

Australia: Right-wing witch-hunt against La Trobe University academic

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La Trobe University in Melbourne announced on June 3 that it was lifting disciplinary action against Roz Ward, a longstanding academic, after a widespread outcry against her political victimisation, plus threats of legal action from her lawyers. Ward was suspended from her position at La Trobe on June 1, in response to the Murdoch media's publication of a post from Ward's private Facebook page, in which she labelled the Australian flag as "racist."

Ward's post, appended to a picture of the Rainbow Flag flying over Victoria's parliament house, read: "Now we just need to get rid of the racist Australian flag on top of state parliament and get a red one up there and my work is done." Senior figures in the Victorian state Labor government immediately denounced the post, and Ward resigned as an advisor to the government on matters relating to sexual orientation on May 28.

The attack on Ward's democratic rights is part of a hysterical, right-wing campaign against the government-funded Safe Schools program, whose stated aim is "to help schools combat homophobia and transphobia and create inclusive school environments." The program's curriculum is informed by the nostrums of identity politics, which have elevated issues of sexual orientation and gender to centre stage, as part of a broader attack on the centrality of class, particularly in academia.

The Safe Schools program has been supported by Labor and Liberal governments at the state and federal level since being rolled-out in 2014. According to the program's web site, it is taught in 546 schools across the country. Beginning last year, however, the program came under attack from institutions such as the Australian Christian Lobby, which oppose it on religious grounds.

Ward is one of the architects of the program, which is funded by the state government and auspiced by La Trobe University. She has been specifically targeted because she claims to be a Marxist, and is a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative organisation, which has made identity politics central to its perspective and policies.

Following the publication of her Facebook post, the campaign against Ward intensified. Just days before her suspension, Jeff Kennett, a former Victorian Liberal premier, declared he would call for funding to be cut to La Trobe's Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, which administers the Safe Schools program, unless Ward was censured. Kennett is chairman of the Beyond Blue charity, which is a substantial funder of La Trobe's centre.

The Murdoch-owned *Australian* carried articles on an almost daily basis, calling for a move against Ward. An article in the *Australian* last Saturday darkly warned of a generation of "Trotskyist activists at university in the 1970s" who subsequently "undermined the old Labor movement with its roots in the working-class family and formed a new set of green-left alliances to push their barrows." The article said figures such as Ward were "deconstructing, breaking down social pillars," above all, the "conservative family."

Catherine McGregor, a former army officer and transgender individual who has been widely promoted by the media, denounced Ward as a "committed Trotskyite, who believes in the overthrow of the capitalist system and has expressed her contempt for the Australian Defence Force."

La Trobe University's capitulation to this campaign underscores the erosion of basic democratic norms, including freedom of political speech, on university campuses. The university's charges laid against Ward

included that she was “undermining public confidence in you as a researcher and as a person associated with the Safe Schools program,” and had “drawn (your colleagues) into the negative publicity around Safe Schools and this has impacted on their ability to continue with their research in a safe environment.” In other words, political speech that may cause “negative publicity” or inconvenience to an academic institution is impermissible.

La Trobe’s response can be understood only in the context of the transformation of universities, over the past few decades, into corporatised entities. After years of funding cuts by successive Liberal and Labor governments, they rely heavily on private and corporate endowments, and are anxious not to offend their wealthy backers. Campuses are also increasingly integrated into the state-sponsored promotion of nationalism, including the centenary “celebration” of Australia’s participation in World War I, and the contemporary preparations for war. Many universities host think-tanks with close ties to the military and intelligence establishment.

The move against Ward is of a piece with similar attacks on academics and prominent public figures who have spoken out, even in a limited way, against the promotion of Australian nationalism and militarist sentiment.

Last year, Scott McIntyre, a sports reporter for the state-owned Special Broadcasting Corporation, was stood down after issuing a series of tweets on Anzac Day, the official war commemoration day, opposing the glorification of war and recalling some of the crimes committed by the Australian Defence Force in the first and second world wars and other imperialist conflicts. Malcolm Turnbull, who was then communications minister and is currently prime minister, endorsed McIntyre’s sacking.

Over the same weekend, a Socialist Equality Party meeting entitled “Anzac Day, the glorification of militarism and the drive to World War III,” was banned by the University of Sydney. Students and academics also have been targeted for disciplinary measures for opposing Israel’s oppression of the Palestinian people.

At campuses across the country, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the SEP’s youth movement, has faced politically-motivated attempts by university administrations and

student unions to block the formation of IYSSE student clubs, and curtail its anti-war activities on campus. At the University of Melbourne, student union authorities refused in March to affiliate an IYSSE club for the fourth time in two years, in violation of their own constitution.

These developments are a warning of the repressive measures that will be carried out against any political and social opposition, amid an escalation of militarism—including Australia’s role in the US war drive against China—and incessant demands from the corporate elite for a stepped-up austerity offensive.

Organisations such as Socialist Alternative are incapable of mounting a principled defence of democratic rights. Far from being socialist or Trotskyist, Ward and Socialist Alternative are representative of a layer of the upper middle-class that incessantly promotes anti-Marxist identity politics, in order to suppress fundamental class questions and carve-out privileged positions within academia, the corporatised trade unions and the public sector. Ward’s own role as an advisor to the Victorian Labor government, which has continued the assault on healthcare, education and other social rights, underscores Socialist Alternative’s many connections to the very political establishment that is spearheading the turn toward authoritarian forms of rule.

Despite our irreconcilable differences, the IYSSE unequivocally opposes the attack on Ward’s democratic and political rights and warns that the right-wing campaign against her is far from over. The IYSSE insists that the defence of victimised academics such as Ward, and of democratic rights, requires nothing less than the development of a mass socialist movement of the working class in opposition to Labor, the Liberals, the Greens and the unions, and the program of war and austerity that they all defend.

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