to appeal to relatives to cast a ballot against the Coalition. Moore touted a recent court ruling, blocking the establishment of a new mine, and absurdly claimed that limited reductions in carbon emissions by Sydney City Council pointed the way forward in the fight against climate change.

Moore's implicit claim that Greens-backed Labor governments would resolve the environmental crisis are an utter fraud.

Labor and the Greens are as responsible for the failure to address climate change as the Liberal-National Coalition.

The Greens-backed federal Labor government of Julia Gillard did nothing to stem carbon emissions, when it was in office from 2010–2013. Under its signature carbon tax policy, Australia's carbon emissions actually increased. According to Labor's own 2012 modelling, if the tax had remained in place from 2012 to 2020, annual national carbon emissions would have grown from 582 to 621 million tonnes by 2020.

Emissions trading schemes, promoted by the Greens, are just as worthless. Where they have been introduced in Europe and elsewhere, they have succeeded only in establishing lucrative opportunities for "green businesses" and creating new markets for financial

swindlers and speculators to exploit.

Moreover, a federal Labor government would deepen Australia's alignment with the US drive to war, including against nuclear-armed China, while implementing austerity measures aimed at making the working class pay for the deepening economic crisis. A Labor government would also continue Australia's role in the persecution of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange for exposing US-led war crimes, mass surveillance and diplomatic intrigues, and would expand moves towards a police state.

The sharpest expression of the AYCC's role in seeking to suppress any discussion of the broader issues confronting young people and an alternative perspective, was its attempts to censor the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth wing of the Socialist Equality Party, at the Sydney and Melbourne rallies.

At both demonstrations, AYCC operatives approached IYSSE campaigners and demanded that they cease distributing leaflets. IYSSE representatives insisted on their democratic right to disseminate political material and continued to campaign. In Melbourne, a group of students who witnessed the AYCC's actions encouraged the IYSSE to continue campaigning and took a large bundle of leaflets.

The attempts by the political establishment to co-opt the climate strike movement must be resisted.

Climate change is a product of the profit system, and the irrational division of the globe into competing capitalist nation-states. What is required is a turn to the working class, and the construction of a mass socialist movement against war, inequality and authoritarianism. Only by establishing a world socialist society, based on social need, not private profit, can the scourges of climate change, poverty and the threat of nuclear war be ended.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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