

Socialist Equality Party supporters oppose anti-war meeting ban

Our reporter
21 April 2015

Protest letters continue to be sent to the Burwood City Council and the University of Sydney Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Dr Michael Spence, opposing the attempts by both institutions to block an anti-war meeting called by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

On April 17, the university denied a room booking for the SEP's April 26 meeting on "Anzac Day, the glorification of militarism, and the drive to World War III," on the spurious grounds that it posed a "potential for disruption to activities on campus."

The ban followed a decision by the Labor-controlled Burwood Council on April 10 to cancel a booking for the same meeting, following a campaign by supporters of the right-wing, nationalist "Reclaim Australia" organisation.

Published below are some of the emails sent from SEP supporters in the past 24 hours from Sri Lanka, the UK, Germany and the US voicing their opposition to the ban.

Sri Lankan students protest attack on democratic rights

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality group at Jayawardanapura University in Sri Lanka denounces the banning of the Socialist Equality Party meeting by the Burwood City Council in Australia and demands that it be revoked.

The council's action is in line with measures being undertaken by the ruling elite to prepare the Australian people and the world for a Third World War. The meeting ban is an attack on the democratic rights of all working people and part of the attempts by reactionary governments to promote war hysteria and suppress the anti-war sentiments of the vast majority of the population.

The University of Sydney has now taken the same path by not providing a meeting room on the campus. This decision is a denial of the democratic rights of the students and confirms that the initial ban by the Burwood Council was not an isolated incident but an act involving the political establishment as a whole.

We have experienced similar attacks in Sri Lankan universities, even after the island's brutal civil war ended six years ago. No political discussions are allowed within the campuses and the Student Councils are banned.

While the new Sri Lankan government promised "Good Governance," nothing has changed. They all defend the capitalist order against the democratic and social rights of the working class and the oppressed people.

IYSSE group, Jayawardanapura University, Sri Lanka

Military veteran backs the SEP campaign

The SEP has received a copy of letter sent by a member of the Veterans For Peace (VFP) urging the group to endorse the campaign to overturn the meeting ban. VFP is a global organization of military veterans that assists former soldiers and victims of war and advocates for a dismantling of the war economy. It has 140 chapters worldwide. The letter says:

Veterans For Peace's long history of opposing war should be the basis for sending a letter of support for the Socialist Equality Party in Australia. The SEP's efforts to explain the true nature of the slaughter known as WWI are facing stiff resistance and challenges to basic democratic rights.

I urge you to send a letter of support and to publicize the anti-war efforts of the SEP and the efforts to silence them. Attached is "Anzac Day, the glorification of militarism and the drive to World War III" from the *World Socialist Web Site*. I feel the ideas expressed there will resonate with the VFP's perspective on war.

WD, co-founder of VFP chapter 89

"Do university administrators believe anti-war ideas are a 'disruption'?"

To the University of Sydney Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Dr Michael Spence:

I write to demand the University of Sydney reverse its decision prohibiting the anti-war meeting called by the Socialist Equality Party, which was to have been held April 26 and entitled "Anzac Day, the glorification of militarism and the drive to World War III."

The topic of the meeting is of urgent importance for Australia's youth, who are confronted with the threat of a new world war. One hundred years ago millions of young men were sent to the trenches to kill each other in a war that was, in reality, waged by the European ruling classes for global supremacy. Among the dead and maimed were over 200,000 Australians, or nearly 5 percent of the national population. *One in twenty*. Of the male working age population, 18-44, the figure approaches one in five. Imagine, sir, your largest lecture hall filled with students. Now imagine turning around and looking out again to find one fifth of the seats have been made empty. Such was Australia's "Great War."

In attempting to justify its patently arbitrary decision, the university alluded to the "potential for disruption to activities on campus as a result of the event" with no further explanation. Questions must now be answered. What disruption? By whom? Who raised such concerns? Do university administrators believe anti-war ideas are a "disruption"? A disruption of what, exactly?

You are, if I am not mistaken, a scholar of Italian language and literature. Is it necessary to remind you of the events that led to the establishment of fascism in Italy in the early 1920s, and in Germany one decade later? Certainly you, and the University of Sydney, do not wish to be placed together with those who silenced socialist opposition to militarism on the campuses in those catastrophic years. (If you have not done so, I suggest you read an account of this period in Germany: *I Will Bear Witness*, by Victor Klemperer, himself a professor of the Romance languages.)

You are also a scholar of the law. You then know the old Anglo-American tradition that favors the rights of assembly, of speech, and of opposition—liberties always defined against executive fiat. It is instead a hallmark of dictatorial regimes to disallow such rights by claiming "the potential for disruption." Such language has no place at a credible

academic institution.

