

Australian university sacks academic critical of Israeli and US wars

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In a major attack on democratic rights and academic freedom, University of Sydney management sacked Dr Tim Anderson this month on the basis of allegations that his criticisms of Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people were "offensive."

The move, carried out in defiance of widespread opposition among academics and staff, is part of a broader push to outlaw growing hostility to militarism and war, including at university campuses.

It follows a protracted campaign by senior figures in the federal Liberal-National Coalition government, the corporate media and university management to demonise Anderson because of his public denunciations of wars and military interventions by the US, Israel and other major powers.

Anderson, a senior lecturer in the faculty of political economy, was suspended by university management on December 3. He was informed in a letter from university Provost Stephen Garton that he was accused of "offensive conduct" and that termination proceedings had been initiated against him.

Garton cited lecture material displayed by Anderson, which allegedly featured an Israeli flag with the Nazi swastika superimposed on it. Critics of the Israeli government have frequently compared its brutal persecution of the Palestinian people to the actions of the fascist German regime.

The lecture material examined media coverage and the response of international organisations to Israel's attack on Gaza in 2014.

The graphic noted that Israel's aerial bombardment of the besieged territory was widely described as "precision strikes" targeting Palestinian militants. This was despite the fact that the barrage resulted in over 1,000 deaths, 75 percent of which were of civilians. By contrast, primitive Palestinian rocket attacks, which

resulted in six civilian deaths, were denounced as "indiscriminate."

The slide encouraged students to seek out independent evidence and to "be wary of moral equivalence claims carrying inbuilt assumptions" and recognise that "both the objectives and actions of the parties are important."

The university employment review panel, which voted two to one on February 11 to sack Anderson, found that dissemination of the lecture material constituted "serious misconduct." It claimed that it was "reasonable" to find the image of the Israeli flag with the superimposed swastika "offensive."

The panel consisted of Janice McLeay, a former industrial relations commissioner and "dispute management specialist," Professor Philippa Pattison, the university's deputy vice chancellor of education, and Dr Neil Maclean, a senior anthropology lecturer. Maclean voted against sacking Anderson, but the termination was pushed through by McLeay and Pattison.

In his dissenting comments, Maclean warned of the implications of firing Anderson for academic freedom. He expressed opposition to university managements' use of a "minimalist criteria," based on vague claims of "offensive" and "inappropriate" conduct, to sack an academic.

Maclean stated that it was "consistent with the requirements of professional judgement that staff formulate their own concrete criteria for the exercise of academic freedom."

In a public statement on February 11, Anderson condemned the panel's decision, stating that it "avoided important issues of principle over intellectual freedom" and "ignored an attempt by managers to link criticism of Israel with anti-semitism."

Anderson warned: “This censorial abuse will send a cold chill through the University of Sydney. Other academics will worry they might also be expelled if a manager considers something they say is ‘inappropriate or offensive.’ Who would know?”

Anderson pointed to the politically-motivated character of the sacking. He noted that Garton, who initiated the termination proceedings against him, had condemned the lecture material documenting casualties during the attack on Gaza as not being “even handed.”

The sacked academic said that despite such remarks, the review panel found that Garton “expressed no political views.” Anderson countered: “I say he expressed reactionary politics dressed up as ‘ethics.’ I also say he has no mandate to protect Israel from criticism, on behalf of the University of Sydney.”

The initiation of termination proceedings against Anderson in December provoked widespread opposition from academics and university staff.

A December 7 open letter, signed by 30 prominent academics and lecturers warned that Anderson’s dismissal would be “an unacceptable act of censorship and a body-blow to academic freedom,” which, by “instilling a fear of arbitrary reprisal... stifles the very freedom of debate and of thought that education requires.”

That the university nevertheless proceeded with the sacking makes clear that Anderson has been the subject of a political victimisation.

In the first instance, Anderson’s repeated condemnations of Israeli attacks on the Palestinians have provoked the ire of various Zionist organisations. At university campuses, there is a concerted attempt to ban all criticisms of Israeli policy, on the basis of cynical and bogus accusations of anti-Semitism.

Anderson has also come under attack for his opposition to the US-led regime change operation in Syria. In April 2018, Education Minister Simon Birmingham called for an investigation into Anderson for comments he made questioning US claims that the Syrian government was responsible for a sarin gas attack in the town of Khan Sheikhoun. The Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* hysterically denounced Anderson as a “sarin gasbag.”

The alleged sarin attack was used to escalate direct US intervention, including the launching of a bombing campaign against Syrian government forces by the

Trump administration. Anderson had noted that no evidence was provided of Syrian government culpability for a chemical weapons attack and that US-backed rebels, who were being militarily defeated, had a far greater motive for staging such an incident.

In a lengthy article late last year, Anderson reviewed a series of attempts by university management to suppress his public statements opposing US militarism.

Significantly, one of the earlier allegations of “misconduct” against Anderson was over his opposition to a May 2017 invitation by the university to US Republican politician John McCain to deliver an address on campus. Anderson had denounced McCain, who was implicated in every US war and military intervention over the past three decades, as a “war criminal.”

Garton responded: “There are no grounds to assert that Senator McCain is a ‘war criminal.’”

The attacks against Anderson are inextricably tied to the integration of Australian universities into a vast US-led military build-up, aimed at preparing for war with China and other powers. Virtually every university campus across the country participates in government funded programs to subordinate academic research to the development of new military technologies.

A host of pro-war think tanks have also been created. At the University of Sydney, the US Studies Centre was founded in 2006, with US and Australian government funding. Its explicit aim is to counter mass hostility to Australian involvement in US wars.

The attempts to suppress anti-war sentiment underscore the need to build a political movement of workers, students and young people in defence of democratic rights.

University of Sydney staff and students, and all academics, should oppose the sacking of Tim Anderson and demand his immediate reinstatement.



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