

Australia: University of Newcastle Student Association guidelines attack democratic rights

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New clubs and societies guidelines imposed by the University of Newcastle Student Association (UNSA) are a significant attack on the democratic rights of students and an attempt to curtail political activities on campus. The rules were adopted by UNSA on May 26, without any consultation with students or their clubs and societies.

The new rules at the regional New South Wales university deepen a protracted campaign by successive Liberal-National and Labor governments, abetted by the university managements, the staff unions and student associations, to crack down on political discussion and campaigning.

The guidelines uphold the Student Services and Amenities Fee [SSAF] regime introduced by the Greens-backed federal Labor government of Julia Gillard in 2011. They state: “Under SSAF rules, UNSA is not permitted to fund any club activities that support a particular political party or candidate. For that reason, UNSA-affiliated political clubs cannot apply for SSAF funding.”

The SSAF system imposes compulsory fees on students, forcing them to pay for basic services that should be provided free from government funding. Labor’s legislation states that these funds, dispersed to university administrations and student associations, cannot be used to support political parties or candidates in an election for a political office.

This itself is an attempt to bar students from participating in politics. But the laws can and have been interpreted more broadly, including to prevent political clubs from affiliating, booking rooms for meetings and holding other events on campus.

This wider assault is embraced by the UNSA guidelines. One section declares that “Faith-based and Political clubs” have been placed in a separate category to all other clubs, because they “are built upon a belief system rather than a shared activity.” For that reason, they supposedly require “specific guidelines.”

The document includes mealy-mouthed statements about

UNSA remaining “fair, unbiased and reasonable.” But it states that “UNSA will not affiliate a club that acts as a branch for an external organisation” and “clubs with links to external bodies will be monitored to ensure that there is no undue influence from these bodies.” The nature of this “monitoring” is not elaborated.

In effect, these clauses legitimise the barring of most political clubs. Virtually all such clubs are based on political ideas and perspectives that extend beyond a single campus. Often they are affiliated with, or share a common orientation with, a political party. There always have been students who are members or supporters of political parties. The guidelines depict this political participation of students as something potentially nefarious.

The guidelines further state that “proselytization of any kind is not permitted. UNSA will not affiliate any club whose aims and objectives amount to proselytization.” What UNSA means by “proselytization” is any attempt to persuade someone to change their religious or political beliefs. But that is at the foundation of all free discussion about not only politics, but world events, history, ideology and every area of cultural and intellectual endeavour.

The new guidelines are therefore an affront to the intellectual and cultural traditions of university campuses and an attempt to prohibit students from exercising basic democratic rights.

The guidelines could be applied against the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), which has been active at the university for over a decade, and every other political club. They could be used to target clubs that advocate views on environmental, social issues or religious issues.

This is a profoundly reactionary rule and one that is itself highly political. It means that the rights of political and other clubs can be attacked if they fall foul of UNSA or the university administration.

The IYSSE fights for a revolutionary, socialist orientation

against war, social inequality and dictatorship, and aims to mobilise students and staff for free, high-quality university education as a basic social right for all. That is why it has repeatedly been the target of such anti-democratic measures.

This included at University of Newcastle, where in 2014, UoN Services, the public company then responsible for student services at the university, attempted to bar “political members” of the IYSSE from taking part in campus events, based on the SSAF provisions.

It is no accident that the new guidelines have been implemented in the midst of a devastating restructure at UoN, which will see over 400 academics and staff affected by amalgamations and cuts to the university’s colleges, schools and divisions. This includes the destruction of at least 120 jobs.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which covers staff, has collaborated with the university management in suppressing widespread opposition and enforcing the cuts. This is in line with its role nationally of helping to impose an historic onslaught on higher education, accelerated by the pandemic. By the union’s own admission, up to 90,000 jobs have been destroyed in the university sector since the coronavirus crisis began.

For its part, UNSA has played a highly political role. Amid intense hostility among students to the cuts, its only activity has been to hold management “consultation” meetings. These have provided senior executives a platform to justify the cuts as “unavoidable,” while speaking alongside UNSA representatives. The student association is led by members of the big business Labor Party, which has played a central role in the decades-long corporatisation and dismantling of higher education.

In this context, UNSA’s rules serve the purpose of suppressing all expressions of independent political activity among students, including in opposition to the cuts.

UNSA itself was established last year under the guidance of the university administration. The decision to shut down the former student associations, the Newcastle University Students Association (NUSA), Newcastle University Students Postgraduate Association (NUPSA) and Yourimbah, was imposed bureaucratically, without any input from students or student clubs.

In an email exchange last December, the IYSSE asked UNSA “which authority made the proposal to dissolve NUSA, NUPSA, and Yourimbah?” An UNSA representative replied that in 2018 the NUSA and NUPSA presidents had “reached out to the University for assistance in progressing their proposal for a new whole-of-institution organisation,” adding: “[T]he University supported this request.”

UNSA was established as a non-for-profit charity

company. According to its 2020 Annual Report, UNSA received \$574,390 in revenue from the management, of a total annual revenue of \$588,550, and retained a surplus of \$145,997.

UNSA’s establishment was a further step toward abolishing even the pretence of independent student organisation.

The IYSSE is warning that the new guidelines will be used to try to prevent students from developing the political means to fight the ongoing pro-corporate restructure and assault on jobs and conditions, not just at the University of Newcastle but elsewhere.

This is being carried out under conditions of a resurgence of working-class struggle registered in a growing number of strikes and protests around the world. There is immense opposition among workers, as well as students and youth, to the homicidal and profit-driven official response to the pandemic, the escalating drive to war and the turn by governments toward increasingly authoritarian forms of rule. Polls have consistently registered mounting interest in, and support for, socialism among students and youth in Australia and internationally.

UNSA’s attempt to bureaucratically suppress this politicisation must be opposed. Students must have the right to unfettered political discussion and organisation on every issue.

The IYSSE will fight to mobilise opposition to the anti-democratic guidelines as part of its struggle against the restructure and for the social and democratic rights of students and the working class. The IYSSE appeals for all students, young people and university staff, as well as student clubs, to register their opposition to the guidelines and to demand their withdrawal.



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