

New Zealand IYSSE campaigns to free Bogdan Syrotiuk, against censorship at Victoria University of Wellington

Our reporters
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) has been campaigning at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, to build support for Ukrainian socialist Bogdan Syrotiuk, who was sentenced to 15 years in prison by a fascistic court on August 10.

Bogdan was arrested in April 2024 and convicted of “treason” more than two years later. His “crime” is writing articles for the *World Socialist Web Site*, opposing both sides in the US-NATO proxy war with Russia. He called on workers in Ukraine and Russia to unite against both oligarchic regimes.

An appeal lodged by Bogdan’s lawyers on September 9 exposed the verdict as a political frame-up, an attack on freedom of expression and the criminalisation of socialist and anti-war views.

IYSSE members at VUW have spoken with students to promote the petition for Bogdan’s immediate release. The club also submitted an article to the weekly student magazine *Salient* titled “Free Bogdan Syrotiuk: Ukrainian socialist sentenced to 15 years in prison!”

The article was published on September 7 but was removed from *Salient*’s website a few hours later. While it can be read in a digitised copy here on pages 9-10, the censorship of the online version severely limited the article’s potential readership.

The IYSSE emailed the editor of *Salient* to ask for an explanation. The club received a reply not from the editor, but from Matt Tucker, chief executive of the Victoria University of Wellington Students Association (VUWSA).

Tucker wrote: “After concerns were raised about the factual accuracy of certain aspects of the article, I reviewed the matter in my capacity as Chief Executive

Officer of VUWSA and publisher of *Salient* and decided to have the article removed from publication.” He said the decision “was not made lightly.”

When the IYSSE asked what concerns had been raised, who had raised them, and what inaccuracies had been identified, Tucker refused to answer. He replied: “I do not intend to enter into a detailed debate about the merits of the article, nor do I intend to disclose communications received from third parties regarding the matter.”

At an IYSSE speakout on September 10, the Socialist Equality Group’s Tom Peters said Tucker’s action was “part of a pattern of censorship. The media in New Zealand has refused to cover the imprisonment of Bogdan Syrotiuk or the reality of life for ordinary people living under an authoritarian dictatorship in Ukraine.”

Meanwhile, “the New Zealand government and the Labour Party spread lies that this is a ‘good war,’ a war for democracy and against Russia’s autocracy.” In fact, the Zelensky regime has placed Ukraine at the service of the US and NATO powers, which are fighting Russia in a war over vast natural resources and profits.

The IYSSE has distributed hundreds of copies of an open letter demanding that Tucker restore the censored article to *Salient*’s website. Students at a meeting called by the IYSSE on September 16 unanimously endorsed this demand.

In its letter, the IYSSE rejected Tucker’s unsubstantiated claims of factual errors and accused him of politically motivated censorship. “In this sense, we agree that [the decision] ‘was not made lightly.’ It was a serious decision to suppress an article about an

important case of political persecution in Ukraine, which exposes the dictatorial and fascistic character of the Zelensky regime.”

The IYSSE noted the university’s close ties with the NZ military and with NATO: “Only last month, Admiral Giuseppe Cavo Dragone, chair of the NATO Military Committee, spoke at VUW’s Centre for Strategic Studies. He also met political leaders and praised New Zealand’s involvement in the Ukraine war.” NZ troops are training Ukrainian conscripts in Britain and Poland.

In 2022, VUW hosted an exhibition which promoted the Azov Battalion, a fascist unit of the Ukrainian military, and whitewashed the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists’ (OUN) participation in the Nazi Holocaust and war against the Soviet Union.

One of Bogdan’s crimes, according to the judicial verdict, was “denigration of national heroes and historical figures”—meaning that he wrote articles exposing the atrocities committed by the OUN, whose leaders, including Stepan Bandera, are hailed as “national heroes” by Zelensky’s regime.

Speaking to the WWS, **Jake**, a political science student, said Tucker “has not given any proper reason to remove [the article] from the website” and had gone “over the head of *Salient*’s editorial team. Every other journalistic outfit in New Zealand is very explicit that their management and their editorial board are not allowed to do things like that, they’re not allowed to interfere with each other.”

He added: “This was an article about freeing a political prisoner. I would hope that even people who had differences with you about the character of the Ukrainian government or NATO or geopolitics, would still be against political prisoners, and would still stand for the rule of law.”

Avie, a biology and mathematics student who attended the IYSSE’s meeting, said Bogdan should be released since all he had done was “publish works critical of the semi-fascistic regime in Ukraine.” He added that students were “starting to wake up” to the fact that the war was being deliberately prolonged by the imperialist powers.

Avie was surprised to learn about the censorship of the IYSSE’s article. “I read through the article. There’s nothing factually incorrect. Of course it is a politically opinionated piece, and rightly so. You

cannot just censor that, I think that is a step too far.” He said it was “quite eye-opening” that an article critical of Ukraine’s role in the war “has been met with such an iron fist.”

Jed, a politics and film student, said Tucker’s decision was “scary, because you need a free press in order to actually allow for conversation.” The IYSSE’s article had been taken down with “no debate, no reason given, just the decision of one person.”

Calum, who works for Student Services at VUW, said of Bogdan’s case: “If you’re imprisoned for making comments against the war that your country’s involved in and are deemed a traitor, it’s not very hard to find other examples of that historically. It’s fascism, in my opinion.”

Calum said: “I used to work with a couple of Ukrainian refugees back home in the UK, and neither of them were particular fans of Zelensky. We had a lot of conversations about the war. They were no fans of Russia, but they just wanted the war to end.

“They fled to escape conscription and it was a pretty dangerous journey for them to get out. I distinctly remember one conversation with a guy I worked with, who said he felt like it was a ‘fake war.’ I think he meant that it was a proxy war between the west and Russia.”

Helena, a mathematics and philosophy student who attended the IYSSE’s meeting, said Bogdan was facing “unlivable conditions in prison, an unfair trial, and no free speech. For a 27-year-old to be put in such conditions is not evidence of a very liberal place.”

She praised the work of the IYSSE, saying that “the world has turned a blind eye to Ukraine and the Ukrainian citizens that have been suffering from the Russian invasion and their own government. There’s just nowhere safe for them, and I think it’s so hard for us to understand that kind of devastation and the conditions they are in.” She urged others to sign the petition demanding Bogdan’s release and to oppose the censorship of the IYSSE’s *Salient* article.



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