1968-1993

25 years of secondary student revolt

Greg Adamson

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Dedication

To Jim Percy, the first of a generation of secondary student rebels.

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Introduction: 25 years ago …

Amid the turmoil in France in 1968 one student slogan read "We are the people our parents warned us against." Some students were considered too young to receive the warning. They were the secondary students, the "children".

Angry, frustrated and ignored, from that year across the world secondary students started to have their say. Why? Partly it was the changing character of secondary schools. Students were forced to stay at their regimented school longer.

Partly it was the hypocrisy. Every night saw the obscenity of the Vietnam war on television. That was considered okay. But when more than 10000 people marched against the war in May 1970 the *Sydney Morning Herald* headed its national report, "Seven-letter word shocks Brisbane crowds." Brisbane marchers had apparently chanted: "One, two, three, four, We don't want your fucking war."

Partly it was because the whole of society was in turmoil. Every forgotten, misrepresented, oppressed group had started to challenge their lot.

These were the 1960s.

As the Catholic Church once debated whether women had souls, the press in its wisdom discussed the pros and cons of considering "schoolchildren" human. Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* pontificated in the early 1970s,

> What these militant Billy Bunters and playground radicals don't seem to grasp is that they are being led by the nose by a handful of extremist political groups, Trotskyite troublemakers and half-baked revolutionary agitators who care as much about education as [then ACTUpresident] Mr Hawke cares about BHP shareholders.
>
> The vast majority of sensible students will ignore them. The others are being solemnly told the [1972 national secondary student] strike will promote "greater student rights, freedom of expression, an end to arbitrary punishment and educational discrimination." Any student who believes that will believe anything. But that's just the trouble. They do!

Regardless of the warnings secondary students took a stand, firstly by the thousands and later by the tens of thousands. These students provided an important part of the

militant anti-war movement in the late 1960s. They formed groups, published leaflets and newsletters, and took direct action around their school situation. They took part in national strike action for democratic rights and improved conditions in 1972. They went on to campaign for women's rights, against uranium mining and nuclear weap-ons, and for the environment.

Today that spirit remains. Thousands of secondary students were the first onto the streets across Australia as the US government bombed Iraq in early 1991. The following year through the Fact and Fantasy File diary campaign-secondary students fought against the new puritanism which the federal Labor government attempted to foist on them.

For the past quarter century secondary students, young people aged around 11 to 18, have joined and in some cases led movements against oppression and exploitation both in Australia and internationally. This pamphlet describes the highlights of this period. It cannot capture every militant experience of the millions. of secondary students who have passed through the Australian education system over these 25 years. But it seeks to draw together the major threads of that diverse movement. In particular it focuses on campaigns which Resistance, the major national movement involved in schools over these years, has participated in. (While Resistance's name changed during that period to the Socialist Youth Alliance and then back to Resistance, for simplicity the current name is used through-out.)

About the author

Greg Adamson joined Resistance in 1969. As a Year 12 student he was national coordinator of the September 20, 1972, secondary student strike. He is currently active in environmental and social justice campaigns, and is a member of the Democratic Socialist Party.

1. The beginnings

The first day of school
Is always the hardest,
The first day of school
Hallways the darkest.
— *Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy*

The movement against the war in Vietnam dominated Australian politics in the second half of the 1960s. What began as another Australian involve-ment in a war against an Asian country became a byword for failed diplomacy. In particular this enraged a young generation whose parents had idolised the stability of the 1950s after the hardship and horror of the 1930s and 1940s. Far from being pleased and content with what they saw, this young generation found themselves revolted by the hypocrisy of a govern-ment which sent off young people off to fight a war for which -there was no justification. Every night television presented vivid images of a poor back-ward country being blown to pieces. Far from being pleased at the number of "enemy" reported killed, young people asked unthinkable questions, such as Why?

On to the streets

From the mid-1960s students took part in demonstrations against the war and against the visits of senior US officials including President Lyndon Johnson in 1966 and Vice-President Spiro Agnew in 1970.

In 1968 Johnson claimed to meet anti-war demands and entered negotiations with the Vietnamese freedom fighters at the Paris Peace Talks. Through this action the US government sought to shift the focus of the war, to cut US casualties while maintaining the war at its existing level. This was taken as good coin by much of the peace movement. But the student wing of the movement, including secondary students, refused to accept that protests should stop before the US left Vietnam.

By 1970 secondary students estimated at tens of thousands took part in the Moratorium demonstrations which drew well over 100,000 participants around the

country. Groups were formed in many schools. Students were persecuted for handing out leaflets or wearing anti-war badges as they were for breach of uniform or the wearing of beards. The main response to these threats, suspensions and expulsions (which often had to be withdrawn under student pressure) was massive student support for the anti-war movement and opposition to petty school regulations.

As Australian secondary students organised around the war and other issues an international school revolt was brewing. In France, secondary students played a major role in the revolutionary uprising in May-June 1968 through their action committees. Secondary students were the first to mobilise in large numbers after the defeat of that uprising due to the conservatism of the French Communist Party. In February 1971 more than 10,000 students defied government bans and demonstrated successfully for the release of a fellow student victimised by police. In the following years demonstrations were held against yearly changes to secondary education, involving between 10,000 and 100,000 students.

In the United States the largest secondary student actions to date occurred on April 26, 1968. On that day up to 200,000 students with an average age of 16 boycotted classes, 72% of all secondary students. The US *Guardian* newspaper described one typical scene:

> The southeast Bronx is not known for its opposition to the war in Vietnam. Nor for its organised activity in general. But on this warm, sunny Friday morning, housewives stared out of windows to. see the colorful sight of hundreds of chanting students, black and white and Puerto Rican, marching through the streets to protest a war.

In October 1971, 10,000 school students protested in Vancouver, Canada, against the Amchitka bomb test. In this case the student actions precipitated massive protests involving about 100,000 people three weeks later.

Secondary students took to the streets over issues ranging from a London demonstration against corporal punishment to massive 1972 student and worker demonstrations in Malagasy against French domination.

