IYSSE holds anti-war meetings at Australian and New Zealand campuses

Our reporters
28 September 2013

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), held meetings against the US war threat to Syria over the past week at universities across Australia and in New Zealand. A broad cross-section of students attended at campuses in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth and Wellington.

Further meetings are scheduled in the coming two weeks and the SEP has called rallies in Sydney and Melbourne, as part of the fight to develop an anti-war movement of the working class in opposition to the US preparations for an attack on Syria, and the wider eruption of imperialist militarism.

Before the meeting at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney, the IYSSE held a speak-out. SEP assistant national secretary James Cogan warned: "The gravest mistake would be to conclude that the threat of a US invasion has been halted. In fact, what is being prepared is an even greater conflagration in which the Obama administration intends to refashion the entire Middle East in US interests."

At each campus, IYSSE members delivered reports warning against any illusions that the deal struck between Russia and the US for the elimination of the Assad regime's chemical weapons stockpile had averted the danger of war. The speakers outlined the fraudulent character of the propaganda being used to justify a US attack, and noted that its aim was to obscure the historical context and imperialist interests behind the war drive.

The reports exposed the complicity of the entire Australian political establishment in the preparations for war, including the pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance. Speakers concluded by insisting on the necessity of constructing a new political movement of the working class against war, on the basis of the historical experiences of the twentieth century. They warned: "As the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I approaches, the working class and youth once again face the prospect of a descent into barbarism and destruction on an inconceivable scale."

Lively discussion and questions followed at each meeting.

At UNSW, a student who had grown up in Syria noted that she had lived alongside Sunnis, Armenians and others, without any sectarian tensions. "I am an Alawite, like Assad, but my neighbours are Sunni Muslim or Shiite or Armenian and I didn't even know the difference when I was younger because it wasn't even a problem." She expressed concerns that the atmosphere was rapidly changing with the deliberate cultivation of sectarian antagonisms.

In response, Cogan explained how the reactionary role played by the Arab bourgeoisie, including by the Ba'athist Assad regime, had opened the door for right-wing Islamist tendencies. Parties that claimed to be secular or even socialist "betrayed the enormous aspirations of the people for a secular, just, democratic and progressive society. Movement after movement led by the Communist Parties, or figures like Nasser, produced regimes that maintained the most brutal oppression of the population and in which the political tendencies that were encouraged and fermented were the religious ones."

Cogan insisted that sectarianism could only be combated through a fight to unify the working class against every faction of the ruling elite, on the basis of a genuinely socialist and revolutionary program.

At the University of Sydney, one mature-aged student, who had served in the military as part of Australia's "peacekeeping" force in East Timor, noted that the IYSSE speaker said workers had no interest in slaughtering each other in the pursuit of profits, markets and resources by competing capitalist powers. He said working class youth he met in the army had expressed enthusiasm for an attack on Indonesia, which they thought would invade Australia were it not for the US alliance.

In reply, an IYSSE member explained that such conceptions harked back to the propaganda of "White Australia," the racist doctrine that had been used by the Australian ruling elite throughout much of the twentieth century to justify its predatory operations in the South

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Pacific. Xenophobia was also promoted by the Australian bourgeoisie, and the Labor Party, to divide Australian workers from their class brothers and sisters in the Asian region.

Paraphrasing Marx and Engels, the speaker said the critical question was not what individual workers thought at any given moment, but the objective social position of the working class as a propertyless and international social force with no interest in maintaining the capitalist nation-state system. Alongside the drive to war, governments around the world were carrying out unprecedented attacks on the social position of the working class. The political struggle waged by the IYSSE and SEP to unite workers on the basis of their common class interests offered the only solution to this deepening crisis.

In Wellington, one student asked if Syria's citizens had a "right to respond" to the regime, and suggested that not all opposition groups were backed by the US. In response, IYSSE member Tom Peters explained that the armed conflict was not a genuine popular struggle but a US-funded campaign for regime change. The "rebels" did not enjoy mass support, as evidenced by the fact that they had suffered a series of military defeats, just before the US raised the issue of chemical weapons as an excuse for intervention. The opposition groups were dominated by Sunni extremists, led by forces linked to Al Qaeda, with longstanding ties to the Gulf monarchies and American intelligence agencies. Peters contrasted the reactionary and sectarian character of the Syrian opposition, with the mass movement of the working class that ousted the Mubarak regime in Egypt, and developed across religious divides.

WSWS correspondents spoke to a number of students who attended the meetings.

Audrey, a journalism student at Griffith University in Brisbane, commented: "I really appreciated the meeting, because it gave me information on a rather complicated situation in Syria. I liked the clarity that this is a proxy war, not a civil war." She said it would be difficult to stop the war because "the US has a whole other agenda."

Audrey condemned the confusion and propaganda conveyed by the mass media on the issues in Syria, and thought that a more informed electorate would lead to better outcomes, but then observed: "Obama is doing the complete opposite of what he promised in order to get elected. He said he would protect whistleblowers, stop the wars and shut down Guantanamo Bay. He even got the Nobel peace prize!"

She said the "elite is dominating politics." This was "oligarchy, not democracy," she noted, pointing to the massive funding of US politicians by corporate donors.

At UNSW, **Van Long** said: "No good will come of an attack against Syria. A lot of innocent people will die and for what reason? I've got a lot of friends from Afghanistan and all they tell me week after week is their cousins died and for no reason. They weren't terrorists or anything—they were just normal people living their life…

"I think the claim of chemical weapons is just another ploy. Like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. What have the wars there done? Nothing. Iraq never had any weapons of mass destruction but see how many people died."

In Wellington, **Nene**, a student from East Timor, said: "I truly appreciate your existence and your internationalism, especially because a lot of groups in my country have a very narrow perspective. A lot of people are concerned about the problems caused by capitalism and American intervention."

Neda, a post-graduate student from Iran, said: "I don't have enough knowledge to comment on whether the rebels in Syria are completely funded by the US. But I totally agree with you that the US is not interested in humanitarian issues and has a much broader intention of dominating the whole of the Middle East and its resources."

At Murdoch University in Perth, **Alam** noted that the US intervention in Syria took place in the context of growing tensions between Washington and its chief geo-political rivals, China and Russia. "Today's meeting it is a step in the right direction—to do something about the capitalist system whether you are from a poor country or from Australia—no country is immune.

Asked about the deal between Russia and the US, Alam commented: "We have to learn from past experience. It's a mere delay, and we can see new tactics—such as arming the rebels and making the rebels look like they are doing all the fighting and the US is keeping out of the scene. The public saw what happened in Libya."

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