

Australia: Strong response to IYSSE campaign at University of Newcastle

Our correspondents
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), conducted an important campaign at the Orientation Week “Expo” at the University of Newcastle (UoN) last week. Over five days, IYSSE club members handed out thousands of leaflets and held lively discussions with students on a socialist program to oppose the drive to war, growing social inequality and deepening attacks on democratic rights.

Members distributed copies of the IYSSE statement “Oppose political discrimination at University of Newcastle.” The statement was issued in response to UoN Services Clubs and Societies using the former Labor government’s reactionary Students Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) legislation to make a discriminatory attack on the democratic rights of students who belong to student clubs associated with political parties.

The IYSSE and other clubs of “political nature” were warned that if they brought “political members,” such as members of parliament or election candidates, onto campus, they would be ordered to leave and their Expo stall could be shut down. UoN Services Clubs and Societies justified this threat by declaring O-Week stalls were funded by SSAF and citing the stipulation in the legislation that bars the fee from being used to support a political party or candidate.

The IYSSE statement explained: “It is utterly absurd to allege that the presence of members of parliament or election candidates on campus means SSAF funds are being donated to a political party.

“Moreover, the positions of UoN Services are an affront to the intellectual and cultural traditions of universities. It used to be commonplace for student unions and clubs to organise political events where politicians debated the issues of the day. And student-organised candidate forums were once a feature of federal and state election campaigns, with representatives of political parties invited to face student audiences to outline their policies.

“Whether UoN Services is conscious of it or not, it is establishing a profoundly reactionary and anti-democratic

precedent.”

IYSSE members explained to students that the growing assault on democratic rights and attempts to suppress political discussion were bound up with an intractable crisis of world capitalism, the growing dangers of war and the assault on working class living standards and social rights, including education.

They distributed leaflets explaining that the multi-million dollar plan by the Australian government and big corporations to “celebrate” the centenary of World War I was consciously aimed up at promoting nationalism and stifling anti-war sentiment, especially among youth, amid the steady build-up by the United States and its Australian ally for a military confrontation with China in the Asia-Pacific region.

IYSSE members drew attention to the role of pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alternative and Social Alliance, which have sought to legitimise US-led interventions in Libya, Syria and Ukraine by portraying pro-imperialist proxy forces as “revolutionaries.”

The IYSSE stall was continuously busy, with students staying for extended periods of discussion. Many expressed concern about the danger of war, worsening social inequality and increasing levels of joblessness. Dozens signed up to join the IYSSE.

Students said they were keen to attend the March 12 IYSSE meeting, “The glorification of World War I and the preparations for World War III”.

The overwhelming majority expressed strong opposition to the ban imposed by UoN Clubs and Societies on “political members” taking part in O-Week activities.

Sylvia, a newly enrolled student, said she had a similar experience at high school. She explained: “I was on a social justice committee at my school and every time we tried to take an initiative, our proposal would be turned down by the principal on the grounds it was too political. But the issues of social inequality and war are political. The IYSSE club is clearly raising these issues and encouraging students to think about them and act on them. What UoN Services is doing is

enforcing a government policy to restrict what is politically allowed on this campus.

“We are supposed to have democracy but in reality that is not true. Restrictions are put on young people to stop them from thinking and from really challenging ruling ideas. I think this is happening because the government does not want young people to do anything to change the way things are. They don’t want us to discuss any alternative to the current system or to challenge the social injustice that exists.

“A lot of young people are concerned about social inequality around that world. Millions of people exist on very little, while the upper class have all the benefits and the access to wealth. Very many people today, especially young people, are against war. This is why governments want to do everything they possibly can to prevent any real discussion on their actual preparations for war. If the real plans for war were openly announced, they know it would result in massive opposition.”

Mitchell, who is studying teaching and history, said: “What is being done by UoN is the complete opposite of the whole concept of democratic rights and the free flow of ideas. Everyone is supposed to have freedom to information and to make their own decisions and to hear and discuss fully the ideas of political parties.

“If you are not allowed every opportunity to hear and discuss political views then you cannot get an idea of what is happening and you can’t make an informed judgment. Students should have the right to listen to representatives of your party on the campus and especially on the issues of war.”

Mitchell pointed to the attempts to suppress whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden and Bradley Manning. “People are being threatened with being charged or being locked up because they have let the public know about what governments are doing behind their backs,” he said.

“I was studying the Vietnam War last year. During that period there was wide activity and discussion around the issue at colleges and on campuses in the US and this developed into mass opposition to the war. The government did everything to suppress discussion. This policy inevitably led to a shocking incident where the National Guard was sent to deal with a demonstration at Kent State University, shooting and killing several students. Attacks on democratic rights to prevent discussion in this period could also result in acts of repression.”

Emily said: “It is not right that the university is attempting to put restrictions on members of your party speaking to students on this campus. You should have the full right to come and discuss what you believe, and we should be able to listen.

“We should be able to have this type of conversation if we

want. On campus there should be a free flow of ideas. We are supposed to be encouraged to develop our understanding and ideas. But when we do, there is a reaction against this. At times like this, when there is a drive to war and social inequality, freedom of speech is always the first casualty. Everyone should take a stand to defend democratic rights.”

Karlie, a science student, said: “As far as I am concerned it is nothing less than an attack on democratic rights and freedom of discussion. We come to university to learn and develop ideas at the highest possible level and now we are being told we are not allowed to have political members come on campus and to hear their views.

“It is actually moving towards saying students cannot discuss political ideas and programs. It is an attack on the democratic rights of students and on the clubs they form. Christian clubs and sporting clubs are all allowed to operate freely and invite representatives, but this does not seem to apply to political clubs and political issues, which are the most important things that students should be discussing. They are trying to take away that option.

“Everywhere I see growing repression and moves to suppress democratic rights, like the attempt to censor the Internet. That is very disturbing and should be opposed and that is what motivated me to come today to support the IYSSE.

“Every political club should have the right to bring members on campus, but I feel that socialist ideas are most discriminated against and that the UoN restriction is mainly directed against them. For me, socialist ideas, such as social equality, are the right way but many people do not understand what socialism means. The powers-that-be do not want socialism, and what it is, explained.”



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