You are, finally, Vice-Chancellor and Principal of Australia's leading public university, and, as such, have a responsibility to the students and the public to stand up to demands denying them access to a meeting whose only evident difference with any other is opposition to war. Indeed, the University of Sydney's decision is not just a violation of the Socialist Equality Party's right to hold such a meeting, but of students' right to decide for themselves what meetings they shall attend.

Students, professors, and workers cannot, and will not, allow administrators to assume such prerogative. I am convinced they will campaign against this decision, and will receive support from all over the world.

TM – Pennsylvania, USA

“A grossly undemocratic move”

A university spokesperson has claimed that the decision to ban the meeting was made after “widespread consultation within the university organisation” and that it was “discussed at all appropriate levels of the university.” This was clearly an attempt to give a democratic facade to a grossly undemocratic move.

No account is given as to who attended these discussions, what arguments were proposed, how balloting (if any) was conducted or what voting pattern(s) emerged. Perhaps, then, you yourself spoke out against the ban.

Perhaps you found yourself in the position of those high school principals and others who were forced either to compromise their fundamental beliefs or resign from their posts in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As with the World War I conscription debates, the Vietnam war also divided the country. But is not Australian society the richer, the more progressive for having tolerated the voicing of such important conflicting opinions? Would you have it otherwise?

I urge you to reconsider your position. Please do whatever you can to let the Socialist Equality Party and everybody else have their say.

RH – Germany

“The university administration has acted with cowardice”

As an academic and former employee of the University of Sydney, I am writing to urge you and the administration of the University to reverse the unprecedented and anti-democratic decision to deny the Socialist Equality Party a venue to hold its upcoming meeting on “Anzac Day, the glorification of militarism, and the drive to World War III” on the Camperdown Campus.

A charitable interpretation of the decision by the University to deny the SEP the opportunity to hold its meeting in the face of as yet unnamed “potential for disruption to activities on campus as a result of the event” is that the administration has acted with cowardice in caving in to intimidation and threats by unnamed right-wing and chauvinist elements who seek to close down historical and political inquiry into Australian militarism on campus. In this case, your apparently high-minded statement of principle that “[The University] must be a place in which debate on key issues of public significance can take place, and in which strongly held views can be freely expressed on all sides” (*Sydney Morning Herald*, April 20, 2015), being one you are apparently unwilling to uphold when it applies to critical discussion of Australian militarism, is apparently worth a lot less than the paper it is written on.

A less charitable explanation of your decision is that the University administration have cynically seized upon the alleged threats against the SEP meeting by unnamed right-wing and chauvinist elements as a convenient pretext to close down a discussion of Australian militarism which you and other top University bureaucrats at Sydney University, for reasons of your own, seek to censor and prevent from taking place on campus. If this interpretation is correct, then, notwithstanding your high-minded statement quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* above, the University top administration in fact holds contempt for freedom of

speech, intellectual inquiry and basic democratic principles in common with the as yet unnamed right-wing goons and street thugs who allegedly made the threats against the SEP meeting on campus in the first place.

Which is it Dr Spence?

JE – London, UK

“A miserable capitulation to the war mongers”

Your university claims concern with the defence of free thought. Your own words describe “a forum for the free debate of difficult and often confronting ideas.” These are admirable conceptions.

When there is a worldwide assault on democratic rights and pervasive surveillance of daily life, when militarism demands all the people march silently behind those leading them to disaster, defence of the right to pose an alternative is a matter of incontestable and overwhelming principle.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) intends to frankly reveal to young people the origins of the ongoing and new wars in which they will be expected to fight and die. Yet, Sydney University has concocted a pretext to ban the SEP meeting on April 26 entitled “Anzac Day, the glorification of militarism, and the drive to World War III.” There is, the SEP has been informed, “potential for disruption.”

This is a concoction, as you well know. It is a miserable capitulation to the war mongers in the Australian government and, no doubt, in the university administration. It endangers Sydney University's worldwide reputation. It directly contradicts your own words, if your reference to “free debate” means anything at all.

I urge you to lift the ban on the SEP meeting immediately.

SJ – Glasgow, UK

The SEP calls for letters of protest to be sent to the University of Sydney, demanding that it reverse its refusal to hire its venue for the SEP's April 26 anti-war meeting. Letters should be directed to Vice-Chancellor and Principal, Dr Michael Spence, at vice.chancellor@sydney.edu.au, who is responsible for the executive decisions of university management. Please CC all emails to the SEP at sep@sep.org.au.

The SEP is continuing to insist that Burwood Council rescind its hall cancellation. WSWs readers and supporters should send emails to the Labor Party Mayor of Burwood, Councillor John Faker, at mayor@burwood.nsw.gov.au and to Burwood Council management, at council@burwood.nsw.gov.au. The email addresses of all seven current Burwood councillors can be seen [here](#). Please specify “Complaint” in the subject field and CC all emails to the SEP at sep@sep.org.au.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact