University of Melbourne student union enforces club affiliation requirement amid pandemic

Eric Ludlow
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Despite the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on university life, the student union-run Clubs and Societies Committee (C&SC) at the University of Melbourne has imposed anti-democratic affiliation requirements on campus clubs.

This is an attempt to stifle political and cultural life at one of Australia's oldest and most prestigious universities amid the pandemic crisis, and it is part of a broader attack on student rights.

C&S coordinator Fiona Sanders and Jordan Di Natale, a C&S office bearer and member of the student election organisation "Stand Up!" outlined the onerous obligations in a letter to clubs and societies on July 28—one week before the start of Semester 2. They wrote that "clubs will be required to hold an AGM [Annual General Meeting] in 2020, and those that do not complete reaffiliation (by holding an AGM) may be disaffiliated."

The highly-bureaucratic process of holding AGMs is, even under normal circumstances, a thinly-veiled attempt by the union to arbitrarily disaffiliate clubs that are not tied to the official student political milieu.

The letter said the C&SC had made several "provisions" regarding AGMs in 2020 due to COVID-19, including that clubs should hold AGMs online. More than 15 University of Melbourne student members of the clubs must be present at an AGM.

The letter was sent amid an escalating "second wave" of COVID-19 infections, centred in Melbourne. A week after it was addressed, the state of Victoria recorded a record 725 coronavirus cases, the vast majority in Melbourne. This surge triggered the state Labor Party government's imposition of a "stage four" lockdown of Melbourne, involving the closure of most retail, sharp restrictions on individual travel, and the shuttering of educational institutions.

Clubs and students have opposed the demands of the C&SC. In a letter sent to the C&SC on August 7, president of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club at the university, Evrim Yazgin, said the IYSSE "opposes your decision to require that clubs hold Annual General Meetings this semester under conditions of the worst global pandemic since 1918."

Yazgin added: "Necessary social-distancing measures amid COVID-19 have meant, for the safety of club members and the general student population, clubs have been unable to hold physical campaigns and other critical contact work all year to build their membership base."

Yazgin said the C&SC's decision "constitutes clear procedural unfairness as well as an intrusion on basic democratic rights." It would "serve to disaffiliate clubs which have in previous years demonstrated continued support and interest among students," thus "further compounding the destructive impact that the COVID-19 crisis has had on cultural and political life on campus."

After receiving no response from the C&SC, on August 27 the IYSSE forwarded its letter to students and other clubs, appealing for them to join the IYSSE in opposing the AGM requirements. This has been met with a warm response. The president of one club responded: "Great initiative, couldn't agree more. We back you and will be sending our own email!"

The C&SC then replied to the IYSSE on August 28, saying it would not alter its position. Blithely it stated that it "believed that these requirements were very

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suitable for these conditions."

In an email to all clubs on September 4, the C&SC admitted it had received "a couple of requests to defer AGMs into 2021," but had "consistently iterated that clubs must hold an AGM in 2020." No further concessions were offered to clubs struggling during the pandemic.

The C&SC's anti-democratic actions are not without precedent. The IYSSE was only able to affiliate a club in 2016 after a political struggle of over two-and-a-half years.

The IYSSE's application to form a club at the university was rejected in 2014 and again in 2015 on the false basis that the IYSSE's aims "significantly overlap" with those of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative club. The IYSSE responded by writing an open letter to the C&SC demanding that it overturn the decision, expounding the clear and fundamental political differences between the IYSSE and Socialist Alternative.

The letter explained that "the notion that the C&S Committee, or any other organisation, should be able to determine which clubs can or cannot be formed undermines the fundamental rights of students to organise and exercise freedom of expression. All students should be permitted to establish whatever clubs they choose, whether their interests are cultural, spiritual, political, sporting or academic."

Despite growing support for the IYSSE's affiliation, the C&SC rejected applications twice more. In September 2015, the C&SC declared that the IYSSE, by writing the open letter, had undermined any possible "good faith working relationship" with the committee, and would therefore have its application rejected. The next year, the IYSSE's application was again turned down on the basis that the IYSSE's open letter defended the principle that students should be able to establish clubs of their choice, without hindrance from any university or student body.

The attempts by C&SC to censor a genuine socialist revolutionary, internationalist and anti-war club at the university was ultimately overcome by a political campaign of supporters and students who wanted to build the IYSSE club and ensure its affiliation.

The AGM requirements being forced on clubs by the C&SC today constitute a violation of basic democratic rights and an attack on freedom of expression on campus. Ignoring the immense issues facing clubs and societies amid a global pandemic which has infected tens of millions, killed almost one million and rendered millions more jobless worldwide, the C&SC is utilising the crisis as an opportunity to cull clubs.

This takes place in the context of the turn to authoritarian forms of rule in Australia and internationally. With the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s Great Depression and growing dangers of war, the COVID-19 crisis is exposing the failure and criminality of capitalism before the eyes of millions of workers and youth around the world. Social tensions are boiling over and the ruling elites in every country are seeking to suppress political discussion.

We appeal to all students to oppose the attack on democratic rights contained in the C&SC's AGM requirements. We call on all students and representatives of other clubs on campus to join the IYSSE in its opposition to these provisions. Only on this basis can the basic principles of freedom of expression on campus be defended.

The IYSSE will continue to demand the repeal of the anti-democratic requirements, until the health crisis is overcome. We nevertheless plan to hold a successful AGM this year as part of the fight to build a revolutionary socialist movement at the University of Melbourne, throughout Australia and internationally.

We urge students to attend our upcoming AGM and help build the IYSSE club at the University of Melbourne to ensure that students on campus continue to have a Trotskyist voice on campus. The AGM will be held via GoToMeeting. The details are:

IYSSE University of Melbourne *Annual General Meeting*

2 p.m. Friday, 16 October 2020
https://global.gotomeeting.com/join/371803773
You can also dial in using your phone.
Australia: +61 2 8355 1050
Access Code: 371-803-773

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