

Oppose the political censorship of the IYSSE at Australian universities!

Oppose war and austerity! Defend democratic rights!

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Australia)
12 August 2015

Over the past 18 months, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), youth movement of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), has been subjected to unprecedented acts of political censorship at a number of universities around Australia.

At the University of Newcastle (UoN) in New South Wales, Griffith University in Brisbane, the University of Melbourne (UoM), the University of Sydney (UoS), and the University of Western Sydney (UWS), university management and/or student union representatives have attempted to obstruct and, in some cases, ban, our activities.

The aim of this thoroughly anti-democratic campaign has been to silence the only student organisation that opposes the joint US and Australian war preparations against China and the US-led military intrigues in the Middle East, and which seeks to turn students to the fight for the independent mobilisation of the working class against the ever escalating austerity assault on education, health, welfare and other essential social rights.

The University of Newcastle Services bars “political members”

These efforts began at the University of Newcastle, where the IYSSE has been particularly active in recent years. On February 17, 2014, UoN Services, the public company responsible for student services at the university, emailed the UoN IYSSE informing it that the club could not allow “political members” to be present at its Orientation Week stall, because this would constitute a breach of the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) legislation.

In 2011, the former Labor government, with the support of the Greens, enacted the SSAF. The legislation re-imposed a compulsory fee on students, forcing them to pay for basic services, including resources for student unions and clubs, which should be freely available at university campuses. It stipulated that funds raised from the fee could not be used to support political parties or the candidacy of a person for any political office. The legislation was blatantly discriminatory, as no such restrictions were applied to student organisations affiliated to religious, social or other so-called “non-political” causes.

The UoN Services’ email made the absurd claim that if the IYSSE organised “political members”—defined as members of parliament or candidates for political office—to be present at its O-Week stall, this would be equivalent to the club donating student fees to a political party. It threatened, on this basis, to revoke the IYSSE’s right to participate in O-Week activities.

Under conditions in which the IYSSE at University of Newcastle had been holding regular and well-attended meetings—including against the Labor government’s cuts to university funding, on Edward Snowden and his exposure of US spying, screenings of the film *Tsar to Lenin* and an open air rally against US moves for a direct US war on Syria in October 2013, which was addressed by SEP leaders and won a strong response

from students—there was nothing innocent about the management’s decision. It was a targeted attempt to try and use the SSAF to curb the IYSSE’s political activities and block the right of UoN students to discuss its revolutionary socialist analysis, program and principles on campus.

In response, the IYSSE issued a statement, which it distributed throughout O-Week, drawing attention to the widespread opposition among students to the slashing of higher education funding, the broader attack on working class living standards, the persecution of refugees and the “pivot” to Asia.

Appealing to students to defend their democratic rights, the statement concluded: “The IYSSE warns that the UoN Services’ re-interpretation of the SSAF legislation is setting a precedent that will be used to prevent students from developing the political means to fight these attacks through the organisation of political lectures, classes, meetings, debates and demonstrations.”

Griffith University: A ban on political clubs

While UoN Services retreated from its attempt to proscribe the IYSSE’s activities, the statement’s warning was confirmed just six weeks later. On April 2, 2014, the Campus Life Clubs and Societies Office at Griffith University in Brisbane also invoked the SSAF against the IYSSE. In an email, the student union stated that the IYSSE would not be allowed to book any rooms or other facilities, even if it registered as a club, because of the ban on donating to political parties!

It soon emerged that a ban on political clubs using facilities had been enforced during the previous year at Griffith, and that clubs associated with the Greens, the Labor Party and other organisations had simply accepted it. The IYSSE did not.

On April 4, 2014, the IYSSE issued a statement calling on students to oppose this anti-democratic edict: “[I]t is precisely because students are becoming increasingly concerned about war, social inequality and the attacks on democratic rights, that university managements are turning to the SSAF legislation to manufacture pseudo-legal justifications to suppress any student club activities aimed at clarifying the underlying causes and mobilising students against them.”

Because of the support it won among students for its principled stand, the IYSSE campaign succeeded in forcing the Griffith Clubs and Societies Office to withdraw its discriminatory policies against all political student clubs.

Melbourne University Clubs and Societies Committee refuses to affiliate the IYSSE

The persecution of the IYSSE continued unabated, however. In mid-April 2014, the Clubs and Societies Committee at the University of Melbourne, refused to affiliate the IYSSE on the extraordinary grounds that it had “overlapping aims” with the club of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative—an organisation with which the IYSSE and SEP have

longstanding, fundamental and well-known, political differences.

