

New Zealand: IYSSE and SEG meeting opposes Internet censorship

Our reporter
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The Socialist Equality Group (New Zealand) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at Victoria University of Wellington held a public meeting on April 19 to oppose the drive to censor the Internet and demand freedom for WikiLeaks' editor Julian Assange.

The meeting, which drew an audience of students and workers, was part of an international campaign against Internet censorship led by the International Committee of the Fourth International, which includes upcoming events in Australia.

In opening the meeting, SEG member Tom Peters denounced the latest missile attack on Syria by the US, France and Britain. He pointed out that the drive towards war against Syria and its allies, Russia and Iran, went hand-in-hand with censorship of the media. Reports that discredit the pretext for the bombardment—an alleged chemical attack in Douma by Syrian government forces—have been largely blacked out in the US and European media.

The main speaker, IYSSE organiser Matt Carrington, explained how the *World Socialist Web Site* had exposed the systematic censorship and blacklisting of anti-war, socialist and progressive websites by Google and Facebook.

He described censorship by these corporations, in collaboration with the US and other governments, as “the most significant attack on free speech since World War II ... [when] warring countries shut down anti-war and socialist publications and threw many anti-war activists in jail. In the United States, the Trotskyist movement was persecuted and its leaders imprisoned.”

The WSWs experienced a drop in referrals from Google searches of almost 70 percent after Google announced, in April 2017, new algorithms that promoted so-called “authoritative content” from the

corporate media, and massively demoted the WSWs and many other websites in search results.

Carrington quoted Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's statement on January 31, 2018 in which he pledged to stop what he called “the spread of news that is false, sensational and polarising” and to promote “trusted” sources like the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*.

The speaker posed the question: “What does this really mean? So-called ‘polarising’ content, such as viral videos of the Grenfell Tower disaster in London, or police shootings in the US, is being censored from newsfeeds by Facebook,” along with socialist articles.

Billions of people, “especially young people who often get most of their news via Facebook, will now see what the ruling elite deems to be ‘authoritative’ news sources. These are the same sources that lied about ‘weapons of mass destruction’ to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq. They have been at the forefront of propaganda pushing for war against Syria and a confrontation with Russia.”

Carrington stated: “The Socialist Equality Group and the IYSSE join the International Committee of the Fourth International in condemning the persecution of Assange.”

Assange has been forced to live inside the Ecuadorian embassy in London since 2012 to escape extradition on trumped-up allegations of sexual assault. Last month, the Ecuadorian government cut off his Internet access in a blatant act of censorship designed to appease the US. He has been silenced for his ongoing exposure of imperialist criminality.

WikiLeaks and Assange were targeted in 2010, Carrington said, “for revealing the crimes of US imperialism throughout the world, including the video titled ‘Collateral Murder,’ depicting the brutal killing

of unarmed civilians and journalists in Iraq.”

Carrington explained that Internet censorship was a response to growing opposition to war and social inequality. He noted that during the 2011 revolution in Egypt, “one of the first actions the US-backed dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak took to try and stop the movement was to completely shut down access to social media.”

There are demands for similar measures now in response to “widespread unrest in the United States and Europe. A wave of strikes is largely developing outside of the official organisations—the trade unions and the capitalist parties.” Carrington noted how teacher strikes in Oklahoma and West Virginia had been organised largely through social media.

In New Zealand, he added, nurses and health workers were using Facebook to organise struggles for decent wages and conditions. Families of victims of the 2010 Pike River mine disaster had also used Facebook to organise protests “against the failure of the government to hold anyone accountable for the deaths of 29 men.”

Carrington quoted from the WSWs’s January 23 open letter calling for an international coalition to fight Internet censorship: “The oligarchy, in total control of the world economy, fears the Internet as an arena for discussion, information sharing, and political organisation of the worldwide struggle against capitalist exploitation and imperialist wars.”

He appealed to those present to support the fight against Internet censorship by joining the IYSSE and the SEG, stressing that the fight for free speech is inseparable from the mobilisation of the working class on the basis of a socialist program.

The report was followed by a wide-ranging discussion. One student asked how the IYSSE would respond to the common pretext that censorship was necessary to combat “hate speech.”

Carrington replied that “hate speech and tribalism are symptoms” of the crisis of capitalism. The demand for the censorship of “hate speech,” as defined by governments and corporations, was aimed at establishing a “dangerous precedent” for the suppression of oppositional views.

SEG member John Braddock added that one of the lessons of the 1930s was that fascist and extreme right-wing movements cannot be defeated through appeals to the state “to silence them.” The Trotskyists insisted that

fascism could only be defeated through “a political struggle to build a conscious socialist movement in the working class.”

Another audience member asked how the Socialist Equality Group would build a political party.

Tom Peters from the SEG explained that the construction of a section of the Trotskyist movement required a political fight “to differentiate genuine socialism from everything that, over a whole historical period, has falsely passed itself off as representing socialism, including Stalinism, the Labour Party and all the pseudo-left groups that continue to orbit around it ... Our task is to raise the level of political consciousness among sections of workers, students and young people.”

He added: “There is a growing hostility towards capitalism that’s becoming more and more conscious. As a result of the objective situation people are being driven to the left. We are confident that our socialist and internationalist program will intersect with that movement.”

Jonathan, a computer science student, told the IYSSE after the meeting that he had decided to attend after watching the recent webinar on Internet censorship with WSWs editorial board chairman David North and journalist Chris Hedges.

He added: “I think Julian Assange is a critical issue to focus on. His personal plight is representative of all of us on the left, I feel quite an affinity with him. New Zealand is one of few countries that could possibly put pressure on its allies to protect him, being in the Five Eyes.

“I agree with a lot of what you’re saying,” he said. “The Internet and social media have been described as the most powerful tools for people to communicate since the printing press, and that’s huge, if you know anything about history. We’ve reached a new turning point.”



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