

IYSSE holds first meeting at Otago University in New Zealand

Our reporters
25 February 2024

Last Thursday, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in New Zealand held its initial meeting at the University of Otago in Dunedin. Just over 20 people attended the meeting, which was held to establish a club of the IYSSE, the youth and student movement of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement.

The meeting followed several days of campaigning by IYSSE members during Orientation Week. The meeting topic—the socialist strategy to fight against Israel’s genocide in Gaza and to stop the developing world war—attracted significant interest and support among new and returning students.

The war is politicising millions of young people throughout the world, including in New Zealand. Several of those who spoke with the IYSSE had attended the ongoing protests against the mass slaughter in Gaza and the NZ National Party-led government’s support for Israel and alliance with US imperialism.

At Thursday’s meeting, Rowan, who initiated the club and was elected its first president, delivered a report on the horrifying situation in the Gaza Strip, where more than 30,000 people have been massacred and entire cities destroyed.

“The severity of the barbaric violence, and how much worse it could soon be, cannot be underestimated. With more than half of Gaza’s 2.3 million people crammed into the border town of Rafah, after being advised to evacuate south, Israel is now calling for ‘complete victory’ and preparing for a ground invasion of Rafah. There is no question that the aim of this invasion is the complete annihilation, through death or through evacuation into Egypt, of all Palestinian life present in Gaza.”

The Israeli military was fully supported, armed and funded by the Biden administration in the US, which was “using Israel’s genocide to stoke tensions that could lead to all-out war throughout the Middle East. Airstrikes by the US and its allies against Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria are all directed at escalating confrontation with Iran. The subjugation of Iran, lying at the heart of Eurasia, is a critical component of the US drive for global military domination.”

Rowan emphasised that these developments had to be understood in their international context. “As war rages in the Middle East, US imperialism and its NATO allies are engaged

in a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine. The war in Ukraine has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands, both Ukrainian and Russian, and threatens the eruption of nuclear war.”

The US is seeking to use its overwhelming military strength to counter its economic decline and subjugate its rivals, including Russia and, above all, China. New Zealand, a minor imperialist country allied to the US, has sent troops to Britain to assist in training Ukrainian conscripts and is increasingly integrated into the far-advanced war plans of the US and Australia against China.

Rowan urged those in attendance to join the IYSSE and take up the struggle to build the necessary socialist leadership, in opposition to the entire political establishment. In New Zealand, the Labour Party has recently criticised Israel’s actions, but Labour supported the genocidal onslaught while it was leading the government until late November. Its allies, the Greens and Te P?ti M?ori—which have been prominent at the Gaza rallies—would have joined a Labour government if it had received enough votes in the October election.

Tom Peters, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Group in New Zealand and organiser of the IYSSE in Wellington, also addressed the meeting. He explained: “There is growing anger and opposition towards capitalism. We have identified the period we are living in as one of wars and revolutions; that is not a rhetorical exaggeration. We know that the economic and political breakdown which is leading the ruling class to embrace genocide, fascism, dictatorship and war, is also paving the way for revolutionary struggles.”

Pointing to the mass protest and strike movements over the past two years, including the revolutionary situations that developed in France and Sri Lanka, Peters quoted from the WSWs International Editorial Board’s New Year statement, “The working class, the fight against capitalist barbarism, and the building of the World Party of Socialist Revolution”:

“The growing struggles of workers throughout the world is the objective basis for the development of a mass, international movement for socialism. The transformation of this objective movement into a conscious struggle for power requires the development in the working class of a mass international socialist movement based on Marxist theory and the program

and principles fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International.”

The critical question facing those attending the meeting, Peters said, was to understand “the vast gulf that separates the genuine socialism of the IYSSE from what passes as left wing,” in New Zealand and internationally.