On April 28, 2014, the IYSSE published a statement refuting the spurious claims of the Clubs and Societies Committee and demanding its right to affiliate. It stated:

“The IYSSE has no overlapping aims with Socialist Alternative, which is openly opposed to the program and principles of Trotskyism fought for by the ICFI. Like its pseudo-left counterparts internationally ... (i)t politically supports the US-backed rebels in Syria and has endorsed the fascist-led putsch in Ukraine. It falsely labels China as an ‘imperialist’ power in order to provide a political cover for the alignment of the Australian ruling class with the US preparations for a military confrontation with Beijing. Against the SEP and IYSSE, Socialist Alternative defends the anti-working class trade union apparatuses, which seek to suppress any independent struggle by workers and youth.”

The statement noted that the “arbitrary and anti-democratic character” of the decision was underscored by the fact that “a Socialist Alternative representative on the committee correctly advised it that the IYSSE did not have common aims with their club and cast a vote in support of the IYSSE being affiliated.”

The University of Melbourne Clubs and Societies Committee nevertheless refused to reconsider its decision. Its actions reflected a politically-motivated determination to do everything possible to try and block the IYSSE from winning support among students, against the reactionary, right-wing foreign and domestic policies of the Abbott government and the political parties—Labor, Liberal, Greens and pseudo-left—that dominate the student unions.

Griffith University: An attempt to deregister the IYSSE

As soon as the new academic year opened, in February 2015, the IYSSE faced another attempt by Griffith University to shut it down. The Campus Life Clubs and Societies Office wrote that it would not process the IYSSE’s application to register as a club, or allow it to have an O-Week stall, because of a “lack of student interest.”

Responding to this claim, the IYSSE issued a statement on February 21, documenting that it had, in fact, been the only political club to hold information stalls and meetings throughout 2014, addressing the questions of militarism, social inequality and democratic rights. Far from a “lack of interest,” the IYSSE club was regularly meeting politically serious students and discussing issues of immense concern to them.

That is why, on two occasions during O-Week, university management deployed security guards to force IYSSE members, who were distributing the statement to students, to leave the university’s campuses. Then, echoing University of Melbourne, a Clubs and Society Office representative informed the IYSSE it would have to “explain why it was different to Socialist Alternative.” Once again, it was due to the support of Griffith University students for the IYSSE’s stand that the Clubs and Societies Office ultimately retreated and acknowledged the right of the club to function.

Melbourne University: Another refusal to affiliate the IYSSE

At the University of Melbourne, despite the IYSSE being denied a stall during the 2015 O-Week, well over 50 students signed up as prospective new members. This was significant because at the end of 2014, the student union arbitrarily increased the minimum number of students required to establish a club from 30 to 50, on the explicitly anti-democratic grounds of preventing “club proliferation.” The actual purpose was to clamp down even further on the democratic right of students to form clubs of their choice, in an attempt to suppress freedom of speech and political dissent.

In April 2015, the UoM Clubs and Societies Committee rejected a new application by the IYSSE for club status on the same discredited pretext that it had used the previous year: that the IYSSE had “overlapping aims” with Socialist Alternative. With breathtaking arrogance, a Committee representative sent an email to the IYSSE advising its members to contact Socialist Alternative about developing a “partnering” arrangement,

instead of establishing their own club.

On April 16, the IYSSE issued an Open Letter, which set out, for all UoM students to read, the record of the Clubs and Societies Committee’s flagrant acts of discrimination.

The letter began by stressing: “The notion that the C&S Committee, or any other organisation, should be able to determine which clubs can or cannot be formed undermines the fundamental rights of students to organise and exercise freedom of expression. All students should be permitted to establish whatever clubs they choose, whether their interests are cultural, spiritual, political, sporting or academic.”

It continued: “That said, your decision contains a glaring contradiction. While you cite “overlapping aims” to proscribe the IYSSE, no such objections have been raised to block other clubs on campus—something the IYSSE would most certainly publicly oppose.

“Among the more than 200 affiliated student clubs are two separate clubs representing the same political party, the Australian Labor Party—under the names ALP Club and Labor Club. And, as far as tens of thousands of students are concerned, if ever there were two parties with ‘overlapping aims,’ they are Labor and Liberal, whose big business programs are essentially indistinguishable.

“Moreover, there are four different Christian societies, as well as at least three science fiction clubs. In addition to Socialist Alternative, the Solidarity Club, which also defines itself as ‘socialist,’ is also affiliated.

“What is to account for this double-standard? Why has the IYSSE been singled out for rejection? We can only conclude that your discriminatory decision is based, not on procedural, but on undisclosed political considerations.”

The Open Letter continued: “The class character and orientation of any political organisation is determined, first and foremost, by its history and political program. From this standpoint, the IYSSE and Socialist Alternative represent diametrically opposed political tendencies.”

