A reply to the University of Melbourne's Clubs and Societies Committee

Overturn the ban on the IYSSE!

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (University of Melbourne)
17 September 2015

On August 18, the Clubs and Societies Committee (C&SC) of the University of Melbourne Student Union refused to affiliate a student club of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), for the third time in two years. The committee carried out its latest attack on democratic rights on the extraordinary grounds that it could not have a "good faith relationship" with the IYSSE, because the Trotskyist youth movement had publicly opposed the committee's previous rejections, and exposed the spurious grounds upon which they were based.

The IYSSE has waged a vigorous campaign in defence of the democratic rights of the dozens of students who signed up to join the club and of all students to affiliate clubs of their choice. As well, students, workers and young people from across Australia and internationally have written to the committee, demanding that it reverse its ban. In response, Stephen Smith, a Clubs and Societies Officer, has issued a letter to those who have protested its decision, defending the committee's refusal to affiliate the IYSSE, and issuing a series of unsubstantiated allegations. Below is the IYSSE's response.

Dear Stephen Smith,

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) rejects the claims contained in your email of September 8, apparently sent to all those who have protested the latest refusal by the Clubs and Societies Committee (C&SC) to affiliate an IYSSE club, and continues to insist that you reverse your decision.

In seeking to justify the latest ban on the formation of an affiliated IYSSE club, your email includes a series of unsubstantiated allegations against the IYSSE, and misrepresents the events of the past 18 months. In particular, your accusations that the IYSSE's principled defense of democratic rights has been an exercise in "harassment," "intimidation," and even "defamation" of the C&SC—serious charges for which you provide not the slightest evidence—underscore the politically motivated character of the committee's decisions, and its hostility to any attempts to render it accountable to the student body it purports to represent.

This is all the more striking given that your email acknowledges that the ostensible grounds upon which the C&SC twice rejected the IYSSE's applications for affiliation in Semester 1 of 2014, and 2015, were incorrect. Those decisions were based on the false claim that the IYSSE had "overlapping aims" with the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative. You now write that the IYSSE's arguments, in its application in Semester 2 of 2015, "adequately demonstrate their differences to the Socialist Alternative." Nevertheless the committee continues to block our affiliation.

Allow us to review the record.

In Semester 1 of both 2014 and 2015, the C&SC was impervious to the IYSSE's attempts to clarify the major differences in aims between the world Trotskyist movement, of which the IYSSE is the youth and student movement, and Socialist Alternative, a pseudo-left organisation whose forebears broke with the Trotskyist movement many decades ago. If the IYSSE's applications were insufficiently clear, or gave grounds for committee members unfamiliar with socialist politics to conclude that it had similar or "overlapping aims" to those of Socialist Alternative, this could have been rapidly clarified, and your concerns allayed.

Moreover, you had the benefit of unambiguous evidence that your verdict was incorrect when the committee voted for the first time, in Semester 1, 2014, on the motion to reject the IYSSE's affiliation application on the basis of "overlapping aims." The Socialist Alternative member on the committee voted against the motion! In other words, she was clear that the aims of the IYSSE were completely different to those of the club she represented. This fact was, however, apparently irrelevant as far as the rest of the committee was concerned.

In both 2014, and 2015 the C&SC rejected the IYSSE's attempts to clarify the issues. It proceeded instead to write a letter advising the IYSSE of the committee's rejection of its Semester 1, 2015 application, which included the extraordinary statement that, "We recommend that you contact Socialist Alternative to discuss how your goals can be achieved through partnering with them."

That the C&SC felt it had the right to "recommend" to IYSSE members that they "partner" an organisation with which they have fundamental disagreements underscores the fact that its decision constituted an attack on the democratic rights of the entire student body, and that this was of a piece with a broader onslaught on fundamental civil and political liberties being prosecuted by Labor, the Liberals, and the entire Australian political establishment.

Under these conditions, the IYSSE turned to a long-established tradition in the socialist and workers movement, and issued an open letter appealing to the democratic sentiments of students,

workers and young people and seeking to clarify the issues of substance. While you now, belatedly, claim that this letter, issued on April 16, 2015, was "defamatory," you do not quote from it, or provide any indication of its content.

