

## SEP Student Club blocked at University of Melbourne

**1990s-style student unionism**

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A recent spate of disciplinary actions against student clubs and societies at the University of Melbourne in Australia has highlighted the way in which student unions have become increasingly integrated with university management and government. Repeated attempts to block the affiliation of the Socialist Equality Party Student Club provide the most graphic example of this process.

Melbourne University is the second oldest and perhaps most prestigious university in Australia, attracting a large number of fee-paying overseas and domestic students. Glossy public relations material describes a university that is "internationally competitive" and one which "plays a significant role in the intellectual and cultural life of its city".

But in line with the introduction of higher fees and the push for the privatisation of public tertiary education has come a growing attack on freedom of speech among students and academics alike. Academics are threatened for opposing cutbacks to faculties and most recently the University's publishing house (Melbourne University Press) refused to publish a book critical of the direction of federal education policy.

For its part, the Student Union, controlled at Melbourne University by an amorphous collection of student radicals from "Left Focus" and "Broad Left," acts as a virtual sub-committee of University management, wielding bureaucratic regulations to ensure intellectual and political life on campus remains severely circumscribed. Members of the Student Union Activities Committee de-register and disaffiliate student clubs on the flimsiest of pretexts.

More than 20 clubs faced disaffiliation or other disciplinary action at a Student Union Activities Committee meeting last year on the flimsiest of

pretexts including typographical errors in club constitutions. One motivating aspect is certainly financial. Affiliated clubs have access to grants, thereby providing a built-in incentive on the part of Union management to ensure as few as possible are registered. The "offenders" included the Blues and Rhythm Society, Law Students Society, Film Makers Association, Resistance, the Chess Club and the Cosmic Hitchhikers Appreciation Society.

In the case of the SEP Student Club (SEPSC), political opposition on the part of groups active in the Student Union leadership, including Broad Left (dominated by the Labor Party right-wing) and Left Focus (a coalition of self-styled socialists and feminists), has been at the forefront. Their actions against the SEPSC in the past have included:

\* Unilateral cancellation of the Club's Inaugural General Meeting in September 1996 and deregistration one month later, on the alleged grounds that the SEPSC was an "outside lobby group whose activities are based primarily off campus". The SEPSC replied in a leaflet explaining that while the activities of the Socialist Equality Party were based "primarily off campus", the SEPSC was formed by students at the University who agreed with the aims of the SEP.

The Club rejected the parochialism of the Student Union: "To claim that student clubs at Melbourne University should have no association with 'outside lobby groups' is absurd. On this basis most political clubs, church groups and many cultural clubs should immediately be struck from affiliation. No student club develops solely from the immediate geopolitical environs of Melbourne University's Parkville campus."

\* A two-month suspension in April 1997 for booking a stall in Union House. Melbourne University Student Union (MUSU) regulations forbid the booking of a

lunchtime stall in Union House to all those who are not members of registered or affiliated clubs. Even though the SEPSC's affiliation Expression of Interest had been submitted but not yet voted on by the MUSU Activities Committee, the club was forced to leave on threat of police being called. SEPSC members immediately lodged a complaint against this attack on free speech with the Student Union.

Three weeks later, however, the Activities Committee voted for a two-month disciplinary suspension of the SEPSC's affiliation Expression of Interest. An article by the club, appearing in the student magazine *Farrago*, asked: "What has happened to the conception of universities as forums for free discussion, dissent and debate?"

When the SEPSC's latest affiliation Expression of Interest went before the Activities Committee late last year, the only differences raised by the Committee to the club's affiliation were political. The item was not discussed until after midnight, at which point a member of the Labor right-wing objected to the club's aims and objectives. When SEPSC members pointed out that the attitude of the Labor Party toward the SEPSC was irrelevant and that the principle at stake was the right of students to form a club of their choice, the Labor member left the meeting to break quorum and prevent a binding vote.

The SEPSC has met all the affiliation requirements including more than the required membership, the convening of an inaugural general meeting, the adoption of a club constitution and the election of club office-bearers. Yet the club remains unaffiliated and is therefore barred from accessing a range of Student Union facilities and events.

When the SEPSC was first deregistered in October 1996, the Student Union alleged the club lacked "genuine student support". Yet what is demonstrated by the activity of the club on campus is precisely the opposite--that there is a growing interest among more critical layers of students in a socialist analysis of major world events and political issues.

Only months before, hundreds of University of Melbourne students had attended a lecture co-sponsored by the SEPSC on "Stalin's Terror: Origins and Consequences" delivered by the late Russian Marxist historian Vadim Rogovin. Since then the SEPSC has sponsored lectures by the SEP's national

secretary Nick Beams on the global economic crisis and, in March 1998, on the international significance of the Asian meltdown.

At the same time, it is evident that students are increasingly dissatisfied and, in some cases, openly disgusted with the charade of protest politics, which has been the basis of support in the past for the "left" student leaders. More than a decade of sporadic protests aimed at pressuring the Labor and coalition governments has done nothing to halt rising student fees and the deterioration in university education.

As a result, a number of students are looking for more profound answers, not simply to the problems they immediately face, but to broader social issues. The growing interest in the SEPSC's analysis is the real concern of student leaders who sense that their own base of support is dwindling.

Student politics has traditionally been something of a training ground for parliamentary politicians. Present Liberal leaders including Treasurer Peter Costello, and many on Labor's current frontbench, first earned their stripes in student elections. This type of politics, with its concern for preference deals and its obsession with "getting the numbers", attracts people of a certain type.

The crude bureaucratic actions of the Student Union against the SEPSC reveals that, if anything, the latest crop of budding parliamentary opportunists is even more contemptuous and cynical than their forebears towards any debate on the major issues facing mankind.



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