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Title: Left Limp

Subheading: Despite proclaiming the moral high ground, left-wing activism remains an ineffective force for mobilizing and engaging students to action. Greater connection is needed with the average student to rise anywhere above ridicule.

It had been planned for months. All discussion, all negotiation and all effort had led up to this. Posters were hung, invitations were sent and lectures were bashed. But, at the moment of truth – Even the Brisbane State High First XV rugby union team could have organized a better gathering.

The flop of the recent National Day of Action organized by the National Union of Students is another black mark on the record of an organization which has traditionally sought to engage and mobilize students to involve themselves in political action in their supposed benefit – And which has increasingly become the subject of ridicule and isolation within their supposed constituency.

The National Day of Action – Organized as a response to the \$900 million in education cuts proposed by Education Minister Christopher Pyne – Saw an attendance of barely a dozen students at UQ, with just over fifty turning out at Queen's Park for the official protest. This has continued the trend of a slide in attendance in recent years – Over 300 people attended the annual rally in 2013, and similar rallies in cities such as Melbourne and Sydney have attracted far greater numbers.

While branches of the NUS in cities such as Melbourne and Victoria have regularly managed to bring audiences of over 1,000 people to their rallies, activists from UQ, QUT and Griffith University have seen near-exponential shrinkage in recent years. This deflation in interest begs the question: What is being done wrong? Surely, with so much at stake, even the most passingly politically-minded student would be racing to join the fight against the razor gangs of Abbott and Pyne?

Unfortunately, these questions involve a far broader, and harsher, truth: The left simply can't connect with the average student. One doesn't need to wait for a rally or travel to NatCon to see this. Just sit on the Grassy Knoll every Wednesday, and watch as the Marxist proselytizers implore passing students to join the fight – Looking to student forums such as StalkerSpace, the unanimous student agreement is clear: There is little to no interest for the promotion of these ideas on campus.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with fighting for a cause, and indeed, it's far easier to tear something down than build it up. But this effort is misplaced. Student activists shouldn't expect the thrown-in-the-deep end strong approach to motivate students to join up – For somebody who doesn't have experience in student politics, it just comes off as scary, confusing and extreme, and serves to turn-off people who, had they the right motivation, might jump at the chance to get involved.

Of course, this assumes that the causes are engaging and relevant in the first place. This is reflected heavily in the student elections, particularly over the course of the recently-ousted FRESH administration. While tickets such as Change, Pulse and Real Students may have sought to promote and focus on issues that more broadly affected the education, finances and lives of students, tickets such as FRESH, and to a lesser extent, Lift, focused on partying, prizes and piss-ups – And yet, despite

the relative frivolity of these platforms compared to the former group, achieved resounding success for over half a decade.

While this is not to say that certain parties had totally clean noses in their attempts to hold onto power, it does show a clear message – While bringing attention to issues affecting students is one thing, getting them to understand and care about those issues is quite another. And therein lays the problem for much of the left in student politics: Using too much stick, and not enough carrot. Shouting at students about the environment, political corruption and Students for Palestine isn't going to win votes – You need to draw people in with universal, vanilla policies, and then slowly draw them into whatever hard issues you're focusing on. Wandering around in fedoras and Fuck Fresh shirts and shouting about the backgrounds of the mavericks and madmen within the other tickets doesn't appeal to students, as the results of the 2013 student election aptly show: Despite a near-majority win by the left-aligned Reform ticket, the Socialist Alternative-backed Student Action ticket saw almost a 7% swing against their vote compared to 2011 – A rare occurrence in such a situation.

So, what can the left do? It's clear that if the current path is maintained, regard for organizations such as NUS and the Socialist Alternative will continue to shrink as all but the most complacent career students, with nearly a decade of university under their belt, remain within the organizations. Failure to draw in fresh blood will ultimately reflect itself in the diminishing returns for their campaigns.

This doesn't mean that it's necessary to execute a 180-degree heel turn toward organizing frivolities to draw in political curmudgeons and college crowds – As usual, the third way is best. Left activists should aim to better approach and engage students, while still maintaining their ideals and objectives, and slowly ease the uninitiated into the world of student politics. This would not only have the best chance of ensuring students do more than just roll their eyes at these activists, but would also open the doors for long-term involvement and retention of volunteers.

Ultimately, it's an issue of means, and not ends, that divides the left from the student body at large. To achieve any kind of success in mobilizing students to fight for student rights and causes, the left needs to divide itself from the 'crazy, screaming trot' image that pervades how they are regarded in student politics, both internally and externally. Student activists may cry for revolution, but perhaps first they need to have a revolution of their own.