

New York University professor Bertell Ollman supports IYSSE fight for club status

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Last semester, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) applied for club status at New York University (NYU). The NYU Student Activities Board (SAB) rejected the IYSSE, citing a supposed lack of resources and “similarities” to other groups. Ninety percent of all new applicants were also rejected.

The IYSSE has applied for club status in the spring semester. The SAB recently sent out an email announcing they are delaying their decision on which groups will be accepted into the New Club in Development Program until March 6.

The IYSSE issued an open letter to NYU faculty asking them to write to the SAB as part of a campaign to democratize the club application process. Bertell Ollman, a prominent left-wing professor in NYU’s politics department, had a lengthy email exchange with the SAB in support of the IYSSE being granted club status. (See, “New York University professors speak out to defend IYSSE and support free speech”)

Ollman is a widely known radical author and respected academic. He has published numerous books and dozens of articles on socialism and has held teaching fellowships at Colombia University, Oxford University and the University of Chicago. This reporter recently sat down with Ollman to discuss issues of the club application process and academic freedom on campus.

Below is an edited text of the conversation:

Bertell Ollman: Greetings. My own experience would be a good place to start on the subject of free speech. My first teaching job was in the University of the West Indies in Jamaica. I spent three years there and was eventually fired for being too involved in the country’s politics. There was the first student strike in the

country’s history, and this led to students taking over the campus for three weeks.

Eventually the university held a hearing where they informed me of what I was supposedly guilty of, which I wasn’t guilty of. When the strike ended the government and the school administration sent me out of the country.

Upon my return to the US, I had problems when I was given a job at the University of Maryland. This was when I had been here for a number of years after my book *Alienation* came out, which was a left-wing book that was even appreciated by a number of people that weren’t necessarily Marxists. Then the word got out from the University of Maryland about my book.

All the columnists in Washington D.C. got very involved, and there were ten of them that wrote columns attacking the university for giving me that job. The board of trustees got involved, and 24 or 25 contacted the president of the university and threatened cuts to the basketball and football budgets. So, he changed his mind, and I sued.

I ended up back at NYU, and I almost got a few other jobs except for my politics.

IYSSE: One of the issues that comes up in your own experience and here is that the school has a political position which is hostile to socialism and left-wing politics.

BO: Yes, I have been turned down for a number of jobs. Every time, the university has claimed that they were doing this to defend their academic freedom against the likes of me. I did write an article about this, and it is apparent that everyone talks about “academic freedom” and means something quite different than what it does to you and me. So, I have always been very concerned with not just my own academic freedom, but the academic freedom in the academy and

how far short it falls.

IYSSE: In attempting to establish a club here, one of the things that the IYSSE came up against was the bias of the university against left-wing politics and socialism. They claim that there are no resources for us. Then they announced roughly a month later that they are constructing a billion-dollar building. You referenced this issue of the university having ample resources in your exchange with the SAB. Could you elaborate on the resources the university does have, and your thoughts about their claims?

BO: I live in this building, where my office and the offices of other political scientists and economists are, and I often see some of the rooms, where we hold our lectures, are empty. This is just in this building, and I am sure it is true for all the buildings. It is a question of scheduling. Going around and looking for empty rooms in this building will show that many are empty all the time. It is foolish to say they have no room for you.

In terms of the money they give, or the funds clubs may need, that can be negotiated. I'm sure many of the political clubs would not demand much, or any money. Their main interest is having a room, and being able to let people know that there is a meeting in that room at a certain time. This is all easy to do.

All the talk about lack of resources, whether money or rooms, is ridiculous. When we are talking about student clubs, this has no basis at all. I suspect that some of the students that run the SAB are just naïve and just accept what the university says. The students in the SAB have to decide if they are just underlings for the university, whatever the university's reasons are, or whether they have some interest in serving the student body.

From what you wrote [in the open letter to faculty] and what I have gotten from them, it is clear that they are naïve enough or they have developed the hypocrisy that the people they have worked for in the administration have. As a result, they gave us the kind of nonsense that they have written in their emails.

IYSSE: Coupled with this, the requirements for establishing a new club are fairly vague. This came out with the initial rejection of the IYSSE, when they claimed we were similar to existing groups on campus.

BO: That is just silly. No one in junior high school would not recognize that because you have one or two political clubs that then politics is covered. It makes no

sense whatsoever.

How can they not be embarrassed? Only by being very stupid or very young, and the university is not either of those things. Some of the students in the SAB might be, but I even doubt that.

IYSSE: There is also a catch-22 because applying groups have to show that they can hold successful meetings, but are unable to book rooms without club status.

BO: That is a real beauty. You should have included that in your email.

IYSSE: The IYSSE's appeal was rejected because the SAB claimed we could not last past the graduation of our members. I am not sure how the IYSSE or any group would be capable of proving that definitively.

BO: They are just looking for an excuse. The rules that they say you are offending don't make sense, but they have to say something. They can't simply ignore it.

As I've said, though, I was genuinely surprised because I've had a long history of joining clubs. And, they played an important part not just in my interest in politics, but in my thinking about the world.

I think the comparison with other universities that you made in one of your emails to me is very important. One would like to know if it is as bad, because I think this is a terrible situation at NYU. I am sure it is not perfect elsewhere, but it sounds like it is not as bad as it is here, and we are much richer in every way than all these city colleges.

IYSSE: What do you think the IYSSE should do if the university does reject the IYSSE?

BO: It seems like you have people who support you, you could have a demonstration with people that were sympathetic with your position.



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