Whereas the aims of the IYSSE were to “educate students in the history and principles of the Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International,” Socialist Alternative was “not part of the ICFI and is not a Trotskyist organisation. It traces its origins to a petty bourgeois political trend known as ‘state capitalism,’ which broke from the Fourth International in 1951, on the basis of an explicit rejection of its principles.”

The IYSSE Letter went on to refute in detail the assertion of “overlapping aims,” reviewing the unbridgeable political differences between the two organisations in regards to four major global issues: 1) Syriza, which formed a self-proclaimed “left-wing” government in Greece in January of this year; 2) The United States-sponsored campaign to overthrow the Russian-backed regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, with the assistance of anti-Assad rebels financed by the US and its supporters in the region; 3) On the US pivot to Asia, and the preparations of both the US and Australian governments for war on China; and 4) On the nature of the trade unions.

The statement concluded: “If you cared to investigate you would find such fundamental differences between the IYSSE and SA on every political question. And that is because the two organisations have fundamentally opposed aims.”

For the second time, however, the University of Melbourne Clubs and Society Committee dismissed the exposure of its fraudulent rationale and voted on April 22 to uphold its decision to proscribe the IYSSE.

Behind the attacks on the IYSSE: The preparations for war

The political motives underlying the repeated and continuing attacks on the IYSSE emerged when a public meeting organised by the Socialist Equality Party and IYSSE for April 26, entitled, “Anzac Day, the glorification of militarism, and the drive to World War III,” was banned, first by a local Sydney council and then by the University of Sydney.

The SEP and IYSSE were alone in condemning the official glorification

of Anzac Day—which marks the day Australian troops landed on the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey in 1915—as an effort to indoctrinate young people with patriotism, militarism and nationalism, in preparation for new wars, including against China.

On April 10, the Labor Party-controlled Burwood Council in Sydney cancelled a hall booking for the public meeting. This was followed, a week later, by a decision of the University of Sydney, to refuse to allow the event to be held on its campus. An official admitted that the decision was “discussed at all appropriate levels of the university.”

The banning of an anti-war meeting at one of the country’s oldest academic institutions, brought into focus the reality of political life in Australia. Every level of the political, academic and media establishment has fallen into line with the militarist and austerity policies of the Australian ruling elite. Far from being bastions of freedom of speech, as UoS vice chancellor Dr Michael Spence had claimed just days before issuing the ban, the universities have become thoroughly corporatised institutions, preoccupied with securing financial grants from big business and enforcing political conformity, including the suppression of any and all “controversial” views.

In the midst of the SEP’s campaign against the censorship of its anti-war meeting, the attacks on the IYSSE also intensified. On April 23, University of Western Sydney security guards ordered IYSSE campaigners to cease distributing leaflets opposing the UoS’s banning of the SEP public meeting.

UWS security then insisted on placing extraordinary conditions on the IYSSE. It demanded that the club submit its leaflets for political vetting prior to distribution, and provide the names of all students participating in its campaigns. The head of security at the UWS Bankstown campus declared that the censorship was aimed at ensuring that nothing “offensive” was distributed on campus. At a subsequent meeting with IYSSE members, a UWS official stated that the decision had come from “higher up.”

UWS’ actions, more appropriate to a police state than a university campus, were a transparent attempt to intimidate students and prevent them from participating in socialist and anti-war discussions and activities. It raised the spectre of disciplinary measures against those who engaged in political activities not specifically condoned by the university authorities.

Once again, it was only because the IYSSE fought this attack, issuing a public statement and waging a spirited political campaign, that the UWS backed off. The principled actions of two UWS academics, who wrote to management demanding that it end the political persecution of the IYSSE, contributed to UWS security being overruled and IYSSE activities being allowed to proceed unimpeded.

This concerted 18-month campaign to silence the IYSSE and the SEP raises serious political issues before every student. Throughout the twentieth century, during World War I, World War II and the Vietnam War, the political establishment has dealt with organised political opposition with violence, censorship and repression. The moves to censor and ban the IYSSE’s determined struggle to build an international anti-war movement among students in Australia, throughout the Asia-Pacific region and around the world reflect the fear within the ruling elite, and among its advisers and defenders in the citadels of academia, that this struggle is beginning to intersect with the growing opposition to war and austerity among wide layers of students and working class youth.

We urge every student who wants to fight for internationalism and social equality, and to take a principled stand against the dangers of war and authoritarian forms of rule, to study the history and program of the Trotskyist movement and join and build the IYSSE at university campuses, TAFEs and high schools throughout the country.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact