

Australian university overturns student union election result

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In what amounts to an attack on democratic rights, the University of Wollongong (UOW) administration has overseen the overturning last month of the outcome of this year's presidential election of the Wollongong Undergraduate Students Association (WUSA), a student union.

Chloe Rafferty, a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative organisation and New South Wales (NSW) education officer of the National Union of Students, received 765 votes out of 1,543, or approximately 49.6 of the total, in the October election. She was standing for the "Save our Union" election grouping, which also includes members of the Greens. Despite receiving the highest number of votes by a substantial margin, Rafferty was disqualified after the results were released.

A WUSA Appeals Panel ousted Rafferty because she had addressed students in lecture theatres before classes, a common practice in student election campaigns. The university administration fully backed the disqualification. The university's Director of Academic Quality and Standards headed the appeals panel.

The publicly-available WUSA regulations do not prohibit candidates from addressing lectures. The panel failed to produce evidence for its claim that it issued warnings to the "Save our Union" group to cease speaking to lectures. The "Save our Union" group denied any warnings were made.

Zachary Fitzpatrick, a Young Liberal member who won the second-highest number of votes, was also disqualified. The appeals panel ruled that Fitzpatrick and the outgoing union president, Jasper Brewer, had attempted to convince other candidates to overturn Rafferty's victory, in contravention of electoral regulations.

The ruling meant that the third-placed candidate, Timothy Piert, was installed as president having received just 5.5 percent of the vote.

UOW acting chief administrative officer Theresa Hoynes told the local *Illawarra Mercury* on November 20 it was "unfortunate to see circumstances where candidates' own conduct disqualifies them from taking up the positions for which they would otherwise have been elected." Hoynes cynically declared that the "the university is committed to upholding" WUSA regulations and "protecting the integrity of the student election process."

On December 6, the university administration called police and security guards to prevent Rafferty and several other students from appealing to academics to oppose the decision outside a university senate meeting.

The disqualifications are part of a broader crackdown on democratic rights at universities across the country. It appears that the administration is also seeking to silence criticism of its plans to curtail or abolish the student union.

The "Save Our Union" group had campaigned against the university's decision in July to conduct a so-called Student Representation Review. The review's October 20 report stated the university would "examine the honoraria payment model currently in place for the student associations, WUSA and WUPA [Wollongong University Post-graduate Association] and the student publication, the *Tertangala*." According to "Save Our Union," the university had slashed funding to the union over the past two years.

Student union activities have been wound back across the country over the past decade.

In 2005, the former Liberal-National government of John Howard introduced Voluntary Student Unionism,

ending the previous system of compulsory student union dues paid by all students on enrolment. Since then, many services previously provided by unions have either collapsed or been taken over by university administrations.

The primary target of the Howard government's legislation, which was introduced two years after huge demonstrations against the 2003 invasion of Iraq, was political activity among students and young people. The Labor Party and the Greens opposed the introduction of voluntary union payments for their own reasons. They were concerned that the change cut off a substantial resource for the student unions, which have often served as training grounds for future party careerists.

In 2011, the Greens-backed Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard introduced the Student Services Amenities Fee (SSAF). This allowed universities to charge students a compulsory fee of more than \$200 per year to pay for basic campus services, some of which the universities may delegate to student unions.

This reactionary measure, which places the burden for amenities on students themselves, was supported by the student unions, as well as various pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alternative, because it provides the unions with potentially millions of dollars each year to prop up their apparatuses, which have little support among students.

The SSAF was also aimed at directly subordinating student unions to the dictates of university authorities and their corporate sponsors, amid billions of dollars in university funding cuts by successive Liberal-National and Labor governments, including a \$2.3 billion reduction by the Gillard government in 2012.

The Labor-Greens legislation specifically precludes SSAF resources being used to fund political parties. It places no such restrictions on religious, sporting or cultural institutions. The political ban is particularly aimed at suppressing oppositional and socialist politics, under conditions of growing hostility among young people to war, austerity and the erosion of democratic rights.

The attack against the "Save Our Union" group at UOW is part of an assault on students' democratic rights nationally.

At Griffith University in Queensland and the

University of Newcastle in NSW, the student union and campus authorities sought to utilise the SSAF legislation to ban a number of political clubs, including the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), from holding events on campus. They only retreated in the face of campaigns by the IYSSE, which won support among students.

These attacks were part of a broader attempt to curtail the IYSSE's activities. At the University of Melbourne, the student union's Clubs and Societies Committee maintained a ban on the IYSSE for more than 18 months from mid-2014, preventing it from affiliating a club on campus, on the false pretext that the IYSSE had "overlapping aims" with Socialist Alternative.

In April 2015, the University of Sydney banned an IYSSE and Socialist Equality Party meeting opposing militarism and the glorification of war through "celebrations" of the centenary of Anzac Day, the holiday marking the British and Australian invasion of Gallipoli, Turkey, in World War I.

The IYSSE has fundamental political differences with "Save Our Union" and Socialist Alternative. Both organisations seek to channel the hostility to the attacks on student rights back behind Labor and the Greens, the very parties that have presided over the gutting of higher education.

This does not alter the IYSSE's principled opposition to the attacks against Rafferty and "Save Our Union," which are aimed at suppressing all political activities at the University of Wollongong, setting a precedent that will be used at university campuses across the country.



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