

Australia: University of Newcastle Student Association promotes management, defends anti-democratic guidelines

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At its online Annual General Meeting (AGM) early this month, the University of Newcastle Students Association (UNSA) promoted university management, as it carries out a major pro-business restructuring of the regional New South Wales campus, and defended anti-democratic guidelines aimed at stymieing political activity among students.

The AGM opened with contributions from University of Newcastle (UoN) Vice Chancellor Alex Zelinsky and Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) Mark Hoffman. The presence of two university administration officials in a student association general meeting is unprecedented and points to the close ties between UNSA and the highest levels of management. The purpose of their attendance was twofold, to praise UNSA for the role it has played over the past year since it was founded, and to prevent critical discussion among students.

Zelinsky, as the former Australian Chief Defence Scientist, played a significant role in the militarisation of university campuses across the country. At UoN he has overseen a devastating restructure over the past year, which has seen the destruction of 150 full-time equivalent (FTE) academic positions and 64 FTE professional positions across the university. This follows the consolidation of five faculties into three colleges, which involved cutting or amalgamating approximately 530 of the university's 2,200 courses earlier this year.

Zelinsky limited his remarks to noting UNSA's assistance to students during the recent outbreak of COVID-19 at the campus student residences, which saw 18 students infected. Zelinsky however is not unaware of the opposition amongst students and clubs to UNSA and their new clubs and societies guidelines, which threaten to disaffiliate student groups that advocate for political, social, economic and other views. There is also widespread anger over the restructure.

Hoffman followed up Zelinsky's remarks stating that he "oversaw the first UNSA board come into formation... when I look back at what's happened over the last 12 months of

this board... I have really enjoyed working with [them]." UNSA replaced the former student associations NUSA, NUPSA and Yourimbah last year completely bureaucratically and without any discussion or input from students and clubs. Hoffman's remarks make clear the new outfit was formed under the direction of the administration, and with the purpose of creating a pliant student body beholden to management.

Hoffman continued: "It's clear that students have different views but what is really impressive is that we actually come together as a university with all those different views." He continued: "I have considerably increased confidence that UNSA will be able to support students better and better." UNSA's role, in other words, is to suppress opposition and ensure that the student body "comes together" under a right-wing management that is attacking staff jobs, conditions and education.

Even though the two chancellors from the university administration were allowed to open the meeting, student discussion itself was suppressed. Students were not allowed to unmute to speak and comments and questions from students were vetted by the meeting hosts.

Throughout the meeting, UNSA claimed multiple times that it had listened to student feedback and changed the club guidelines accordingly. This is false, the guidelines have only been reworded.

An IYSSE member commented in the chat: "whilst you say that you have changed the UNSA guidelines, you say under 4c: 'if your primary objective is to convert other people to believing the same as you, UNSA will not affiliate you.' How is this different from the proselytization clause that was in the previous clubs and societies guidelines, where the guidelines formerly stated that 'proselytization of any kind is not permitted?'"

The new "changes" are significant, but not in the way UNSA claims. The word "proselytization" has fundamentally religious associations. Opting to say "convert

other people to believing the same as you” has far broader scope. If a political organisation has the audacity of seeking to convince students of the correctness of its program and perspective, it could fall foul of the guidelines.

Georgia Killick, UNSA’s general manager cryptically responded “we want clubs to be a place where you build community... of shared beliefs, shared interests, we want people’s primary objective to be about building community as part of the broader university community.” The corporate word soup was absurd on its face. How can one develop a campus community or club without debate and discussion to change people’s “beliefs”?

Killick also responded to a question concerning the lack of consultation with students and clubs over the new guidelines. She claimed they were developed by “comparing [them] to a number of other large student associations in Australia, so our guidelines were pretty much a reflection, in line with a lot of other student club guidelines.” It is the case that student unions and administrations are cracking down on democratic rights across the country. Killick, however, did not point to a single other university union which explicitly bans attempts to change student’s opinions.

Killick would later state that the guidelines were developed with “a lot of collaboration with the university... our guidelines reflect a policy of what needs to happen on campus.” In other words, the guidelines were drawn up by the administration, as it carries out attacks on student and staff conditions, and seeks to suppress the resulting opposition.

The Labor Party has played a central role in this operation. While UNSA President Luka Harrison claimed the body is “an apolitical organization” and “does not have any political affiliations,” he and other executives are prominent members of Labor. Together with the Liberal-National Coalition, it has carried through a decades-long corporatisation and dismantling of higher education.

Absent from the meeting was the so-called UoN Socialist Club, formed earlier this year and aligned with the pseudo-left party Socialist Alliance. They have also directly collaborated with university management and UNSA, having played a role in organising the student consultation sessions held in May this year which gave university management a platform to justify the university cuts to students.

This is bound up with the club’s orientation to the Labor Party, the Greens, and the unions. The UoN Socialist Club has nothing to do with genuine socialism. Its role is to channel students back behind the organisations enforcing or facilitating the assault on education, including Labor and the unions. To this day, the UoN Socialists have not released an official public statement opposing either.

A handful of right-wing clubs and organisations have

claimed to oppose the new guidelines, including representatives of the National Party and Christian groups. Their opposition is entirely tactical, and is based on fears that anti-democratic guidelines could be used by a Labor-dominated union to target them. Many Christian groups, however, have supported a host of attacks on civil liberties, from marriage equality to abortion and more. The Nationals are a right-wing capitalist party, that is in government at the federal level and a number of states, where it is responsible for sweeping attacks on democratic rights, the social conditions of the working class, the destruction of education, and escalating militarism.

The IYSSE, the student and youth wing of the Socialist Equality Party, is the only club on campus fighting to defeat the guidelines and the restructure, through the mobilisation of students and staff against management, UNSA and all the pro-capitalist parties.

A member of the IYSSE posted a message in the chat which was prevented from being posted: “The IYSSE is proposing that the rules and regulations should 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. Even with the new changes, the clubs and societies guidelines are still an affront to the intellectual and cultural traditions of university campuses and an attempt to prohibit students from exercising basic democratic rights. The attacks on political and religious/faith-based clubs is not just targeting them but the democratic rights of students across the board.”

The member added: “there needs to be free and open discussion at this meeting. The fact that you have muted students and allowed Alex Zelinsky and Mark Hoffman to speak openly at the meeting is very revealing. The IYSSE opposes this.”

The guidelines are above all directed against the mounting social and political opposition of students and youth, who are increasingly opposed to capitalism and attracted to socialism. The IYSSE appeals to students to join its club at the University of Newcastle, as part of the fight to build a movement of students, staff and academics across the country and internationally against the onslaught on higher education and the erosion of democratic rights.



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