

International Students for Social Equality

Australia: ISSE holds meetings at New South Wales campuses

Our correspondents

7 March 2007

Over the past three weeks, the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), the student movement of the Socialist Equality Party and International Committee of the Fourth International, has conducted campaigns and held inaugural meetings at four universities in the Australian state of New South Wales.

Members and supporters of the ISSE organised recruitment stalls in Orientation Week (a week of activities to welcome new undergraduates at the start of the academic year) at the University of Newcastle, the University of New South Wales (UNSW), the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), and the University of Sydney. All together, the four campuses have a student population of approximately 150,000.

The ISSE O-Week activities were closely integrated with the SEP's campaign in the New South Wales state elections. The four campuses are in, or adjacent to, the three electoral districts where the SEP is standing its candidates: Noel Holt for Newcastle, James Cogan for Heffron and Patrick O'Connor for Marrickville.

The focus of the ISSE O-Week stalls was the distribution of the ISSE's appeal to students to build an international socialist student organisation against militarism, social inequality and the global attack on democratic rights, published on the *World Socialist Web Site* on February 19. (See "Join the International Students for Social Equality!")

Many students expressed deep concerns about the state of society, especially the escalating US military aggression in the Middle East and the threat of war against Iran. A number of students who approached the ISSE stalls were already regular readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*. Lively discussions were held on a number of political, historical and cultural issues, ranging from the struggle of the Trotskyist movement against Stalinism to the fundamental driving forces of militarism, to the reasons behind the promotion of intelligent design and other anti-scientific religious theories. At each of the campuses, students from many different backgrounds and nationalities expressed their support for the Emergency Conference Against War that will be held by the ISSE and the Socialist Equality Party in the United States at the end of March. (See The Conference website)

The meetings held during O-Week provided conditions for a serious discussion on the international political situation and the perspective of the ISSE. James Cogan spoke at Newcastle and UNSW and Patrick O'Connor addressed students at the University

of Sydney.

Cogan and O'Connor explained that the ISSE was being established to develop the struggle for an internationalist and socialist perspective among students in every part of the world. The clubs would become, they stressed, a forum for discussion and debate on all the most critical political, theoretical and historic issues confronting students and the working class as a whole.

The two speakers emphasised the need for students to study the lessons of the 2003 protest movement against the invasion of Iraq, when millions of people sought to oppose the drive toward war by exerting pressure on the powers-that-be, or by making appeals to the United Nations. War was not the product of the subjective intentions of particular leaders, they said, but arose out of the struggle for markets, resources and profits between the major capitalist powers.

Cogan told students at the University of Newcastle: "US capitalism is seeking to extricate itself from internal conflicts and economic decline by militarist aggression. In doing so, it is provoking ever-greater tensions and rivalries with other capitalist powers, such as the European Union, Japan, China and Russia. The over-riding fear in Washington is that a combination of its rivals could shatter the post-war political dominance of the US, which is a major factor in its ability to retain a relatively privileged position within world economy.

"The events of September 11, 2001 have been used as pretext for ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the preparations for another war, against Iran, which are aimed at establishing a stranglehold over the key oil and gas resources of the Middle East. The consequences, if not prevented by the world's working people, will be a third inter-imperialist conflict."

Against the perspective advanced by the various middle class protest organisations, the SEP speakers encouraged students to participate in the ISSE and turn toward the political education of the international working class, the only social force capable of carrying through the overturn of capitalism and replacing it with a rational and genuinely democratic socialist society. The ISSE, they explained, would provide a framework for students to discuss the true history of the twentieth century and answer the false claims that the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and its ultimate collapse represented the failure of a socialist perspective.

At each of the meetings, lengthy discussion followed the main

report.

At UNSW, a student explained that he had always been told that the antiwar protest movement against the Vietnam War had been the main reason why the United States had been forced to withdraw its troops. Why then, he asked, did the ISSE not think a similar protest movement could end the Iraq war?

Cogan replied that it was necessary to examine the issue historically. While US capitalism had expended enormous financial resources and squandered tens of thousands of young lives attempting to maintain its grip over Indo-China, the area was, in the final analysis, peripheral to the deepest requirements of US imperialism. By the end of the 1960s, faced with growing economic turbulence and explosive working class struggles around the world, efforts were already being made to end the war in Vietnam and re-focus on stabilising world capitalism, thus preserving the most important US economic and political interests. That stabilisation was eventually achieved, thanks to the assistance rendered by the various Stalinist, social democratic and nationalist movements, which diverted the working class from a genuine revolutionary perspective.

“The eruption of US militarism since 2001 is unfolding under vastly transformed international conditions,” Cogan said. “The processes associated with globalisation—which were set in motion by the turbulence of the late 60s and 70s—have not only shattered the post-war US economic dominance, but the ability of governments to shield their national economies from global pressures by various forms of regulation.”

Cogan stressed: “American imperialism no longer has the means to grant concessions to the working class and lessen social tensions at home, nor can it compete in the market against the challenges of its rivals. It has no other way out but militarism to secure control over the key resources of the globe, while at the same time making preparations for authoritarian rule within the US itself, to suppress the growing domestic opposition. The working class must base its response on this understanding and strive for revolutionary social change.”

At the University of Sydney, a student asked whether individual responsibility and local action was not the most important issue. O’Connor explained: “Organisations and people who advance this view, such as the Greens, are unwittingly or deliberately diverting the working class and youth from taking up a unified political struggle against the actual cause of war, inequality and climate change—the capitalist market. No solution is possible without the global reorganisation of economic life that removes the destructive impact of the profit motive.” Individual actions, O’Connor said, “are not a substitute for the political education of the working class and the development of a socialist movement internationally”.

The meetings and discussions organised by the ISSE during O-Week were in sharp contrast to the general climate that exists on the campuses.

At UNSW, the largest and most prominent stalls were reserved for companies, including the telecommunications giant Telstra and the Fairfax newspaper, the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The University of Sydney marketed its O-Week to business sponsors as “the first possible opportunity to make contact with a large proportion of the student population at a time when they are most

likely to form their purchasing behaviours for the rest of the year”.

A significant factor in this corporate promotion was the introduction last year of “Voluntary Student Unionism” (VSU). Elected student unions, funded by a levy of several hundred dollars on each student, were previously able to provide a variety of services. VSU, however, has stripped student unions of the right to charge compulsory membership fees, leading to a collapse of their independent resources and leaving them reliant on grants from university administrations or corporate sponsorship.

The attempt to convert O-Week into a marketing bonanza was most sharply demonstrated at the campuses of Charles Sturt University in regional NSW cities. The administration banned all political organisations from having stalls on the grounds that it would be “inappropriate” to expose newly enrolled students to politics.

To the extent that political events took place, they were aimed at disorientating the student population. At UNSW, an O-Week forum presented Peter Garrett, a Labor Party MP and former rock star and environmental activist, as a defender of democratic rights. A member of the ISSE exposed the hypocrisy of the claim, documenting the support of the Labor Party for the Howard government’s “anti-terrorism” legislation that has seriously eroded civil liberties. The stand taken by the ISSE was applauded by students in the audience, several of whom later joined the club. (See “ISSE exposes hypocrisy of Australian Labor politician at campus meeting”)

Over the coming weeks, the ISSE will be holding further meetings. The ISSE club at UNSW has invited Nick Beams to address its inaugural general meeting on March 20 on the lessons of the 2003 antiwar movement. Beams is the national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party and heads the SEP’s slate of 15 candidates for the NSW upper house. Full details of all upcoming ISSE activities will be published at www.sep.org.au.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact