

Student union at Australian university attempts to bar Chinese students from elections

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In a blatant act of political discrimination, student union leaders at Melbourne's Monash University attempted to prevent international students from running in their annual elections last week.

The Monash Student Union (MONSU) at Caulfield campus was forced to repeal the decision and reschedule the election after crisis meetings with university management and the Victorian state Labor government last Wednesday.

The election was due to be held September 16–18, with nominations closing at 4pm on September 5.

On the morning of September 5, after having received all nominations, MONSU voted to implement a requirement that officeholders for nine of the 13 electable portfolios be eligible to work 22 hours per week. The regulation was a transparent attempt to bar international students, who, under regressive national visa laws, cannot work more than 20 hours a week.

The decision, spearheaded by the largest group in the outgoing union leadership, Forward, was aimed at scuttling the expected election victory of Go!—a group of mainly Chinese international students. Six international students were deemed ineligible for nomination because of the work requirement.

Jack Guo, a candidate for Go! and president of the Monash Chinese Student Association (MCSA) told the *Age*: “We think this is a biased, racist decision against Chinese students and other international students.” He added: “There has been no proper funding for us [MCSA] for 18 months—we get no support from the union... we feel there is a bias against Chinese students.”

The Caulfield campus has a student population of over 17,000, 62 percent of whom are international

students.

Go! challenged the decision as discriminatory and a breach of the Equal Opportunity Act. MONSU's election tribunal admitted “indirect discrimination” against international students had been caused by the regulation, but upheld the ban because discrimination on the basis of visa type is not prevented by existing legislation.

Following a public uproar after the ban was made public, Monash University executives convened a meeting with MONSU. The state Labor government intervened, and the federal Coalition government was also reportedly involved in the talks.

The panicked intervention of university management and the state and federal governments was not based on any concern for the rights of international students.

The key consideration on their part was that the transparent discrimination would discourage international students from studying in Australia, where they are used as cash cows for a university sector that has suffered decades of funding cuts by successive Labor and Coalition governments.

International students are forced to pay exorbitant fees up front and in full, often totalling more than \$30,000 a year.

In reality, the election ban dovetailed with a protracted anti-China campaign waged by Labor, the Coalition, the corporate media and the intelligence agencies.

For the past three years, the media and political establishment has been dominated by lurid and unsubstantiated warnings of “Chinese interference” in virtually every Australian institution. This has been aimed at legitimising Australia's central role in a vast

US military build-up throughout the Asia-Pacific in preparation for war with China.

Universities have been a central target of the xenophobic anti-China witch-hunt.

Last month, the federal Coalition government, with the full support of the Labor opposition, established a “taskforce” composed of academics and representatives of the intelligence agencies, to investigate supposed “foreign interference” on university campuses.

This followed “crisis talks” with the university sector, convened by the government and involving high-level representatives of the security agencies. The formation of the task force is part of a push to more fully subordinate universities, including academic research, to the demands of the military and the intelligence apparatus.

Chinese students and student organisations have been slandered in the media, and by leading political figures, as patsies of the Chinese Communist Party regime.

This began in September 2016, when the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* international editor, Peter Hartcher, wrote that Chinese student organisations exist “specifically to spread Beijing’s influence.” He ominously branded them as “pests” that must be “eliminated.”

Chinese students who have won office in student elections have also been directly targeted.

A January 7 opinion piece in the *Australian* warned against the victory of Jacky He, a Chinese-born student, in elections for the presidency of the University of Sydney’s Student Representative Council (SRC) last September. The article insinuated that He’s victory should be cause for alarm, and drew attention to his involvement in a Chinese student club, that it claimed promoted an “understanding of China” but “with the nasty bits left out.”

More recently, right-wing students at the University of Queensland have waged a campaign against a Confucius Institute on campus, which promotes Chinese language and cultural programs. Because the centre is funded by the Chinese government, its opponents have hysterically claimed that they are under “Chinese Communist Party occupation.”

Clive Hamilton, a pro-US ideologue and member of the Greens, has been involved in the campaign at the University of Queensland. Last year, Hamilton published a book entitled *Silent Invasion*, which

claimed that virtually every Australian institution was “being penetrated and shaped by a complex system of influence and control overseen by agencies serving the Chinese Communist Party.”

Hamilton called for the disbandment of Chinese student associations, and warned that the majority of Australia’s 1.2 million people of Chinese descent were “not loyal.”

The Monash Student Union’s actions were an attempt to put these anti-democratic precepts into practice. The ban on Chinese and international students participating in the election demonstrated the authoritarian logic of the anti-China campaign, signalling that its trajectory is to do away with the fundamental rights of entire groups of students.

As the WSWs has repeatedly warned, the xenophobia emanating from the highest levels of the political establishment raises the specter of a return to the measures imposed by the Australian state during both world wars, including the mass internment of so-called “enemy aliens.”

While Chinese students and groups may be the immediate target of these attacks, they are directed against the democratic rights of the entire working class. Their aim is to create the conditions for the criminalisation of opposition to militarism and war, amid advanced preparations for Australia to play a frontline role in a US-led war with China.



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