

Socialist Equality Party holds meetings in Australia on Internet censorship

Our reporters
5 May 2018

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Australia held public meetings entitled “Organise Resistance to Internet Censorship! Free Julian Assange!” in Sydney, Melbourne and Newcastle this week.

The meetings were convened in response to the *World Socialist Web Site*’s call for the formation of an International Coalition of Socialist, Anti-War and Progressive Websites to oppose Internet censorship and imperialist preparations for war.

The first meeting, held at the University of Sydney on April 29, was attended by over 70 people, including workers and retirees, as well as students from various universities. For many who attended, it was their first SEP event, having heard about it via social media, posters and street campaigns or campus “speak outs” by IYSSE members (see: “Australian workers and youth speak after public meetings”).

SEP assistant national secretary Cheryl Crisp chaired the meeting. She pointed out that increasing efforts to censor the Internet were driven by the deepening political and economic crisis of facing capitalist governments everywhere, attacks on workers’ living standards, and the preparations for war, led above all by the US and its imperialist allies.

SEP national committee member Zac Hambides reviewed the massive worldwide increase in Internet use over the past 20 years, particularly among young people, and the growth of WSWS readership since its establishment in 1998.

This growth, Hambides noted, paralleled the expansion of the international working class, particularly in the “emerging economies,” such as China, India and South and Central America, as well as increased social inequality and immense distrust in the

corporate media and governments of every political colouration.

The censorship measures taken by Google, Facebook and other giant Internet companies and governments, he said, were an anti-democratic attempt to block access to the WSWS’s socialist perspective, and anti-war and progressive web sites.

SEP national secretary James Cogan reviewed the broader political context in which Internet censorship had emerged and the reckless US-led preparations for war against China and Russia.

Cogan told the meeting that senior US intelligence officials had been systematically calling for stricter control of the Internet, warning that this was essential for the survival of American capitalism. He cited one such comment: “Civil wars don’t start with gunshots, they start with words... We all must act now on the social media battlefield to quell information rebellions that can quickly lead to violent confrontations.”

The speaker said increasingly worried articles were being published by American corporate media outlets about how US teachers, starting in West Virginia, were using Facebook and other social media to organise industrial action independently of the trade union bureaucracies.

Cogan reviewed the history of the persecution of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks, including calls by US politicians for his assassination, and the Ecuadorian government’s recent decision, under pressure from Washington, to isolate the anti-war journalist.

The persecution of Assange, the speaker said, cannot be separated from the broader offensive by capitalist governments to silence all dissent. He pointed out that CIA director Mike Pompeo, who is now the US Secretary of State, last year labelled WikiLeaks as a “non-state hostile intelligence service.”

Cogan reviewed the pernicious role played by Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard, who falsely claimed in 2010 that Assange's activities were "illegal" and promised that her government would do everything to assist Washington silence the Australian citizen and shut down WikiLeaks.

Cogan told the meeting that the contemporary attacks on freedom of speech and Internet censorship followed a reactionary tradition. He cited the comments of Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels that "if you repeat a lie often enough, people will believe it" and "give me control of the media, and I will turn any nation into a herd of pigs."

The ruling class today, the speaker said, is determined to deny the population access to the truth, so they can be manipulated to any end, above all, for war.

Access to the socialist perspective provided by the WSWS and the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) is necessary for the development of political consciousness and an international political organisation to mobilise the working class to put an end to capitalism, the source of imperialist war, Cogan said.

"The world must be transformed on the basis of a socialist program, involving the expropriation of the transnational banks and corporations that dominate over world economy, into public ownership and democratic control. The global communications systems, including the Internet, must be transformed into public utilities."

Cogan concluded by calling on all in attendance to participate in the ICFI's 2018 international online May Day rally on May 6, and apply to join the SEP, the Australian section of the ICFI.

The other meetings were held on Thursday evening. At the University of Melbourne, the speakers were Cogan and Evrim Yazgin, the IYSSE president at that campus. The meeting at the University of Newcastle was addressed by SEP national committee member Oscar Grenfell and Robert Champion, the secretary of the IYSSE club. The final meeting in the series will be held in Brisbane, the Queensland state capital, on May 20.

The SEP meetings provoked serious discussion as audiences grappled with the political implications of issues raised in the reports. Over \$3,200 was donated to the SEP's monthly fund and more than \$300 of Marxist literature was sold.

Questions ranged from more details on Facebook censorship, to the possible use of alternative search engines, the names of individuals and organisations who previously supported Julian Assange but had abandoned him, and what individuals could do to defend him.

Cogan explained that an open letter defending Assange in 2010 had been signed by the editors of all the major newspapers and television news services in Australia, as well as lawyers, artists, leading Greens politicians, the pseudo-left and others. These layers had turned sharply to the right in the seven years since then and are either openly hostile to Assange or refuse to say a word in his defence.

A student attending the Sydney meeting asked whether humanity faced an "Orwellian future" if censorship of the Internet continued. Her question provoked an important discussion, with contributions from other SEP members.

The working class faces great dangers, Cogan said, but there was a way to prevent an "Orwellian future" and the descent into barbarism. That was in the struggle to build the ICFI, the only political party fighting in defence of basic democratic rights and for a socialist and internationalist program.



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