

Political victimisation of an Australian academic

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Robert Austin, an academic in Spanish and International Studies at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University (RMIT), was informed last October that he would be dismissed as of April 24, 2006. The sacking is an attack on academic freedom and sets a dangerous precedent for the victimisation of other university staff.

The administration has justified its decision with a series of largely spurious charges, but it is clear that Austin is being targeted for his left-wing views. Its decision came in the wake of a diatribe against “political preaching” in universities by right-wing commentator Andrew Bolt in the *Herald Sun* that specifically named Austin.

Austin, an academic of 15 years experience, has taught history, language and social sciences in Latin American, Caribbean and Australian universities. He is the author of several books on Latin American culture, politics and history and is a participating editor for a number of academic journals. He commenced work at RMIT in February 2005 on a probationary basis and taught Spanish language and Latin American culture, politics and history.

The probationary process, which has been inserted into university enterprise agreements with the support of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), lays the basis for the political vetting of staff. Austin was subjected to four probation meetings over the course of 2005. The first and second meetings held in March and May discussed Latin American Studies course matters.

Then on August 17, Bolt’s article entitled “Closed Doors and Minds” appeared in the Murdoch-owned *Herald Sun*. As part of his right-wing rant, he highlighted Austin’s rescheduling of a class on August 10 to allow students to attend a protest rally opposing the Howard government’s Voluntary Student Unionism

(VSU) legislation. The issue was one of direct concern to many students as the new law will undermine student unions and their welfare, cultural and sporting facilities as well as student political activities.

RMIT management, which is noted for its pro-business orientation, reacted to what it regarded as adverse publicity. Austin’s next probationary meeting was held on September 14 but was quickly aborted when Professor Manfred Steger of the School of International and Community Studies attempted to tape the proceedings without obtaining Austin’s approval.

At the rescheduled meeting on September 28, Steger cited anonymous complaints and tabled the Bolt article as “evidence” for Austin’s “lack of collegiality.” He also objected to a promotional poster for Austin’s International Studies Course for 2006, which was entitled “Why does Washington fear Caracas?” and subtitled “unique journeys through politics, literature, art and history”. Steger denied that it had been previously authorised by management.

Austin’s teaching ability and knowledge have not been called into question. In fact, Steger commented that Austin’s research was “excellent and goes beyond reasonable expectation” and commended him on his “teaching and engagement with students and other universities” leading to a “considerably more attractive” Spanish program.

Nevertheless, in a letter dated October 21, RMIT Vice Chancellor Professor Margaret Gardner informed Austin that his position would be terminated in April. In an appeal on November 9, Austin rebutted all the allegations against him but was ruled against.

Despite the political nature of Austin’s sacking, the RMIT branch of the NTEU has refused to lift a finger in his defence. On the issue of the VSU rally, he was simply following a NTEU email urging academics to

“cancel classes” or “not penalise students for non-attendance” on August 10.

RMIT Branch NTEU President Jeanette Pierce issued a statement on November 24 declaring that the union was in “dispute,” but the NTEU has done nothing to further publicise the case or to draw out the implications for academic freedom.

Under Liberal and Labor governments, universities and colleges have increasingly been starved of funding and forced to turn to corporate sponsorship and full-fee paying students from Australia and overseas. In 2005, RMIT had 17,000 full fee-paying students, representing 50 percent of the university’s student population.

This commercial orientation is generating a conservative and stifling environment. Far from encouraging free and open debate of political, social and academic issues, institutional image and courses are being tailored to maximise income. Academics, many of whom lack secure tenure, are forced to toe the line or face the consequences.

Austin spoke to the WSWS.

“The proceedings against me are allegedly based on the university’s probation procedures, but they have simply been used as a political device to purge International and Community Studies of an identifiable Marxist. From the outset I have been involved in the academics union as an ally of progressive and left opposition within the branch.

“The Bolt article is critical. In the probation documents the actual description of my action in postponing classes on August 10 to allow those students who were interested to attend the anti VSU rally is that I engaged in unauthorised, unsanctioned activity. And when that particular allegation was discussed and an attempt made to substantiate it in a probation meeting on September 28, the head of school tabled the Bolt article. That is an inflammatory, right wing and dishonest report of events surrounding the anti-VSU demonstration and my endorsement of student participation in it. And it is clear evidence of management’s condemnation of my union activity.

“In the past quarter century there has been a pronounced shift away from progressive labour principles to the labour police model. The NTEU has become increasingly hard to distinguish from management and in cases such as RMIT, the union leadership and management are in effect one and the

same. The function of the union has been to create the conditions where activists can be isolated. There have been around 200 retrenchments this year at RMIT, most of whom were apparently union members.

“I think it is important I mention the meeting I held with my fellow workers. The staff of the Spanish program, other than myself, are sessional labour; they’re contract labour, employed for one semester at a time. Now with one exception out of seven, all the sessional staff agreed quite enthusiastically to a meeting on September 30 to discuss what was obviously by then a campaign for my removal by management.

“On the morning the pro-Vice Chancellor responsible for our school, Professor Alan Cumming and the head of school turned up at our meeting in a local café, and broke it up. They stood over myself and the union delegate present, and demanded that I leave the cafe immediately with them. They claimed to have the union branch president on the line. They waved a mobile in front of us and claimed she was on the line and had authorised the break up of our meeting and my being removed from university premises. The sessional staff were in a state of shock and to be truthful I was too. I hadn’t seen this conduct since I’d lived under General Pinochet in 1978/79 in Chile.”



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