

# Protest leaders barred from University of Papua New Guinea

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10 September 2016

Eight students who were prominent in protests at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) earlier this year have been permanently excluded from further study. In protest over their victimisation, many students who were due to return to classes on September 5 boycotted a “reconciliation” ceremony organised by the UPNG administration.

The university reopened after two months of class boycotts and protests over demands that Prime Minister Peter O’Neill answer corruption allegations. The protests climaxed on June 8 when heavily-armed police fired on peacefully demonstrating students, wounding at least 23 people. In early July, the academic year was cancelled at UPNG, the University of Technology (UniTech) in Lae and the University of Goroka, in order to quell the protests.

The government and education authorities are now attempting to revive the academic year in a truncated form. However, when the UPNG student leaders, including Student Representative Council (SRC) vice president Arthur Amos, arrived last week for registration, they were handed permanent termination letters and escorted off the campus by security guards.

The UPNG SRC, which operates with a budget funded from tuition fees, has been disbanded by the university administration. The SRC’s lawyer, Laken Lepatu Aigilol, is being sued by UPNG for allegedly aiding the students. Police have been seeking to arrest SRC president Kenneth Rapa on unspecified charges since the armed confrontation on June 8. Rapa remains at large.

The exclusion letter, signed by acting pro-vice-chancellor professor Mange Matui, declared that the eight accused were being barred on the basis of “credible evidence” they had “breached all laws of Papua New Guinea, including the Criminal Code Act

and the Summary Offences Act.”

Lawyer Peter Dumu denounced the administration’s action as “illegal,” saying it was procedurally wrong, in breach of the university’s own regulations and unconstitutional. He declared that the rights of students to be heard according to principles of natural justice had been trampled on and the administration “should reconsider its decision, and at least go by the book.” Parliamentary opposition leader Don Polye called on the UPNG council to rescind its decision, saying it had abused its powers.

Reports said the banned students were given seven days to appeal against their termination, but the notices were received after the appeal period was over. One student told the New Zealand-based *Asia Pacific Report* that none of the students involved in the unrest took part in the “reconciliation” program because the university excluded their elected leaders. “The majority of the students will not attend this program because it is being forced,” the student said.

Few students turned up for the official ceremony, most standing on the balconies overlooking the UPNG Forum. Only a handful sat in the chairs provided for them. Security at the campus has been described as “very tight.” All campus entrances are closed, except for one gate manned by security guards.

The university administration is undoubtedly acting at the behest of the government, which insisted on harsh punishments. In July, O’Neill established a witch-hunting inquiry into the student unrest. Headed by a retired judge, it was set up to examine whether there was “outside influence” and if students “were incited to encourage unrest at the universities.” Its purpose is to absolve the government of responsibility and place full blame on the students.

In fact, by the end of June, the SRCs at UPNG and

Unitec were both collaborating with the administrations to shut down the protest movement and engineer a return to class. At the UPNG, the SRC wrote to the administration asking for a meeting to negotiate an end to the standoff. It indicated the SRC was prepared to “apologise” if the UPNG authorities did likewise and condemned the actions of police who had opened fire on students.

O’Neill’s response was to ramp up the repression of widening social unrest. After a National Security Advisory Council meeting over the student protests in July, Chief Secretary Isaac Lupari threatened to invoke the Internal Security Act and Essential Services Act. “Politicians, landowners, public, students, and any members of the community who issue threats will be investigated, arrested and prosecuted,” he declared. A new National Security Joint Task Force, including police and military personnel, was established to “quell increasing internal security threats.”

The victimisation of students is taking place alongside ongoing struggles by sections of the working class. Doctors at the Western Highland’s Mt Hagen hospital walked out on August 24 in an extended dispute over alleged mismanagement and corrupt practices at the hospital and the provincial health authority. Doctors, nurses and senior staff stopped work in March and again in June.

The government has suspended the Western Highlands Provincial Health Authority and appointed an interim hospital board and administration. The health minister ordered doctors to return to work under the threat of dismissal and legal action.

A petition in March revealed a range of major problems. These included no microbiology unit in the hospital for 13 years; closure of the operating theatre for eight months; no blood test department for six months; and the blood bank crippled for a year. Most public hospitals and clinics face shortages of blood bags, test kits and other medical kits.

The government is confronted by a severe financial and social crisis. Driven by a precipitous economic collapse, because of the global commodity price crash, O’Neill is implementing harsh austerity measures, including funding reductions of 40 percent across the health system.

Last month, more spending cuts and revenue raising measures were announced in response to what the

Sydney-based Lowy Institute described as “concerning figures” in PNG’s Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook. The government handed down a supplementary budget to raise 958 million kina (\$A397 million), while cutting another K928 million. The cuts would see K649 million taken from capital works, with another K279 million from government agencies.

The government continues to face widespread discontent. Last month, it was forced to settle a dispute with landowners, owed K1 billion in royalties, who blocked access to the \$US20 billion ExxonMobil liquefied natural gas project in Hela Province. The landowners agreed to end their two-week protest after the government promised to meet its outstanding financial commitments.

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