High school students against the war in Vietnam

In Sydney a central role in the anti-war movement was played by Resistance. Formed in 1967, originally from activists at Sydney University, this group was able to grow beyond the campuses in part because of the support it gave to secondary student activists. An early event was a secondary student teach-in on the Vietnam war in July 1968. This drew 400 people, overwhelmingly secondary students. It was organised in conjunction with the newly formed High School Students Against the War in Vietnam (HSSAWV). Following this success, HSSAWV began publishing *Student Underground.*

The first issue appeared in September 1968, and announced:

> This news sheet … is an attempt to make students realise that there is another attitude to the war besides that of the government and their great and powerful friends, that some people, including high school students, believe that thousands of innocent people are being killed pointlessly, in a senseless and totally unjustifiable war.

Response to the first issue was overwhelming. A first print run of 6000 was quickly increased to 26,000 copies, distributed at more than 80 schools. All daily papers in Sydney as well as two television stations reported on the publication. *Student Underground* was attacked in NSW state parliament, making it a symbol of anti-authoritarianism. Support was not surprising. School consisted of an endless set of rules, each beginning with *Don't*. Don't wear long hair (for male students) or beards, don't hold meetings, don't discuss politics, don't read or distribute subversive newsletters. Antiwar groups were generally banned. Antiwar speakers rarely got through the school gates.

This first issue of *Student Underground* advertised an antiwar rally on September 20, including a march to the US Consulate followed by leafleting of US and Australian service personnel in Kings Cross. Around 2000 people participated, half of them secondary students.

An early 1969 issue of *Student Underground* spelt out its view on the education system:

> There is a misconception among some dissatisfied high school stu-dents that the existing state of school education arises because of a few bugs in the system. They think that these will be effectively ironed out by students cooperating with the administration, trying to get them "on side" … This is not the way in which the basic contradictions in the education system (and in society) will be changed. To change the education system, the society which has created it must also be changed, since school is an important tool in creating the apathy that exists in Australian society. As long as apathetic high school students are required to fill the need for apathetic, uninformed and unquestioning working people, then society will allow no real change in the education system …
>
> We in the Student Underground Movement intend to focus attention on this society in order to change it, and with it the abhorrent symptoms such as the Vietnam war, social injustice and the education system.

Throughout 1969 Student Underground became a movement in its own right, with supporters distributing the newsletter in more than 100 schools by the tens of thousands. In addition to the Vietnam war Student Under-ground raised a range of other issues. These included school uniforms, leaflet distribution in schools, politics in schools and other aspects of students' rights. It held an alternative "Education Weak"

demonstration in opposition to the official Education Week parade, and won undying education department hatred and widespread student. support.

News sheets were also published in a number of individual schools across Australia. One of the most successful of these was at Cremorne Girls High, where eight issues of *The Spark* appeared in 1969. Students involved in *The Spark* found that the most popular issues were those dealing with compulsory scripture, the exam system, powerless school councils, national anthems and pledges, the prefect system, head master repression, and the now abolished Commonwealth Day (formerly Empire Day). *The Spark* also raised other issues, including the Vietnam war, poverty and alienation. Refusing to stand for the national anthem drove the school administration into a frenzy. As one issue reported, there was a general discipline problem.

> Last week in an assembly on the terrace the prefects were invested with new disciplinary powers, i.e., the right to give detentions. This was necessary, it was claimed, as the prefects were not being given the respect that was their due, and they had no way of enforcing their authority. As much as it was against the will of many to have these powers thrust upon them, they exercised them with great gusto the following day when the creditable score of 34 was chalked up.

In Melbourne about 15 single school news sheets were published by supporters of Secondary Students In Dissent (SSID), a group with relations to the Maoist-oriented Worker Student Alliance.

2. We don't need no thought control

We don't need no education
We don't need no thought control
No dark sarcasm in the classroom
Teacher leave them kids alone
— *Pink Floyd, The Wall*

Since the 1950s major changes have occurred in the composition of secondary education in Australia. A report into the NSW education system completed in 1956 notes that of secondary students enrolled in 1952, only 16% reached the final year. In 1992 the figure was 77%. Today there are very few jobs for school leavers (or anybody for that matter) so many students find there is no point in leaving school. The jobs that are available require increasingly high qualifications.

In addition to students staying. at school longer the length of school courses generally increased (for example, five to six years in NSW after the Wyndham Scheme was introduced in the early 1960s). The effect,of these changes has been to subject 17 and 18 year old students to restrictions originally designed for 14 year olds. To quote one cartoon, "The rules are simple: DON'T." It is not necessarily 17 to 18 year olds who are going to complain loudest. As the composition of demonstrations and sit-ins over secondary student rights shows it is often 13 to 15 year olds, faced with several more years of school, who are the most vocal protesters. This style of "education" isn't goodfor students of any age.

Role of schools

In the late 1960s major media and political parties had a nearly perfect record of opposition to all radicalism. Mountains of lies were heaped on militant unionists, campus students, and women's rights activists. However, when it came to secondary students, all sense of rationality went out the window.

While organised conservative groups existed on campus, the school had traditionally been left "non-political". Apathy was sufficient to keep these students apolitical while they were being mentally moulded for. the "needs" of society.' Fourteen-year-old students being recruited to revolutionary politics was a far cry from the stereotype of "long-haired, unkempt, rabble rousing university students." The ruling class hated and feared the thought that its most cherished possession, its children, could turn on it.

Student disregard for such trivial matters as school uniform, playing areas or subject timetables met a violent reaction from the school authorities. These petty rules and regulations were not just anachronisms which could be done away with. They were central to a system which sought to reinforce the status quo by crushing individuality.

Essentially these points remain valid in the early 1990s. In a world where governments change every few years, fashions every few months, the similarity of school experience across the decades is remarkable. This is because of the basic character of education within this society.

Within the school system those with good marks go on to university. The rest go into the workforce, possible via some vocational training. All very democratic. But the laborer's son or daughter rarely becomes a doctor. The lawyer's children rarely feels the need to be earning by 16. From top to bottom in every aspect the education system is meant to duplicate existing social structures in society. A few very bright working-class children beat the odds and break through.: But that simply feeds the myth. In Victoria the pattern is more transparent than other states: high school students have the option of following an academic: path, technical school students don't. And of course att exclusive private schools children learn that, in proportion to their parents' wealth, they are born to rule.

Even for future workers, however, preparation for regimentation within the workforce is only part of the current education system. There is a growing requirement for "clever" workers, and not just those who reach university. So the school system runs up against a problem: strangling the creativity of young people, while producing highly trained workers who can think (for the purposes of work, that is).

The resulting abuse of education in schools can be seen in two ways: firstly in the courses, secondly in the treatment of students. The school's primary function is kept to a crude process of regimentation and indoctrination. The humanities reinforce existing social prejudices, exhorting na-tionalism and encouraging sexism, racism and a series of other chauvinisms. Conceptual understanding of mathematics and science is played down as these are reduced to isolated formulae. Languages and the arts are likewise mechanically dissected under the guise of being "taught". Why else wait until

the early teens to teach students foreign languages when *any* linguist can tell you that the best age to start learning is under five years old?

Alongside this is the dehumanising treatment of individual students within the school situation. Secondary school students' ages range from about 11 to 18. It is in these years that "children" become "adults". These adolescent years should include the most creative and exhilarating of a person's life. Yet these are "problem" years, a frustrating and difficult period. Two institutions of capitalism, the school and the family, are largely responsible for this. For the large majority of students, secondary school is a period between oppression within the family and the less personal but no less real oppression within the workforce.

This explains the hatred which many students feel towards their school. This is often the strongest response to 10 or 12 years of schooling. Figures on destruction of school property, particularly the vandalising of school buildings, are astounding. These students are simply responding to the vandalism and destruction which those schools have wrought on them. Legislation is now being introduced in many states to force parents to pay for the cost of vandalism. Perhaps an appropriate response would be for parents to sue the education system for the damage done to their children.

One subject which remains taboo within schools is that of suicide. Why do so many secondary students kill themselves? Sometimes it is the pressure of exams. Exam periods are accompanied by a rise in reports of suicides. Other times it is the treatment which students get at school. Even though it is often from other students that the pressure comes, the school system deserves full blame for encouraging the racist, sexist and.homophobic attitudes of these students. In one case at Eastwood Boys High in Sydney in 1972 a homosexual student who couldn't bear the anti-homosexual hostility any longer burned himself to death. Despite greater community awareness, in the schools of today little appears to have changed. Secondary students make up a large proportion of "poofter bashers".

The more things change …

The Wyndham reforms brought into NSW schools through the 1960s and 1970s emphasised preparation of the student for later study. High school was extended from five years to six years, and courses tried to bring to the fore the appreciation and understanding of subjects. These changes attempted to adapt the subjects and teaching methods to new conditions while leaving,the school system intact (for example, the heavy reliance on public exams). Predictably, within three years of its introduction, learning was once again synonymous with memorising irrelevant information. (The three intervening years were marked by confusion rather than improvement.) Needless

to say, throughout this period the oppressive school apparatus remained in operation. Since then, and in other states, similar changes on a smaller scale have been brought in from time to time.

One more substantial change has been the introduction of a system of separate matriculation colleges for the final two years of secondary education. While this makes life more pleasant for the final two years, the main effect is to fragment an already divided (primary, secondary, tertiary) system.

Regardless of what is promised, at the end of the day the school system remains true to its regimenting requirements. For example, although schools have been forced to train more women for the labor market, they have still not changed their function of preparing women to take on their roles as defined by society.

For students, winning recognition for themselves as people with a legitimate contribution to society .is a major battle. Their opponents may at various times include parents, teachers, government education departments and society as a whole. This means that before students can raise issues such as uniforms, discipline, and the arbitrary regulation of all student affairs they first have to make their existence as people known.

During the lead up to the 1972 national secondary strike, one parent expressed the alternate view in a letter to the *National Times*:

> As a mother of children likely to be affected by the proposed student strike on September 20, I wish to express my disgust and annoyance at this disgraceful exploitation of youth for political purposes. Children, for it is children who are being made the scapegoats in this proposal, should be immune from the efforts of an un-Australian minority group to undermine our education system in this country.

The approach of the NSW education department to the same strike was to threaten that "children under the school leaving age of 15 who played truant from school could come in for investigation by the Child Welfare Department."

This comment reminds one of the similarity between school students and prisoners. The child welfare department becomes the parole board of the education system. In some ways the prison system is more progressive, having banned corporal punishment last century.

In the midst of growing dissatisfaction educationists have experimented with "alternate education." These schools cater for radical teachers and students from generally well-off backgrounds. Despite their "alternate" label their purpose is still to slot students into existing society, rather than help students to change society. In contrast, students who stand up for their rights and fight against discrimination and arbitrary rule of school are preparing themselves for the reality of modem day society.

For poor and working class people there is no escape, at school or in society at large.

Teachers & students

The attitudes of students to teachers and vice versa are conditioned by their relationship within the school. Regardless of personal views teachers are a part of the oppressive school system. Especially when teaching younger students most teachers in the past tried to maintain complete, unchallenged rule within the classroom. They were reinforced in their beliefs by the sight of unresponsive students who they themselves had discouraged from independent thought. This led to the traditional semi-hostility of students to teachers.

The 1960s radicalisation changed some of this. Teachers who received their tertiary education in an era of protest started to drive back the once prevailing conservative attitudes. These teachers whose own memories of school oppression were only four or five years old were both less willing to accept the authority of more senior teachers, and had little desire to dictatorially rule their own classes. As a result students often began to show complete disregard for these more liberal teachers. This reflects not the need for discipline, but the nature of the present courses, which were not designed to be taught but to be forced onto students.

Nevertheless, many teachers as individuals continue to try to make life a bit more bearable for their students. In this they face an uphill battle. Some find their idealism rapidly crushed, especially amid the poverty and over-crowding of working class schools. Others find a more conducive environ-ment. Even there, however, the teacher who attempts to force alternative views on students in the same manner as the standard curriculum is doomed to disappointment. One environmental activist who recently addressed a school group was disappointed by the disinterest of students. It was only afterwards that he learned that students had been put on detention to get them to attend!

Students are used to the punishment they get for stepping outside the unwritten rules. For teachers, however, the punishment can be similarly harsh. In 1976 a dispute took place over the sacking of a teacher at Doncaster High School in Melbourne. A mass meeting of teachers voted to take a week's strike action in support of Helen Rawicki. According to the education department, this teacher had failed to keep an acceptable "level of order and discipline" in the classroom. She had allowed students to leave the room during classes, permitted students to address her by first name and used language "departing from the normal grace of a teacher". Rawicki had allegedly exclaimed "fuck" in the staffroom upon hearing that she had been given an extra class.

Student activists have generally directed their anger at school administrations or

government education departments. Neither teachers as a whole nor teachers' unions have been held responsible for the state of education. The struggles of teachers for better working condition, more teachers, and against victimisation are seen by more aware students as a parallel of their own fights. This is helped when teachers provide information to students about their campaigns.

In general the radicalisation has proceeded more unevenly among teachers than among students. Friction between students' and teachers' movements is mainly the responsibility of teachers. Radical teachers must fight hostile or patronising attitudes towards student radicalism within the teachers' movement. Students in turn have to organise independently of teachers, even when campaigning for teachers' demands. Such independence educates both students and teachers. Channelling student activism into passive support for teachers' demands cannot help anyone. Students should also be wary of being used as political cannon fodder by the Labor Party or the media out to score political points.

While more lenient attitudes to school rules are coming into the public school system, private schools preserve the most archaic and oppressive attitudes towards education. Because student expulsions are much simpler than in state schools, and students go to private schools "by choice", these schools are in a strong position to enforce these rules. However, during periods of action many students reject the advice to be thankful for their privileged position. Private school students are often among the most militant advocates of secondary student rights.

3. School's out

School's out for summer
School's out for ever
School's been blown to pieces
— *Alice Cooper, School's Out*

By 1971 discontent within schools across Australia was reaching mass proportions. Strikes, walk-outs, playground demonstrations and other actions were taking place in all cities. Issues often focussed on poor conditions (bad lighting, no heating, leaking roofs, broken floors) or some other local issue, such as transfer of a teacher. Blacktown.High, a working-class school in Sydney's western suburbs, was an interesting example. The school had a total population of some 3000 students (in two segregated halves), most of whom left in Year 10. In late 1971 repeated class stoppages took place around the issues of crowding and other conditions. These involved Year 8 to Year I 1 students in a situation approaching a "rolling stoppage". This situation continued into 1972, with numerous strikes in individual schools throughout Australia. Reports were appearing in the media every few weeks.

The best organised secondary student movement at that time was in Melbourne. On April 10, 1972, striking students from University High held a city demonstration of 500 students. They appealed to the Victorian Secondary Students Union (VSSU) to organise solidarity actions in other chools. A meeting was held between Education Action Group (EAG) students from University High and the VSSU. At this meeting the most active sections of the VSSU with the support of the EAG counterposed direct action of students to the existing passivity of the VSSU. The EAG and the VSSU jointly projected an all-day student strike on May 31. This was a major success with estimates of up to 3000 students marching in the face of education department threats that participants would not be allowed to sit forthcoming exams.

After the success of this action, a majority of the leadership of the VSSU' hesitated about supporting further demonstrations. The activists (including the University High students) then departed as the Education Action Group.

In June Resistance saw the need for the protests to broaden, and following discussions at a national council meeting called for a coordinated strike on September 20.

The strike tactic had already been used by students at many schools, and involved the largest number of students in visible action. It also reduced the possibility of victimisation of individual students because it involved a mass rather than individual commitment. While many students had been, suspended for participation in strikes and other protests these suspensions were usually withdrawn, sometimes after wider protests.

The actions were endorsed by the Sydney and Melbourne based Education Action Groups and local groups in other centres. Both the activists who led the national student strike, and the practical experiences that they relied on, came from the anti-Vietnam war movement.

In each state preparatory activity was organised. Press releases, badge sales, and publicity leaflets were organised. Endorsements were sought and received from the Australian Union of Students, individual trade unions in Victoria, tertiary student unions (student councils at the University of NSW and Macquarie University in Sydney each contributed $50), Young Labor Associations, Resistance, the Victorian branch of the Communist Party of Australia and many individual leaders of secondary student unions.

In Sydney preparations included an August 17 Picket for Education at the education department to coincide with the department-sponsored Education Week, and a petition presented to the Director-General.

The demands listed on the main Sydney EAG leaflet publicising the strike were:

- Freedom of appearance for all students;
- Freedom of expression;
- No corporal punishment, complete listing of all school rules;
- End to all segregation in schools;
- More finance for state education, more teachers;
- Equalisation of education opportunities.

Preparations received national coverage in the September 4 *National Times*. The report by Jon Powis set the tone for future coverage. It was headed "Marxist at 13, and spreading the message: The Left invades the playgrounds." This referred to North Sydney Boys High student and NSW EAG coordinator Dennis Garnsey.

While this report upset many parents, red-baiting the strike did not seem to affect student support. If anything it appeared that students liked the idea of identifying with a "rebel". (One of the problems that the government faces in allowing political discussion among secondary students is that these students have not necessarily accumulated the

prejudices that "responsible" citizens are expected to display.) The *National Times* was surprised by the response to the report: it carried a full page of letters on the matter in its following issue.

Among the most vehemently hostile coverage leading up to the national day was that of the Sydney *Sunday Telegraph*. The September 17 edition featured a full page report including photos of state coordinators in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and Canberra under the heading "These are the ringleaders." All four were members of Resistance.

1972: National secondary student strike

On September 20, 1972, for the first time in Australian history tens of thousands of secondary students took direct action for their rights. Actions included strikes, school walkouts, meetings in school and rallies after school. The exact number may never be known because most took place at the individual school. Education Departments in most states gave individual principals power to take whatever action they thought necessary to stop students participating. Generally this took the form of blunt threats of reprisal. Nevertheless, the entire Australian school system was disrupted for the day. The experience of a teacher from the NSW town of Bathurst, reflected the situation in schools across the country: most students were unwilling to confront the explicit threats of expulsion from the principal if they took part in the protests, but "normal school work was impossible" since everyone's mind was on the strike.

Up to 10,000 students took part in nationally reported actions but this was just a hint of what happened. In Sydney, for example, petitions circulated showed that the rally of around a thousand students included participants from over 100 schools. These students represented the majority of schools in Sydney.

The Sydney protest assembled at the Town Hall to hear EAG speakers and marched to Hyde Park (near Parliament House) where students were addressed by state parliamentarian George Petersen, black rights activist Gary Foley, University of NSW student paper editor Frans Timmerman, and secondary students speaking on conditions within their own schools.. Several students burned their ties in symbolic protest. The demonstration then moved to the Education Department where a delegation requested to meet the Director-General but were refused entry.

At Penshurst Girls High in Sydney 400 students demonstrated on school grounds. The demands of the students included liberalisation of school uniform regulations and "no privileges for senior students: equal rights for all".

