

Union cancels Toronto anti-war meeting, surrendering to state-backed, far-right led censorship campaign

Socialist Equality Party (Canada)

23 June 2023

The Socialist Equality Party condemns in the strongest terms the political censorship of an anti-war meeting that was to be held in Toronto Wednesday evening, following a campaign of threats and slander orchestrated by the far-right Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC). The event, organized by self-avowed “ecosocialist” and former Green Party of Canada leadership candidate Dimitri Lascaris, was to have discussed his perspective on how to end the war in Ukraine, but was canceled at the last minute by the owners of the venue, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU).

OPSEU’s outrageous surrender to the censorship campaign sets a dangerous precedent. If it is allowed to stand, far-right nationalists, whose political roots are in the Nazi collaborationist and fascist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), will have the power to dictate what discussion on the US-NATO war on Russia is permissible. With the support of the Canadian state, led by the pro-war Trudeau Liberal government, a climate of fear and intimidation is being created akin to the repressive conditions under an authoritarian regime. This must be countered through the political mobilization of the working class in defence of the basic democratic right of all anti-war groups to hold public meetings and protests unhindered and without threats of violence.

Lascaris planned to hold a public meeting at OPSEU’s Wellesley St. headquarters to report on his April trip to Russia, and to the disputed territories in Crimea and Donbas. On this trip, Lascaris attempted to win support among a layer of upper-middle-class Russian academics, journalists, expatriates and others for a “peaceful settlement” to NATO’s war in Ukraine, to be negotiated between the imperialist powers and Ukraine on the one hand, and the Russian capitalist state on the other. Lascaris has organized a series of such meetings across Canada, under the banner “Making peace with Russia, one handshake at a time.”

The targeting of Lascaris’ meeting is part of a state-

sanctioned operation to establish a regime of political censorship in close cooperation with fascistic Ukrainian nationalists. In March, the UCC boasted in a press release about meetings with Trudeau government ministers, including Minister for Public Safety Marco Mendicino. The organization submitted a document to Mendicino with recommendations on how to combat “pro-Russian messaging” by banning meetings on university campuses and elsewhere.

The UCC was created—as it itself proudly declares—at the government’s behest in 1940 to serve the interests of Canadian imperialism in World War II. It subsequently worked with the Canadian state to provide refuge to thousands of far-right Ukrainian nationalists who had collaborated with the Nazis in the Holocaust and the Third Reich’s war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, whitewash their crimes, and use them as instruments of Ottawa’s Cold War foreign and domestic policy. Today the UCC enjoys enormous influence at the highest levels of the Canadian state. This is embodied in Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland, the granddaughter of an OUN supporter and Nazi collaborator who edited the only Ukrainian-language newspaper permitted to publish under Nazi occupation.

The alliance between Canadian imperialism and far-right Ukrainian nationalism epitomizes the character of the US-NATO war on Russia. It is using the Ukrainian people as cannon fodder in a war aimed at reducing the resource-rich country to the status of a semi-colony and strengthening the geostrategic position of American imperialism and its allies, Canada included.

It is precisely because they fear that any discussion of the causes of the war and the reactionary aims of the rival belligerents will quickly explode their false narrative of “Putin’s unprovoked war” on “democratic Ukraine” that the UCC and the political establishment are determined to suppress it.

The most powerful resistance to the state-backed censorship campaign has come from the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), which held two successful meetings in Waterloo and Toronto in the face of sustained efforts by the far-right nationalists, prominent politicians and state officials to shut them down.

The IYSSE's meetings discussed the historical origins of the imperialist war against Russia—in the three decades of US-led wars and aggression and the Stalinist bureaucracy's liquidation of the Soviet Union and restoration of capitalism—and advanced the building of a global anti-war movement led by the working class as the only viable means to end the conflict.

In the lead-up to the Toronto meeting, Ontario Labour Minister Monte McNaughton urged that the IYSSE meeting, entitled “The war in Ukraine and how to stop it,” be banned. The IYSSE responded to the threats to censor and disrupt the event by launching a vigorous campaign in defence of democratic rights, which mobilized over 1,000 supporters for a petition. Pink Floyd founder Roger Waters tweeted his support.

OPSEU surrenders to the far-right without a fight

The fact that OPSEU capitulated to the far-right-spearheaded, state-backed censorship campaign and shut down Lascaris' meeting without a fight should come as no surprise. The public sector union, which counts over 180,000 members on its rolls, is a significant force within the union bureaucracy that serves as a key prop of the federal Trudeau government.

OPSEU, in announcing to Lascaris that it was canceling his meeting without forewarning, told him that “OPSEU leaders and staff” had “received dozens of emails expressing opposition to the holding of the event, and that, based on those emails, OPSEU leadership became concerned for the safety of the participants and the property.”

In other words, threats of violence were made against either the meeting, its organizers and participants, or all three, and to damage what is rightfully the property of Ontario public sector workers.

This begs the question of why, given its ostensible role as a “workers” organization, OPSEU did not make these threats public and condemn them. Why did OPSEU president J.P. Hornick, much touted by Canada's pseudo-left groups as a “militant” leader, not urge OPSEU's 180,000 members and the working class as whole to come to

the meeting's defence?

To ask the question is to answer it. Such an appeal would have risked provoking an open political conflict with the union bureaucracy's pro-war allies in the Liberal government and the NDP.

Underscoring its complicity in the censoring of Lascaris' meeting, even now the OPSEU leadership is refusing to identify and condemn the far-right forces to whom it surrendered, thereby facilitating a state of affairs in which fascistic pro-war nationalists have a free hand to shut down public meetings and threaten anti-war activists.

OPSEU members should demand Hornick and the union leadership reveal who took the decision to cancel Wednesday's meeting and why. Did their allies in the Canadian Labour Congress, Ontario Federation of Labour or New Democratic Party prevail on OPSEU to cancel the meeting to safeguard the war they support from criticism?

For his part, Lascaris has shown no desire to raise these issues, declaring instead in his statement on the meeting's cancellation that OPSEU's decision was “not political.” This flows from Lascaris' own debilitating and bankrupt political perspective. He and his supporters direct their energies at pressuring Canadian imperialism and other capitalist great powers and aspiring great powers to adopt a more peaceful course, not mobilizing the international working class to oppose the war and capitalism.

Notwithstanding the Socialist Equality Party's unbridgeable political differences with Lascaris, we unconditionally defend his democratic right to organize meetings and argue for his positions. At stake is not only the right of Lascaris or any other individual, but the fundamental democratic rights of all workers to criticize and oppose pro-war imperialist policies free from the threats of state-backed fascistic thugs. The fundamental democratic rights of free speech and assembly can only be defended by mobilizing the same social force which can put an end to the imperialist war in Ukraine and the capitalist system that gave rise to it—the world working class, united around a revolutionary internationalist and socialist program.



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