The Gaza genocide had “starkly exposed” pseudo-left tendencies such as the Democratic Socialists of America, and politicians “like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders, who voted to fund the Israeli military, have been revealed as nothing but total reactionaries. These figures will once again campaign on behalf of Joe Biden and the Democrats in this year’s US election, presenting this blood-soaked party and leader as a lesser evil, or even as positively progressive.”

In New Zealand, the Labour Party’s “left” allies have likewise been exposed. This includes the trade union bureaucracy and the middle class pseudo-left groups, such as the International Socialist Organisation (ISO). The ISO, Peters explained, openly supports imperialism—including the US-NATO war against Russia—and is seeking to prevent the development of an independent, socialist movement against war.

“On Israel’s genocide in Gaza, the ISO has whitewashed the role of the trade unions, which are preventing any genuine struggle by workers to stop weapons being manufactured and shipped to Israel.” In the 2023 election, even after Labour supported Israel’s bombardment of Gaza, the ISO called for votes for the Greens and Te Pahi Māori, falsely claiming that Labour could be pressured to move to the left.

The Gaza genocide had revealed the trade union bureaucracy to be lackeys of the imperialist powers, whose job is to police the working class. These pro-capitalist organisations in the US, Europe, Australia and New Zealand have rejected the call by the Palestinian Federation of Trade Unions for workers to organise strikes and other actions to stop the production and supply of weapons for Israel.

Peters explained that the IYSSE supports the call by the International Committee of the Fourth International for workers to rebel against the unions and form independent, rank-and-file committees. Such committees will provide the means for workers to coordinate action internationally to block the production and supply of weapons for Israel and the imperialist powers.

Peters also denounced the pro-war politics of the Otago University Students Association (OUSA), which provided the New Zealand Defence Force with a prominent place during Orientation Week to recruit students. The student union also removed the IYSSE’s posters promoting its meeting inside the Clubs & Societies building, saying that the words “Stop the Genocide in Gaza: Build a Socialist Anti-War Movement” could be “distressing,” and telling the IYSSE to “tone down” its language.

The two reports were followed by an important discussion,

including on the historic degeneration of the trade unions; whether protest alone is sufficient to stop the genocide; and whether workers should support the “lesser evil” capitalist parties in elections.

A member of the ISO, clearly disturbed by the IYSSE’s presence at Otago, interjected at numerous points. He attempted to defend the trade unions, with which the ISO works closely, saying: “I believe the CTU [Council of Trade Unions] put out a statement calling for a ceasefire” and that the unions had supported protests being organised outside the ports against Israeli shipping. The ISO member later added that strike action against the Gaza genocide was “illegal” in New Zealand and therefore the unions’ hands were tied.

Peters replied that the CTU had been involved in drafting the 2000 Employment Relations Act passed by the then-Labour government, which banned most forms of strike action outside of contract negotiations. The unions now function as the enforcers of this anti-working class law, preventing political strikes even against genocide and war.

Anna, a science student who stayed behind to speak with the IYSSE after the meeting, said: “I agreed with what you were saying about Gaza and how to stop [the genocide]. Things like union resolutions and press releases don’t lead to change. The genocide is ongoing, and so token things like this seem kind of insulting: to supposedly call for a ceasefire, but then not to have any strikes, any actual workers’ action.”

She added: “I’ve been to protests here in Dunedin, and over the summer I went to the ones in Christchurch, including at the port in Lyttelton. It was very alarming seeing how forceful the police were at the port towards protesters.”

She said the IYSSE meeting had given her a lot to think about. “Before this, I had fallen into that mindset that protest is all we can do at the moment. I think it is time to step that up and organise the working class. The protests have been important in bringing more people into that environment, and through that they get educated and hopefully recognise that we need deep structural change to stop war.”

Anna agreed that a socialist strategy was needed: “There can’t be any significant change or reform under capitalism. At first, I suppose, people will try to make change by having bills passed in parliament, or going to court to try and get justice there, but it’s all part of a capitalist system. It is hard to see what’s outside of that, but we have to fight for an alternative.”



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