

Overtake University of Melbourne student union's anti-democratic disaffiliation of the IYSSE!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Australia)
16 September 2022

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club at the University of Melbourne (UofM) has been disaffiliated by the University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU). If the decision remains, the IYSSE, the youth wing of the Socialist Equality Party, will be unable to reaffiliate for 12 months.

The move is a blatant attack on the democratic rights of the IYSSE and the entire student population. It is part of a broader onslaught on cultural and political life at universities, as they are transformed into fully corporatised instruments of big business, governments and the military.

Within this context, the targeting of the IYSSE is particularly significant. The disaffiliation of its club is aimed at suppressing any discussion of the key political issues confronting young people, including the mounting threat of world war, the disastrous consequences of the “let it rip” COVID policies and the turn to authoritarianism by governments around the world.

The IYSSE, moreover, advances a genuine alternative to the right-wing, pro-capitalist politics of the student union and every other political tendency on campus. It fights to turn students to the emerging struggles of the working class, based on a socialist perspective aimed at transforming society in the interests of ordinary people.

Disaffiliation from UMSU means the IYSSE can no longer book university classrooms or lecture theatres for events. The IYSSE is blocked from holding on campus speakouts and accessing the limited grants funding that UMSU provides clubs.

UMSU’s Clubs & Societies Committee (C&SC) oversees the management of clubs and societies on campus. Each year, every club is forced to submit to the C&SC the names and details of at least 30 student members.

The IYSSE attempted to submit online its list of 34 members on March 14, well before the deadline. However, under unexplained circumstances, the IYSSE’s list was not uploaded to the club’s online portal—a fact that only became

apparent to the club’s executive months later.

Equally inexplicably, the only communication from the C&SC warning that the committee had not received the IYSSE membership list and that the club risked being disaffiliated was an email on June 2 which went to the IYSSE’s spam folder.

No attempt was made by the C&SC—which has multiple full-time staff and several student members—to call members of the IYSSE’s executive, who were required to give their phone numbers when elected in 2021.

On June 16, the C&SC voted to disaffiliate the club.

Having independently noticed the failed attempt to upload the membership list, the IYSSE executive submitted the list on July 1 and informed the C&SC. This was taken by the C&SC as an appeal by the IYSSE of its decision to disaffiliate the club.

The appeal was heard by the UMSU Student Council—the highest decision-making body of the student union—in an August 4 meeting. No notice of the discussion of the IYSSE’s appeal was given to the club ahead of the meeting.

C&S Officer Eleanor Cooney-Hunt told the student council, according to the minutes of the August 4 meeting, that the IYSSE did not respond to “multiple correspondence” and that “if the *club is not operating*, C&S cannot do anything further [emphasis added].” The council voted in favour of upholding the C&SC’s disaffiliation of the IYSSE.

Having ensured the IYSSE did not know about the meeting, the council minutes state: “No representative from IYSSE was present to speak to the appeal.”

For over a month after the August 4 Student Council meeting, the IYSSE was still not notified of the appeal hearing. Only when the IYSSE president requested the minutes of the meeting on September 9 was the club made aware of the August 4 vote.

After the IYSSE wrote a letter of opposition to its disaffiliation on September 12, UMSU general secretary

Millie Macwhirter told the IYSSE: “I was in contact with the club regarding the decision and the outcome” of the student council meeting. This is patently false.

Macwhirter, a member of the Greens club on campus, added: “The decision made at the C&S committee meeting and Students’ Council are final and this matter is unable to be reheard by Council.”

UMSU representatives have close connections to the major capitalist political parties, including the Greens and Labor—parties that are presiding over war, austerity and attacks on democratic rights.

These forces have long sought to prevent the IYSSE from having a presence at the UofM.

The IYSSE was compelled to wage a two-year campaign to affiliate at the university after spurious and anti-democratic attempts by the C&SC and UMSU to censor the club. Twice in 2014 and 2015, the club was denied affiliation on the false C&SC assertion that the IYSSE shared aims with the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative club.

C&SC rejected the IYSSE affiliation again in 2015 and 2016 on the extraordinary grounds that the IYSSE sought to expose the committee’s political censorship. That the IYSSE was able to establish a club at UofM in 2016 was the result of an intense campaign, winning the support of students and exposing the anti-democratic character of the C&SC’s attempts to reject the club’s affiliation.

Similar anti-democratic attacks on students’ rights to organise have taken place at campuses around the country.

The IYSSE at Macquarie University was disaffiliated earlier this year, along with 45 percent of the clubs at that university. An overnight culling of clubs was undertaken with management and the student representative body working hand-in-glove. It sets a dangerous precedent whereby university managements can arbitrarily change affiliation conditions without warning, removing clubs as they please. The clear target of such attacks are socialist clubs.

After playing a critical role in the political and cultural life at UofM for six years, the IYSSE is again in the sights of the student union and C&SC.

Far from being a club that “is not operating,” the IYSSE has been intensely active, holding weekly campaigns and meetings on a variety of political and historical issues of immense importance for students and young people.

A particular focus of the IYSSE’s work has been the fight against war, amid the US-NATO proxy conflict in Ukraine and active preparations for a US-led war against China.

The erosion of democratic rights on campuses is intimately connected to their transformation into militarist hubs, and official attempts to suppress anti-war opposition.

As one of the “sandstone” institutions in the country,

UofM plays a key role in the war drive. The university has hosted the military think tank, the Defence Science Institute since 2010. In 2016, UofM announced a \$13-million partnership with the world’s largest arms manufacturer Lockheed Martin.

The IYSSE has also played a central role in the fight against the authoritarian measures that accompany the war policies. It has campaigned for years in defence of courageous journalist and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, a former UofM student. Assange has been subjected to a decade-long witch hunt led by the United States for his role in exposing US war crimes in the Middle East.

The attempted disaffiliation of the IYSSE club must not be allowed to stand! We warn students: the C&SC is attempting to determine what you can discuss, campaign about and even think while on campus. Whatever the immediate motivation, this body is functioning as the instrument of attempts by the university administration, the official political parties and the ruling elite they represent to shut down oppositional voices on campus.

The IYSSE is launching a public, international campaign against this anti-democratic attack. We demand that the IYSSE be reaffiliated immediately, with all rights restored. We do not recognise the decision of the C&SC to disaffiliate the club and will proceed with our Annual General Meeting (AGM) at 1:30 p.m. (AEST) on Thursday, 22 September. Students can attend the AGM which will be held via Zoom at this link.

We urge all students and student clubs to support our campaign. Students should attend and help build our AGM. Get in contact with the UofM IYSSE, give statements of support and join our fight against this anti-democratic attack.

To get in contact with the IYSSE email at iysse.uom@gmail.com
Join the IYSSE Facebook page here: <https://www.facebook.com/IYSSEaustralia>
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