

Australia: Political witch-hunt against Sydney University academic

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8 April 2015

In response to a protest at a public lecture at Sydney University last month by retired British Colonel Richard Kemp, a hysterical political witch-hunt has been launched, both against the students involved and Associate Professor Jake Lynch, who objected to their ejection by campus security guards.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) has fundamental political differences with the groups that participated in the protest, including the pseudo-left Solidarity organisation, and with the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel, of which Lynch is a prominent supporter. However, we unequivocally oppose the persecution of those involved, and the campaign to remove Lynch from his academic position in the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies at Sydney University. These moves are part of a broader assault on democratic rights on university campuses across the country.

Kemp's lecture on March 11 was part of a national tour organised by "United Israel Appeal," a lobby group funded by the Israeli state. He was slated to lecture on "Ethical Dilemmas of Military Strategy" and "Dealing with non-state armed groups."

Kemp was commander of British forces in Afghanistan and as such is directly responsible for the crimes of the British military in the protracted US-led neo-colonial occupation of the country. Since retiring from the military, he has emerged as a leading propagandist for Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people. Last year, he defended the Israeli assault on Gaza, which killed more than 1,500 Palestinian civilians. Kemp provocatively declared that Israeli forces were "world leaders in actions to minimise civilian casualties."

A small group of students disrupted Kemp's lecture,

shouting slogans that underscored his support for the oppression of Palestinians. The noisy stunt was in keeping with the protest politics of Solidarity, which are directed against the political clarification of the decisive issues facing students and young people, including war. When campus security arrived and began physically removing the student protesters from the lecture theatre, Lynch, who was in the audience, voiced his opposition to their ejection.

The incident was immediately blown out of all proportion, with a host of Zionist organisations, including the Australasian Union of Jewish Students (AUJS), falsely branding the protesters as "anti-Semites" who had set out to "intimidate" Jewish students in the audience. The Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper published a series of articles on the same theme, claiming that student protests threaten the right to free speech on campus.

Kemp sent an open letter to Sydney University's vice-chancellor, calling on the university to take action against Lynch, Nick Reimer, another academic present in the lecture theatre, and the student protesters. Based on a photo of Lynch holding up a five-dollar note in the lecture theatre, the AUJS and Kemp declared that he was waving money at Jewish students in an act of racial vilification.

According to Lynch and others in the lecture theatre, he held up the note after an unidentified woman repeatedly threw water at him, and allegedly kicked him. His gesture was accompanied by a threat to sue the woman if she continued to assault him. Video footage has since emerged substantiating Lynch's claims.

Nevertheless, the AUJS launched an online petition calling for the university to sack Lynch. The university administration responded by establishing an

investigation into Lynch's conduct. The AUJS says it is liaising closely with the vice-chancellor.

This is not the first time that Lynch has been targeted by right-wing, Zionist organisations. Last year, an Israeli-based lobby unsuccessfully sued Lynch for racial discrimination, citing his participation in the BDS campaign. While the move was a politically motivated attempt to bankrupt Lynch, there is nothing progressive about the BDS campaign. It is indiscriminately directed against all Israeli citizens and serves to divide the working class on national lines. Like all forms of middle-class protest politics, BDS represents no fundamental challenge to capitalism.

Senior political figures have joined the latest campaign against Lynch. Federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne told the *Australian Jewish News* on March 18: "There is no free speech defence or academic freedom defence here, the thugs who tried to close down Colonel Kemp weren't exercising free speech or academic freedom, they were adopting the tactics of the fascists that they pretend to hate but in fact, emulate."

Last Thursday, former Education Minister Peter Baldwin, a "Labor left," wrote a comment in the *Australian* titled: "Where the right to speak is howled down." Baldwin called on the university administration to prevent the campus from becoming "a place where mob rule is allowed to prevail" by taking action against Lynch, Reimer and the protesters.

The attempts by Pyne and Baldwin to posture as champions of "free speech" are utterly hypocritical. While supporting militarist figures such as Kemp and right-wing organisations such as the AUJS, both Labor and Pyne's Liberal Party have been at the centre of attempts to shut-down broader political and oppositional discussion on campuses.

In Melbourne last year, Pyne and the Liberal-National government, in collaboration with the AUJS and the media, launched a vicious campaign against the pseudo-left organisation, Socialist Alternative (SAIt), alleging, without any evidence, that it was anti-Semitic. At Monash University, the SAIt student club was deregistered, while at La Trobe University, a member of SAIt was threatened with expulsion, and subsequently suspended for his participation in campaigns against the Israeli assault on Gaza.

Just days before both universities moved against

Socialist Alternative, Pyne wrote an op-ed in the *Australian* shot through with lies and slanders. He provocatively declared: "University administrations should be very careful not to invoke freedom of speech to allow speech that vilifies students."

Throughout the year, Pyne was at the forefront of attempts by the Abbott government to demonise students protesting against its fee deregulation bill, which seeks to increase course fees by thousands of dollars a year. Pyne's "education reform" is transparently aimed at preventing working class youth from accessing higher education, and transforming universities, ever more openly, into institutions accessible only to the wealthy elite.

For its part, the previous Gillard Labor government introduced the Students Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) in 2011. This user-pays funding scheme for student services includes provisions barring funds from being used to "support political parties." The legislation was aimed at shutting down political discussion on campus. It has been invoked by student unions and university administrations to unsuccessfully try to prevent the International Youth and Students for Social Equality from conducting political work at universities in Newcastle and Brisbane.

The turn to political witch-hunts on campuses is a warning to all students and young people. As Australia plays an ever-more prominent role in US-led wars and military machinations in every corner of the globe, an attempt is being made to cultivate a militarist, pro-war climate on university campuses. The IYSSE calls on students and young people to oppose this reactionary agenda, by developing a powerful anti-war movement on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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