In fact, the letter put forward a forthright defence of basic democratic rights, stating, "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."

The bulk of the letter was dedicated to a detailed refutation of the claim that the IYSSE and Socialist Alternative had the same "aims," on the basis of a review of the public statements of the two organisations. It exposed Socialist Alternative's support for the Syriza government in Greece, which was carrying out the dictates of the European banks, its promotion of the US-led regime-change operation in Syria, and preparations for war against China, and its ardent defense of the thoroughly corporatised trade unions. In each case, the statement documented the diametrically opposed positions of the IYSSE.

Underlying your hostility to the open letter is your contention that any opposition to the decisions of the committee, regardless of whether they are correct or otherwise, is impermissible. As your letter states, "The Regulations provide no avenue of appeal against a decision to reject an application to affiliate."

This argument, more befitting of a police state than a university student union committee, demonstrates the anti-democratic character of the C&SC's entire conduct in this matter. Your letter essentially asserts that because the committee is an elected body, its decisions are unchallengeable by students and clubs whose applications have been rejected. In this novel theory of democratic procedure, any protest, disagreement or public opposition to the committee is considered an act of lèse-majesté. From this flows the various unsubstantiated claims made against the IYSSE in your letter and the committee's latest ban.

Your defense of the lack of any right to appeal is all the more striking, given that the committee twice made an incorrect judgment when assessing the IYSSE application. Your letter acknowledges, on two occasions, that Socialist Alternative, and the IYSSE do not, in fact, have "overlapping aims." You note that in the meeting of the committee that discussed the IYSSE's Semester 2, 2015 application, our third application in 18 months, you "moved a motion to grant them initial approval," because the IYSSE "adequately demonstrate their differences to the Socialist Alternative."

You go on to claim that you withdrew the motion because the "C&S Committee raised concern about the potential relationship that would exist between our department and IYSSE, given they had sought to intimidate us into allowing them to affiliate." You then moved a motion to disallow affiliation to the IYSSE on the grounds that, "the C&S staff or Committee cannot transact the affiliation with the Contacts on a good faith basis."

There is nothing in your letter to indicate that this decision was made on any basis other than that the IYSSE had opposed the committee's previous decisions, which you now implicitly acknowledge to have been incorrect. In other words, the IYSSE has been effectively proscribed for protesting, and seeking to correct, a violation of its basic right to form a student club, having met all of the stipulated requirements.

It is to cover up the character of the committee's handling of this matter, that you seek to smear the IYSSE's campaign as a "pattern of intimidation and harassment." In fact, the IYSSE has conducted itself in an entirely principled manner, accurately presenting the statements and decisions of the committee, and exposing their objectively anti-democratic content. It is the committee that now feels compelled to resort to slander, to seek to obscure this record.

You conclude by stating that the IYSSE's presentation of the committee's actions as "denying IYSSE the ability to meet and organise as a political group on campus," is false and go on to claim, "IYSSE is welcome to meet and organise on campus, we are simply saying that because of the negative relationship between the applicants and our department that we do not believe we can have an effective working relationship with them."

Nobody with any concern for democratic rights on campus will accept this argument. If students accrued no benefits by being members of an affiliated student club, then the C&SC department of the student union, and your committee itself, would not exist.

Without affiliation, the IYSSE is liable to be harassed by campus security during its campaigns, to be forced to pay exorbitant corporate fees for meeting rooms, and to be denied the ability to apply for funding and grants, as every other affiliated student club can.

In preventing the IYSSE from affiliating, you are denying the many students who have expressed their interest in joining our club from enjoying rights exercised by members of other clubs, including those affiliated with other political organisations. The only conclusion one can draw from the C&SC's actions is that there are unstated political motivations underlying its determined attempts to prevent the IYSSE from forming an affiliated club.

The IYSSE calls on students and all those concerned with the defense of basic democratic rights to demand that the C&SC immediately reverse its decision. We also insist, once again, that you retract the false allegations contained in your email.

Sincerely,

University of Melbourne IYSSE