In some cases student action was provoked by a particular school principal on the day. At Riverside Girls High in Sydney, for example, after two fourth year students

had been prevented from attending the city demonstra-tion one second year class walked out en bloc in protest and went to the rally.

Five hundred students staged a sit-in at one Nowra high school while at the other 30 students struck for the day. Strikes were also reported at Tumut and Bathurst.

In Canberra 200 students attended a rally at Parliament House and were addressed by Labor Party parliamentarians Moss Cass and Gordon Bryant among others.

In Melbourne 900 students attended the city march from Treasury Gardens to the City Square. This action was smaller than the May 31 demonstration, partly due to the last-minute decision of the Victorian Secondary Student Union to withhold its support (which had even more dire consequences for. the VSSU).

At Broadmeadow West Tech in Melbourne 200 students staged a protest outside their school on the day of the strike. The students later explained that they couldn't afford to travel into the city.

In Wodonga a large section of one school participated in a strike. Ten representatives travelled 200 miles to attend the Melbourne demonstration.

In Brisbane 300 students participated in a rally at the Roma Street Forum after a march of 200 from the Botanic Gardens.

In Hobart an after-school rally was attended by 300 in Franklin Square which was addressed by teacher and draft resister Tim Thorn and others.

In Launceston 200 Kingsmeadow High students protesting the lack of a school gymnasium marched to Prospect High. There they were joined by 100 students and marched to Launceston's third school, Brooks High, where 400 more students joined the march to Launceston Town Hall for a rally demanding better education conditions.

In Adelaide 300 students marched from Elder Park to the Education Department where a list of demands were presented. Some students waited without result for the education minister to appear.

In Perth 200 students struck to attend a rally at the Supreme Court Gardens.

A survey of 366 students at the Sydney rally gave an interesting indication of age distribution. Seven per cent were in Year 8; 25% in Year 9; 19% in Year 10; 16% in Year 11; and 10% in Year 12. While the closeness of the matriculation exam could have explained the low turnout of final year students it would not explain the low Year 11 representation or the attendance of Year 10 students who were also about to face an external exam. It was students from lower years who felt the burdenn of years more at school.

The media coverage given to the strike was one of its main achievements. It showed to some degree that students were thinking human beings who could legitimately press a genuine complaint. Just on the basis of media information students in regional

centres such as Nowra and Launceston took strike action, and many others in individual schools held meetings and boycotts.

The attitude of government education departments was generally hostile.

The response of school administrations varied widely. At MacRobertson Girls High in Melbourne a meeting of students the day after .the strike decided that uniforms would no longer be worn. In response 40 students including the head prefect were suspended. Generally there were threats of discipline beforehand but these were not carried out. These threats were responsible for keeping many people away from the demonstrations.

Experiences of student unionism

Since the early 1970s three types of organisation have existed in the secondary student movement. The first of these is the campaigning group, established around particular issues such as opposition to the war or uranium mining, and involving students on more or less clear-cut. demands or goals. The second is a movement of radical students such as Student Underground organised around many issues, possibly linked to non-school organisations. The third is the secondary student union.

Secondary student unions may consist of individual members based in several schools. Alternately they take the more cumbersome form of individual school councils affiliated to a central organisation, a sort of ACTU for schools. Secondary student unions using methods similar to tertiary student unions such as services and entertainment have been attempted in most cities, including Adelaide, Sydney, Brisbane, and Melbourne.

Unfortunately, many student unions have 'brought to secondary student politics the worst aspects of trade union politics: top down control and bureaucratic management. This trend was encouraged by pressure from organisations including the former Australian Union of Students, local campus student bodies, teacher unions and other education activist bodies to affiliate. It was also helped by a tendency of former secondary student activists to hold on to the leadership of these unions after they left school.

In order to understand one common weakness of secondary student unions it is worth briefly looking at school councils. Traditionally they have functioned as an adjunct to the prefect system. Their structure is designated by the school administration, which maintains veto rights over the group. Greater representation is usually provided, to senior years, and representatives, are often conscripted rather than elected. Problems dealt with . mainly related to self-discipline of students: keeping playgrounds tidy, maintaining the age demarcation of playing areas and so on. Not surprisingly these councils win little interest from students. (Similarly, students are generally uninterested

in publications approved and censored by the school authorities. Scurrilous unauthorised news sheets gain a much wider audience.)

Some student unions found themselves embarrassed by the actual militancy of the students they felt that they represented. A 1971 letter from the South Australian Union for Secondary Students reflected this:

> Dear Headmaster, There have been many misconceptions about the Union for Secondary Students (S.A) arising from the circulation of various documents and from press publicity received towards the end of 1970. We have enclosed a copy of our constitution to explain our aims, procedures and general structure, in the hope that this may clarify our position …With your cooperation and in conjunction with other interested educational bodies, the Union for Secondary Students hopes to be able to help improve education in S.A.

Student unions based on individual membership have the advantage that they go out and join up members. Too often, however, membership is linked to entertainment and discount purchasing. The union in this case simply becomes an administrative body organising bulk purchasing discounts with little time for militant defence of students' interests.

From late 1969 student unions were formed in both Melbourne and Adelaide. For the following two years the Victorian Secondary Student Union dominated the secondary student movement in Melbourne. For most of this time the union avoided organising action by students. Following the VSSU's brief involvement in the May 1972 Melbourne student strike the group resumed its passive role. The union collapsed following its refusal to support the militant September 1972 national student strike.

The Brisbane experience echoed this. While several students (mainly in the Young Labor Associations) had attempted to build the Queensland Secondary Students Union throughout 1972 the only activity that involved students was its preparation for September 20. Despite little organisation 200 students marched from the Botanic Gardens to Roma Street Forum where 300 students heard speakers. After this the union once again tried to continue on its previous path and had collapsed by early 1973.

In Sydney in 1972 attempts were made to set up a secondary students union. From February to September several issues of *Stone Rack* were published calling for the formation of a secondary student union. The high point was a July 29 meeting held to form such a union. Attended by 150 students the meeting deferred discussion of support for September 20. A second smaller conference in August voted against supporting September 20.

In contrast a revived Victorian Secondary Student Union conducted important battles

for secondary student rights in 1974 and 1975. During this period the union based itself on a secondary student bill of rights rather than a more amorphous "representative" or resource role.

The ability of Resistance to organise, lead and win over secondary students has been one of its major achievements. The most important part of this has been to give secondary students a full say within Resistance itself.

In contrast the Labor and Communist parties, which in the 1960s held the majority allegiance of the left and labor movements, had less interest in challenging apathy among young students. The self interest of the older leaders kept younger members out of any positions from which they might, in their "rashness", challenge the party bureaucrats.

Such an attitude of stifling young members prevented any real influence in the secondary student movement, which was not surprising. There is no common ground between the spontaneous, enthusiastic, undaunted political attitudes which characterise the secondary student movement, and the stale, conservative, sell-out politics of the Labor Party leaders.

The problems for the Communist Party (CPA) were more complex. At the time of the formation of Resistance in 1967 this was the major party on the left. The CPA proved unable to recruit or influence large numbers of secondary students. In part this was due to its attempt up until 1971 to relate to secondary students through its teacher members.

In 1972 a number of secondary students were involved in forming the CPA's Young Communist Movement (YCM) in Sydney. Rather than trying to reach out to students directly the YCM put its energies into building the NSW Secondary Students Union. There was little interest in an organisation based on services and social activities, and the organisation collapsed. This was also due to the refusal of the secondary student union to participate in the national student strike of that year. For example, the last issue of *Stone Rack*, dated September-October 1972, contains no mention of the strike and bears a heavy CPA imprint, including an advertisement for the 1973 World Youth Festival in Berlin.

4. Writing on the wall

When I think back on all the crap I leaned in high school
It's a wonder I can think at all,
And though my lack of education hasn't hurt me none
I can read the writing on the wall.
— *Paul Simon, Kodachrome*

Women in schools

The rise of the women's liberation movement at the end of the 1960s saw a reflection in secondary schools in the early 1970s. This was particularly the case in Sydney where Resistance supported feminism, taking the view that female secondary students were doubly oppressed: as school students and as women. In the other major secondary student centre, Melbourne, things were a little different. The main viewpoint there was that of the Worker Student Alliance, which as a Maoist organisation opposed femi-nism.

The March 1972 copy of *The Spark,* a Resistance secondary student news sheet, was devoted to building a forthcoming International Women's Day demonstration. The news sheet commented:

> As the education system is geared to preparing the sexes for their two distinct roles, girls are channelled into sewing and domestic "science" courses, or generally academic pursuits. Women are even actively discouraged from pursuing certain careers such as law and science, as women are meant to be, by nature, unscientific, illogical and emotional.

Throughout the 1970s secondary school feminist groups and actions were organised. In 1973 Melbourne secondary students picketed high school beauty contests. The same year in Sydney a School Women's Liberation Group was setup. The. following year Secondary Student Women's Liberation groups were formed in a number of cities. Secondary students were also well represented at activities of the Women's Abortion Action Coalition.

Discrimination in schools was achieved in a number of ways. Some subjects such as home economics and typing were considered suitable while others such as manual arts were not. In Queensland female students in Grade 9 had to do a compulsory "mothercraft" course, devoted to explaining the joys and wonders of motherhood. There was no equivalent fatherhood course. Women were also channelled into the humanities rather than courses designed with heavier workloads such as mathematics or science. While this sort of "streaming" is less acceptable today many barriers still remain.

In addition to choice is the question of content. History, geography and social studies consistently distorted and down played the role of women in society. The nuclear family was presented as the timeless, unchanging unit on which all societies rest. Women were pictured as innately passive and submissive. With few exceptions historical achievements of women were brushed over or forgotten. Today much of this remains unchanged.

A third area concerned lack of adequate sex education: where courses existed, their primary motive was not to encourage students to have healthy and satisfying sex lives. They generally sought to instil fear and disgust in students through an emphasis on venereal diseases. Others just moralised. How to get safe, reliable contraceptives was not said, and the subject of abortion was taboo. While these affect all students the final responsibility for not getting pregnant was with the woman. If she did then she was usually expelled. Today the threat of AIDS has been added, Safe sex education is so much more important, yet moralists from within church, government and other conservative organisations continue to deny its need.

Perhaps the most obvious stupidity concerned school uniforms. Generation after generation of female students have boiled in summer and frozen in winter. In May 1977, in the midst of a particularly cold spell, students at Auburn Girls High in Sydney held a sit-down strike after being refused permission to wear slacks in winter. These were considered "unladylike".

The issue of school segregation was also attacked. Sexist myths are more easily fostered if students were out of contact with students of their own age group of the opposite sex. Unfortunately, simply integrating schools without taking other steps to ensure the educational and social development of women results in males doing better academically and females doing worse.

Schools fall apart

Following the election of the Whitlam Labor government in 1972 many things seemed to change. Australia was no longer involved in the Vietnam war, imprisoned draft resisters were released, changes were taking place. In some cases these were real, in other cases not. But overall the movements which had fought to end the war were demobilised. After the high point of 1972 the secondary student movement lost most of its visibility. The exception was in Victoria where secondary students focussed on the appalling conditions in working-class schools.

The Education Action Group continued to exist in Melbourne until late 1973. In early 1974 the Victorian Secondary Students Union was reformed with the involvement of Resistance students. The VSSU continued to be active through to late 1975 supporting campaigns in schools including Werribbee and Sunshine North.

In September 1974 the transfer of a much-needed teacher from Werribbee High School sparked off a student strike involving 250 students. The school administration responded viciously, suspending 100 students and undertaking expulsion proceedings against the central activists. Solidarity and publicity for the students was organised including strike action at a nearby school. In the end the expulsion threats were defeated.

The following year a major battle took place over conditions at Sunshine North. Teacher shortages were so great that class hours were staggered and some classes sent home. Teachers began a campaign to improve conditions. In contrast to the passive role which students usually take in such a situation the Sunshine North students took a major role in publicising and building support for the campaign. They doorknocked houses in Sunshine to explain the situation at their school and got parents, including many migrants, to come to the meetings. The students also held demonstrations at Sunshine and in the city. An action committee was organised for the campaign which included both students and parents.

The class bias of the education system was clear to the students involved. In the words of one student activist, “The government doesn’t take any notice of us. We are just treated as second class to them. They will supply teachers for Toorak but not for schools in the western suburbs.”

Over the following decade little changed. Disputes continued at a local level over individual school conditions. Teachers attempted to hold the line against education cuts, often despite the apathy or even sabotage of their own unions. An interesting dispute took place in Western Australia at the beginning of the 1988 school year. For two years teachers had been campaigning against dreadful overcrowding, and had resorted to turning students away once a class reached a maximum teachable size. Then on February 16, 200 students from South Fremantle Senior High School went on strike over shortages of teachers and classrooms, chaotic timetables, and in support of students turned away from classes. The following day 1000 students at Kelmscott Senior High School refused to enter classrooms.

After two years of stalling state Education Minister Bob Pearce responded:

> One would have to concede that the involvement of large-scale student actions is a big complicating factor and exemplifies the need for an early resolution to the dispute. The spectre of students out of control in two or three schools is a real problem for the teachers in the longer term and something I find very worrying.

The West Australian victory prompted secondary students at Elizabeth College in Hobart to waged a struggle over similar demands.

That year saw the emergence of widespread action against planned attacks on the NSW education system. For their own reasons sections of the Sydney daily media encouraged action by teachers against a poorly planned dismantling of many aspects of education. At the same time the NSW School Students Union called for action by secondary students. The result was a major strike with an estimated 15,000 secondary students staying away from classes on July 1. Having made their point with Greiner the media then switched off the campaign as abruptly as they had turned it on. The teachers' union obligingly stopped its campaign. Having lost their access to the media the students were unable to continue the campaign.

No to war, yes to the environment.

In. the early 1970s widespread concern for the environment became reflected among secondary students. At the time this was seen by the establishment as something to be encouraged as an alternative to more radical issues such as opposition to war or support for women's rights. In NSW for example the education department supported the formation of a group called Protect Your Environment. PYE was publicly financed by the Company Directors' Association of Australia. Its program was mixed, on the one hand calling for Zero Population Growth while at the same time demanding lead-free petrol.

From 1976 secondary students across Australia were a major part of the growing

movement against uranium mining. As a resource rich country Australia has never had a requirement for nuclear power though it does have some of the world's largest uranium reserves. A movement against nuclear weapons or nuclear power inevitably concentrates on the issue of mining. As well as contributing to the nuclear fuel cycle and nuclear weapons proliferation these mines take a high toll of lives of miners, and are often mined at the expense of traditional Aboriginal owners.

Secondary students marched against uranium mining in large numbers.

Observers commented that every anti-uranium protest became younger. At the 1977 Hiroshima Day demonstration in Melbourne an estimated 5000 out of a crowd of 25,000 were secondary student age. A similar composition was seen in Sydney.

Huge numbers of secondary students sported anti-uranium badges on their uniforms and bags. There was a constant demand for anti-uranium speakers from schools.

As well as participating in city-wide demonstrations secondary students in many schools organised anti-uranium groups in their schools. At Sydney Girls High a group was set up in early 1978 after 150 students, nearly a third of the school, attended a film showing of *The War Game*. This film gave a fictionalised account of post-nuclear war Britain.

Cross-school groups were also set up. In Sydney the Secondary Students Against Uranium Mining helped build the big anti-nuclear demonstrations. In Tasmania in 1977 Students Against Uranium Mining was organised at the Matriculation Colleges (which cover the final two years of secondary school). In July some 60 secondary students travelled from Hobart to Launceston to picket the office of environment minister Kevin Newman. In Melbourne an environmental group Inspect, which had evolved from an Education Department sponsored environmental group, took a leading role. At the October 1977 demonstration. 200 students marched from Inspect offices.

The emergence of the Nuclear Disarmament Party (NDP) in mid-1984 marked a resurgence of political interest among young people. Most of the left organisations opposed or boycotted the NDP, preferring to continue their support to the pro-nuclear Labor Party. Resistance in contrast gave full support from the start, helping to set up NDP branches in a number of cities. Across Australia during the same period secondary student groups were formed, including Melbourne's Secondary Students for Nuclear Disarmament, Sydney's Secondary Students Against War, and Secondary Students for Peace in Adelaide. Tens of thousands of secondary students joined hundreds of thousands of others in the huge Palm Sunday peace demonstrations of the time.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s secondary students were on record as being among those most concerned about the destruction of the environment. In many schools

environmental clubs were formed, often around recycling campaigns. It was only with the tour by David Suzuki in 1990 that a national environmental organisation mainly based among secondary students was formed. Basing himself on the Canadian experience Suzuki called on young people to form an Environmental Youth Alliance. The EYA was formed and since then has organised many campaigns against environmental destruction in Australia and globally. At its most recent national conference in Easter 1993 nearly 200 activists set out a schedule of national campaigns including informational tours to hundreds of secondary schools.

As the US military and allies began their murderous bombing of Iraq in January 1991 Australian secondary students were in the middle of summer holidays. Within hours hundreds of secondary students had joined others forming pickets at US Consulates and other suitable locations. These pickets reflected the impact of the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and the. 1960s in general. Young secondary students strummed guitars and sang Where Have All the Flowers Gone? Young speakers took the megaphones to express their outrage as details of the carnage filtered through.

In a few days the Gulf War taught a new generation about the horror of war and US foreign policy. Within weeks groups such as Secondary Students Against the Gulf War had been organised in a number of cities. Students who had participated in environmental groups such as the Environment Youth Alliance looked at bombings and oil fires in shock. Environmental peak bodies told these young people that the Gulf War was about "politics and not the environment", and therefore not a key concern for environmentalists. Young environmentalists responded, "What about Iraq's environment?"

Yes to freedom of sexuality

One recent issue was the campaign around the *Fact and Fantasy File* school diary.

A result of the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s was an acceptance of the right of secondary students to sex education. In the 1970s the conservative Queensland state government of Joh Bjelke-Petersen was ridiculed for banning school sex education programs. Similarly, Sydney's Fred Nile fought a rear guard action for his particular brand of Christian values. With attendance at the annual Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras approaching the 500,000 mark, his defeat appears complete.

A new move to shut the doors on sex education emerged in early 1992. In the first week of February, Labor prime minister Paul Keating banned the distribution of the Family Planning Association's *Fact and Fantasy File* diary. Funding was also removed from the companion project, the Making Sense of Sex Hotline. Resistance responded by distributing bootleg copies of the diary. The response from students was

overwhelming. At Sydney Girls High and Fort Street High in Sydney, then in Adelaide, then across the country students grabbed the diaries as fast as they could be provided.

