

# Police attack student protests in Sydney and Melbourne

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Contingents of police violently attacked two demonstrations of students and young people in Sydney and Melbourne last week, leading to allegations of police brutality at both events.

Both protests were called in opposition to the federal Liberal-National government's plans to deregulate university fees—a move that would result in course costs skyrocketing by tens of thousands of dollars a year. The policy is a continuation of the decades-long assault on higher education, carried out by successive Labor and Liberal governments and aimed at transforming universities into corporatised, for profit entities.

At the University of Sydney, as many as 20 riot police set upon a protest of around 30 students affiliated with the Sydney University Education Action Group at the main library. The students were demonstrating against federal education minister, Simon Birmingham, who was present to adjudicate an annual debating competition organised by the Liberal Party student club.

In the days prior to the event, Birmingham had issued a series of provocative comments making clear that the government was pressing ahead with its plans to deregulate fees and deepen the pro-business restructuring of universities. The government's plans will effectively shut out tens of thousands of working-class students from higher education.

The protesters entered the library chanting slogans against the cuts to education and making a series of speeches prior to the start of the debating competition. After around 15 minutes, riot police surrounded them. Video footage published by the student newspaper, *Honi Soit*, showed the police forcibly pulling protesters to their feet and pushing them out the library's glass doors.

A number of the protesters have alleged that the

police carried out violent assaults. Georgia Mantle, the SRC's general secretary and indigenous officer, told *Honi Soit* that the police, "put me in a wristlock and pulled my hair and lifted me up by the ankles." Another student, Cameron Caccamo said, "They pushed us up two sets of stairs ... and at least two students were knocked to the ground." Photos published online showed one of the library's electronic gates, through which the protesters had been pushed, visibly damaged.

*Honi Soit* reported that members of campus security had indicated that the police had been called at the request of the event organisers. The University of Sydney's administration has a documented history of collaborating with the police, including riot police, against students and staff.

In 2013, Tom Raue, then University of Sydney Union (USU) vice-president, leaked a section of a confidential report prepared by the USU to *Honi Soit*. It indicated that police and university management had closely coordinated their response to limited strike actions and protests called by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and student groups in response to moves to sack hundreds of staff. During strike and protest actions, and the accompanying clashes with police, in the course of the year, 11 students were arrested, another was left with a broken leg, one suffered internal bleeding and one was placed in a dangerous chokehold by police.

The report implied that police had at times been operating under the direction of university administration. It reported the comments of one officer, who told a USU staff member that police were "not in a position to do anything but follow them (protesters), unless instructed otherwise by the University." The university had denied any collusion with the police.

The University of Sydney Union's board responded

by seeking to remove Raue, including through legal action in the Supreme Court. In 2015, it moved to pursue Raue for legal costs of up to \$50,000.

In 2014, riot squad and public order police also clashed with students protesting that year's debating competition organised by the Liberal Club at the University of Sydney. Police have become a regular fixture at protests on campus.

As one of Australia's two elite "sandstone" universities, the University of Sydney is one of the most corporatised in the country. At the end of last year, university administration announced a major pro-business restructuring, which will include the slashing of undergraduate degrees from 122 to as few as 20, and the merger of its 16 faculties and schools into just 6 faculties and 3 schools. The move is based on a model implemented at the University of Melbourne, which resulted in the destruction of hundreds of staff jobs.

University administration has also carried out blatant political censorship, banning a Socialist Equality Party meeting against the glorification of militarism and the drive to war over the Anzac Day weekend last year. The decision underscored the central role universities are playing in the broader campaign to suppress widespread anti-war sentiment, amid an eruption of militarism around the world and Australia's integration into advanced US plans for war against China. The United States Studies Centre, a major think-tank whose aim is to promote the US-Australia alliance, is centred at the University of Sydney.

At a protest in Melbourne last Friday, outside a Liberal Party function in the Docklands area attended by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and former Prime Minister John Howard, some 150 demonstrators were met by 50 police, along with five mounted police and officers from the Australian Federal Police. The protesters, who included a number of students and young people opposing the assault on education, were indiscriminately targeted with pepper spray. Around 20 people, including a cameraman from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, were sprayed with the substance, which can cause serious injuries.

One of the protesters, Matt Munro, told the *Age* that he had been sprayed at close range in the eyes and mouth after questioning an officer, whom he claimed had punched a friend of his. Munro commented, "I was just trying to protect a friend and there was no need to

spray me."

Monash Student Association president Abby Stapleton told the ABC, "I saw a man who was pulled by his hair and thrown to the ground and then kicked in the stomach by a policeman. Absolutely horrendous. We were all manhandled quite a bit, we were shoved and pushed and pulled to the ground and kicked and beaten essentially." She said that a 10-year-old child had been among those pepper-sprayed.

The perspective of the protest organisers, however, many of whom were from pseudo-left groups such as Socialist Alternative, is utterly bankrupt. Their noisy stunts are aimed at presenting the attacks on universities as being a result of the right-wing predilections of individual Liberal Party politicians and university vice-chancellors. This goes hand in hand with their promotion of the lie that a Greens-backed Labor government would be a "lesser-evil" that would halt fee deregulation and other regressive measures.

Despite our irreconcilable political differences with the pseudo-left, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality unequivocally opposes the use of police violence against such events. It constitutes an attack on the democratic right to protest and establishes a dangerous precedent. Amid mounting hostility among workers, students and youth to the entire political establishment, to the imposition of austerity measures targeting healthcare, education and other social services, and the growing dangers of war, the resort to police violence against a handful of student protesters is a warning of the preparations for a far broader crackdown on political and social struggles.



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