

Oppose the political ban on the IYSSE at University of Melbourne!

For democratic and political rights on campus!

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Australia)
12 April 2016

At a meeting on March 23, the Clubs and Societies Committee (C&SC) of the University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) rejected the application of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), to affiliate a club on campus for the fourth time in two years, on explicitly anti-democratic grounds.

As in each of its previous applications, the IYSSE had met the union's requirements for affiliation, including presenting over fifty expressions of interest from students for the establishment of a club.

The basis of the Committee's decision last month was that in opposing the abrogation of its democratic right to form a club in 2015, the IYSSE had defended the principle that all students should be able to establish clubs of their choice, without hindrance from any university or student body.

The Committee cited the IYSSE's Open Letter of April 16, 2015, which stated: "First and foremost, 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 be cultural, spiritual, political, sporting or academic."

In other words, asserting that students have fundamental political and democratic rights is considered by the C&SC to be an offense warranting permanent proscription. That the Committee is counterposing its own "right" to wield arbitrary authority to the most basic democratic norms, including the rights to freedom of political speech and association, is a warning to the entire student body at University of Melbourne and at universities across the country. The Committee is establishing a precedent for the banning of student clubs and organisations on every campus.

The C&S Committee consists of seven students chosen from the executive members of affiliated clubs on campus: Gulsara Kaplun of the Secular Society, Kayley Cuzzubbo of Potter Heads, Jacinta Cooper of the Science Students' Society, Julianna Rozek of Horticultured, Nicholas Hynes of the Arts

Students' Society, Alexander Tashevski-Beckwith of the Political Interests Society and Angela Keyte of the Physics Students' Society. Fiona Sanders, the Clubs and Societies Coordinator employed by UMSU, along with Ryan Davey and Yasmine Luu, the C&SC office bearers, were also present at the meeting. Luu and Davey were elected to the position at the end of 2015 on the "More Activities!" ticket. The office bearers who presided over two rejections of IYSSE applications last year, Stephen Smith and Claire Pollock, were also members of the "More Activities!" student faction.

Minutes for the March 23 meeting, where the ban decision was taken, have not been published, nor has a single Committee member or office bearer spoken out publicly against it.

In seeking to justify their position, the C&SC has issued a series of libelous accusations against us, centring on the claim that the IYSSE's principled campaign against the Committee's previous decisions constituted an exercise in "intimidation." Given that the C&SC is seeking to falsify the public record, it is necessary to review the events of the past two years.

In April 2014, the C&SC rejected an IYSSE application to form an affiliated club, on the grounds that we had "overlapping aims" with the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative club. In response, the IYSSE issued a detailed statement exposing the political gulf that separated the pro-imperialist agenda of the pseudo-lefts from the socialist and internationalist aims of the IYSSE clubs. The Committee refused to reconsider its ban.

In April 2015, the Committee again rejected an IYSSE application on the discredited grounds of "overlapping aims" with Socialist Alternative. With no avenue of appeal, the IYSSE turned to the longstanding tradition of issuing an open letter, reviewing in detail the unbridgeable divide between the program of Socialist Alternative, including its support for the US regime-change operations in Syria and Libya, and the pro-austerity Syriza government in Greece, and the program and traditions of the world Trotskyist movement, fought for by the IYSSE. Once again, the Committee upheld its decision.

In August, 2015, the C&SC rejected a third IYSSE

application, this time on the Orwellian grounds that we had publicly opposed its previous decisions. This, the Committee claimed, demonstrated that it could not have a “good faith working relationship” with the IYSSE. In response to letters of protest from students and workers at the University of Melbourne, at other Australian universities and internationally, Stephen Smith, a 2015 Clubs and Societies Officer, issued an email acknowledging that our aims did not, in fact, overlap with those of Socialist Alternative—an extraordinary admission that the grounds upon which the IYSSE had twice been prevented from forming a club had been false.

Smith sought to obscure this fact by alleging that our April 2015 Open Letter was “defamatory” and that the IYSSE’s campaign against the Committee’s decision had been an exercise in “harassment” and “intimidation.” He did not provide the slightest evidence for these claims. Instead, he centred his accusations on our decision to issue the open letter—making clear that the Committee’s real concern was that its actions had been brought to the attention of the broader student body. The Committee was essentially asserting that disagreement with its decisions was unacceptable. The basis of a “good faith working relationship” would be unquestioning acceptance of the Committee’s “right” to curtail student activities, including of political organisations, even if carried out upon transparently false grounds. In response, the IYSSE issued another open letter, in September 2015, refuting Smith’s allegations. This letter was never answered.

Now, the Committee is making explicit the anti-democratic logic behind Smith’s arguments, and reviving the slanders contained in his email.

The false accusations of “intimidation” were aimed at creating the conditions for the IYSSE and our members to be victimised and targeted by university authorities if we launched a public campaign against the Committee’s latest ban. The Committee’s resort to such tactics, along with the shifting pretexts it has employed to deny the IYSSE our right to affiliate over the past two years, underscore the politically-motivated character of its attack.

By denying the IYSSE the right to conduct political work as an affiliated club at the University of Melbourne, one of the country’s elite “sandstone” universities, the Committee is preventing students from encountering a revolutionary, socialist program in opposition to the accelerating drive to war. Ours is the only youth organization apprising students of Australia’s integration into the advanced US preparations for war against China, in opposition to the conspiracy of silence being maintained by the Liberals, the Labor Party, the Greens and the pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alternative. We alone are fighting to build an international anti-war movement to prevent a new and catastrophic global conflagration and to turn students to the working class, the only social force capable of ending the profit system and halting the descent into barbarism.

These political positions are anathema to the official political climate that has been cultivated at universities over the past three decades. The conception of campuses as centres of critical inquiry, dissent and vigorous intellectual debate has been abandoned by university authorities and the entire political establishment. Instead, they have been transformed into bastions of intellectual conformity, thoroughly corporatised and subjected to decades of government funding cuts.

According to the *Australian*, the University of Melbourne has the highest revenue of any university in the country, with \$2.2 billion in 2015, and is ranked 177 in the list of the largest revenue generating organisations in the country. At the same time, between 2012 and 2013, revenue from federal grants declined by over \$40 million. The university is thus heavily dependent upon private endowments, corporate partnerships and the exorbitant fees extracted from international students. Undoubtedly, the authorities are anxious to prevent activities on campus that would displease wealthy donors.

We therefore demand that the C&S disclose the full contents of any discussions held with university administration, other sections of the student union or any other parties regarding the banning of the IYSSE. We likewise insist that the minutes of the March 23 meeting be made public.

The erosion of democratic rights at University of Melbourne takes place in the context of moves towards authoritarian forms of rule in Australia and internationally, amid the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s and the emergence of flashpoints for war in every corner of the globe. In France, the Socialist Party government has provided a glaring example of the dangers this poses before the working class and young people. It has used the Paris terror attacks late last year to institute a “state of emergency,” banning protests and creating the framework for virtual martial law. These measures have already been invoked this year to arrest and detain environmental activists planning protests at the Paris Climate Summit last November.

If the C&S’s decision is allowed to stand, it will clear the way for political proscriptions and censorship at campuses across the country and more broadly. That is why the IYSSE calls on students, staff and academics, and all workers and youth opposed to the assault on democratic rights, to support our campaign against political censorship at the University of Melbourne. The IYSSE will hold meetings, lectures and extensive campaigns demanding that the C&S reverse its decision, as part of the fight to defend fundamental political and democratic rights at universities and educational institutions everywhere.



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