The Australian Solicitor General threatened Resistance with a restraining order. Brian Howe's Department of Health, Housing and Community Services wrote saying that it was "concerned that the contents of the Diary are not appropriate reading for all young people." Television, radio and print media across the country took up the issue.

In response to the legal threats, Resistance announced that it would issue its own F*antastic Sex Facts* pamphlet, containing the same information as that banned by the Labor government. Sydney's *Sunday Telegraph* editorialised:

> Ms Zanny Begg [Resistance activist] vows her new publication will be more explicit than the fantasy diary. This newspaper had that grotty little booklet banned. Rest assured, Ms Begg, we will be watching for your group's sex guide and if it contains what you claim, *The Sunday Telegraph* will not stop until it is also banned.

Students showed their feelings, taking 5000 copies of the new publication in the first week. Sunday Telegraph editor Roy Miller was then forced to debate Zany Begg in the pages of his paper and *Green Left Weekly*. Calling on the authority of political parties, Miller said "The premier and his wife didn't like it nor did the. prime minister and his wife, and they are family people." This simply proved that there was nothing to distinguish the leaders of the state Liberal and federal Labor governments on the issue. Neither cared about young people.

Miller particularly objected to an item under the heading "Sex Questions". It read: "Do girls want sex as much as boys? Answer: yes."

"Does this publication have any right to say that the answer is correct? How do you know that girls want sex as much as boys?", Miller asked.

"The continuation of that question is that it doesn't matter whether you are a girl or boy; it depends on who you are and what you feel whether you want sex a lot or not," replied Begg.

In the end the *Sunday Telegraph* lost. Tens of thousands of secondary students read some honest sex education information. Hundreds of thousands thought about the issues after hearing reports in the daily media. The Resistance publication was not banned, and the conservative Labor and Liberal leaders were ignored.

Twenty-five years later

One quarter century after the Paris secondary students took to the streets, after *Student Underground* disturbed the peace in Sydney, much has changed, yet much has stayed the same. Wars, poverty, hunger and environmental destruction continue.

Many secondary students want to do something about them, and about the day to day stupidity of the education system. Today Resistance continues to fight for student rights, as part of its wider battle for a better world for all.

The struggles outlined here show that secondary students can beat the system. Most are too young to vote (for what that's worth), but organised in group like Resistance, they can make a difference. That's what the world needs.

What Resistance stands for

More and more people are saying no. No to injustice, war, sexism, racism, and no to the destruction.of our environment. In Resistance we say no but we also say yes. Yes to real democracy, to freedom, to human solidarity, and yes to the right to rebel against the system.

Resistance is an organisation of young people that aims to educate, mobilise and organise young people in the struggle for a green, democratic and socialist society.

People and the environment are being sacrificed to save the capitalist system. Worldwide four billion people are officially living in poverty. In the Third World it's desperate. And it only gets worse with American "help". In Somalia help means people are now getting shot as well as going hungry.

Governments and big business are making working people pay for the recession. Governments are cutting public spending, destroying education, public transport, the whole welfare system, and using the "savings" to lift falling business profits. So, it's only a recession for ordinary people — we've got fewer jobs, lower wages, less rights. Business has record profits.

This is what the Labor Party has done in Australia. In 10 years Labor's Accord has shifted $4500 annually from every workers' wage to business profit. That's $35 billion a year. The Liberal Party just wants to do more of the same.

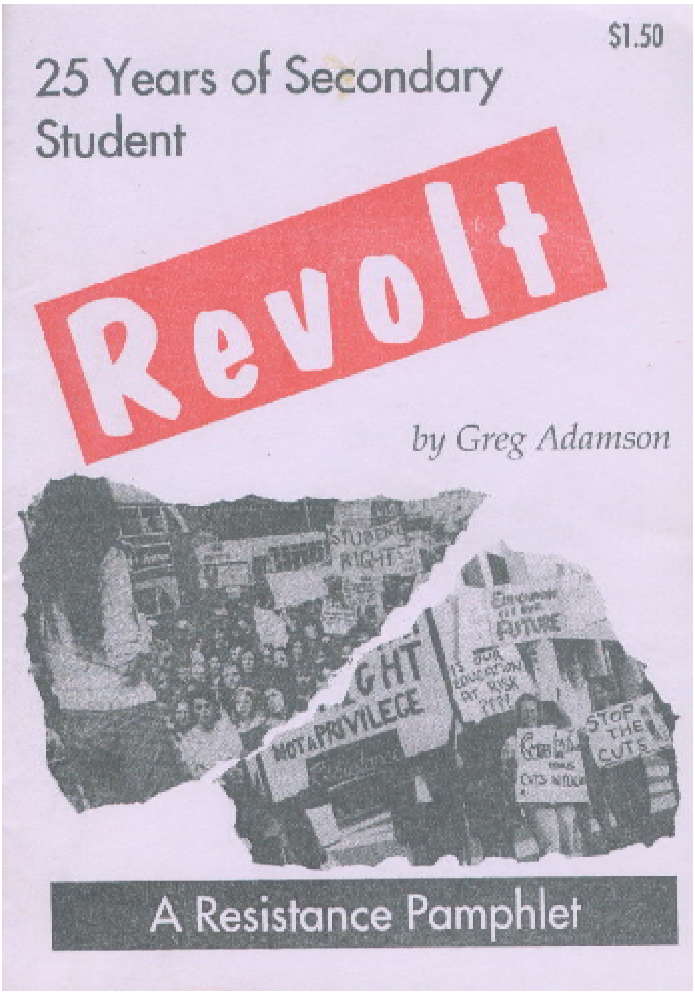
We need a political alternative to the parties of big business, Liberal and Labor.

Resistance is building this alternative. We campaign around all social and environmental issues, point to the underlying causes and in the process aim to mobilise more and more people into action against the injustices of the system. We're involved in the movements for the environment, workers rights, women's liberation, international solidarity with struggles for self determination, lesbian and gay liberation, land rights, free education and more.

Resistance is made up of young workers, unemployed young people, high school and campus students. Our inspiration comes from knowing that we are not submitting to the system, but bringing together all today's cam-paigns in the struggle for a new

society.

Today we need to be radical not only in our ideas and our dreams, but also in our actions. Get active, join the biggest radical youth organisation in the country. **Join Resistance!**



Resistance books