Australian student association attacking political rights on campus

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An online Zoom meeting hosted by the University of Newcastle Student Association (UNSA) underscored the organisation's anti-democratic attempts to muzzle student political activities at the campus in regional New South Wales.

Under cover of the pandemic crisis and behind the backs of students, new clubs and societies guidelines have been instituted by UNSA at the University of Newcastle (UoN) which threaten to prevent the reaffiliation of long standing political and religious clubs. Those that are granted affiliation are forbidden to "proselytise," i.e., engage students in discussion with the intent of winning them to a certain perspective.

UNSA is a newly formed company which emerged alongside a university management restructure affecting hundreds of jobs and courses. It replaces a number of liquidated student associations including Yourimbah, the Newcastle University Post-Graduates Student Association (NUPSA), the Newcastle University Students Association (NUSA) and the Club Management wing of Student Central.

The Zoom meeting on September 16 was held with the purported intent of outlining the transition of as many as seventy clubs previously affiliated with Student Central to UNSA.

In the Q&A, John Davis, president of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club on campus, condemned UNSA's crackdown on political rights.

"I think this whole process has been very undemocratic," Davis said. "A little background, when Student Central was established by the university, it was to undermine the existing and long-standing student organizations and poach clubs away from the Newcastle University Students Association (NUSA). It didn't work.

"What I think we are seeing with the transition of all clubs from Student Central to UNSA, is the completion of that process by another means. Now the university has used the transformation of NUSA into UNSA to bring student clubs and organizations under the control of the university.

"It needs to be recalled that UNSA itself was established last year under the guidance of the university administration. The decision to shut down the former student associations, NUSA, NUPSA and Yourimbah was imposed bureaucratically without any input from students or student clubs.

"The whole aim of this enterprise is to have a completely subservient student organisation to university management. One can see that from the fact that UNSA has refused to take up any fight against the ongoing devastating restructure.

"I think nothing expresses this more, however, than the new guidelines established by UNSA in May, which virtually excludes a number of clubs from financial assistance and restricts what it is that they can say."

UNSA General Manager Georgia Killick attempted to cut Davis off but he ended his remarks by demanding, "that these rules and regulations be immediately withdrawn. New regulations should be drawn up as the subject of a mass meeting of students and with the involvement of all students and clubs."

Killick asserted that UNSA had been formed through a democratic process, and that its creation had been "moved by student association members, involving the presidents."

This is belied by the stunned response of student clubs, the most active section of the student body, over the past year. The IYSSE reached out to UoN affiliated clubs upon first hearing of the restructure, and of the five that replied only one had been informed of the process. None, however, were privy to any vote or discussion on the formation of UNSA.

Other clubs have also pointed this out publicly. The president of Newcastle Christian Students club, for instance, stated: "For the last 18 months we've been very concerned and frustrated. We have not been welcomed and there has not been any consultation."

In response to concerns raised by students over the new guidelines, Killick stated that they were fully in line with Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) legislation.

The IYSSE treasurer rejected Killick's interpretation of SSAF stating that, "the guidelines went far further than what is listed in the SSAF legislation… there is no clause

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forbidding ‘proselytization.’ Far from making clubs ‘vibrant and thriving’ as has been claimed in this meeting, UNSA is in fact restricting the political activities of clubs on campus.”

Passed by the Greens-backed Labor government of Julia Gillard in 2011, the SSAF legislation imposes compulsory fees on students to provide basic services, which ought to be free.

It also states that funds raised cannot be used to support a political party. This has been interpreted in the past by the administration to revoke the opportunity for clubs such as the IYSSE to host “political members” on campus during Orientation Week, claiming that SSAF fees were being effectively siphoned to a political party.

The IYSSE led a fight against this interpretation at the University of Newcastle in 2015 by turning to the student body who successfully forced a repeal of the decision. In a statement that year, the IYSSE placed the attempted curtailment of political rights on campus in the content of the bipartisan assault on higher education, the growth of social inequality, and the militarisation of university campuses, in line with US-Australian preparations for war. It declared:

The IYSSE warns that the UoN Services’ re-interpretation of the SSAF legislation is setting a precedent that will be used to prevent students from developing the political means to fight these attacks through the organisation of political lectures, classes, meetings, debates and demonstrations.

Over six years later, the deepening crisis of capitalism has led to a pandemic of historic proportions and the student body finds its democratic rights under attack again on a broader scale. The pandemic is also being utilised by the corporate elite to accelerate its attacks on higher education, which it declares in the interests of profit to be already “ dead .” According to union estimates up to 90,000 jobs have been lost in the sector since early 2020.

Universities have also become increasingly incorporated into the war drive against China. UoN states favourably on the research section of its website that it is “uniquely placed to collaborate with the defence industry” listing a whole raft of research initiatives it is involved with such as “Australian Defence Force Operation and Sustainment” and the development of military “Autonomous Systems.”

The IYSSE has exposed the pro-corporate role played by student associations and unions throughout this process. In the name of “transparency” UNSA has hosted consultation sessions in which management has been given a platform in front of students to justify the pro-business restructure on campus. The NTEU has not called for a single mass meeting of staff, instead preaching defeatism and appealing to management for greater collaboration with the union.

Notably absent in the Zoom meeting and silent throughout this whole affair has been the UoN Socialist Club. Formed this year, it has not made any statement on its Facebook page opposing the guidelines or the restructure, nor has it voiced opposition in the student consultation meetings. Its complicit silence is in line with the pseudo-left club’s orientation to Labor, the Greens and the unions.

Only the IYSSE, the genuine socialist club on campus, has spoken out against the cuts, social inequality and the danger of war.

The latest interpretation of SSAF legislation in UNSA’s club guidelines is a warning that management is cracking down far harder than before on any independent political activity of students. UNSA denies the fact that it is a political organisation but as with its predecessor, UNSA, it is led by Labor Party students.

Underlining the anti-democratic intent of the guidelines is the fact that some clubs seeking affiliation have been forced to seek approval from the university’s vice chancellor. Chief Information Officer Anthony Molinia told the university newspaper *Yak* that if a major conflict were to arise between UNSA and a club, the university would likely play a role in finding a resolution.

The IYSSE unequivocally opposes the guidelines in their current form. Affiliation must not be subject to the political persuasions of university management. Students must fight for their democratic right to form whatever club they wish.

We urge young people, staff and students to contact the Newcastle IYSSE and attend our upcoming Annual General Meeting for affiliation in October, which will be opposing the corporate assault on higher education.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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