

# Police shut down protests, fine students at University of Sydney

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During the past two months, police have broken up four protests and one meeting at the University of Sydney, with dozens of fines issued to participants. On the patently false pretext of enforcing COVID-19 safety measures, the state Liberal-National government in New South Wales has deployed police to conduct anti-democratic operations on a university campus.

Amid mass unemployment, intensifying cuts to university jobs, and planned student fee increases, there is rising political and social unrest among students, and more broadly among youth and workers. Under these conditions, the mobilisation of police on campuses—previously regarded as safe venues for political demonstrations—is a warning of the authoritarian measures being prepared against the working class as a whole.

On July 31, approximately 30 police officers broke up a socially-distanced rally of students against the federal Liberal-National government's plan to increase course fees for humanities, communications, law, economics and commerce students to \$14,500 a year, the highest fee bracket. For humanities students, this means a more than doubling of fees.

While students were dispersing, police identified a rally organiser, Adam Adelpour, and chased him down. Adelpour and another student were both issued \$1,000 fines.

On August 28, over 70 police officers, including from the riot squad and mounted police, prevented a planned rally from taking place. The event was called to protest cuts by the federal government and university managements.

The rally followed an August 19 email from the head of the Sydney School of Education and Social Work to staff outlining plans to cut up to 30 percent of full-time equivalent staff.

Police cleared students away from the entrance to the university's main Fisher Library, while officers on horseback blocked off entrances to the university. Ten students were fined at least \$1,000 each.

On September 16, roughly 100 riot squad and other police officers broke up a series of rallies on campus, each with less than 20 participants, protesting aspects of the education cuts. As with the previous rallies, police arrived before the start and began fining students within 10 minutes of the commencement of speeches.

Police declared that the individual rallies were all for the same purpose and therefore contravened a public health order. Approximately 10 students were fined, including Adelpour, who was arrested. He has since been fined \$11,000 and could face six months in jail for allegedly refusing to comply with police move-on orders.

On September 23, students and staff held eight protests of less than 20 participants each. Just before the rallies, National Tertiary Education Union members held an outdoor seminar with roughly 100 students on "Higher Education and Democratic Dissent." Police issued move-on orders to those participating in the protests but not the seminar.

Approximately 200 protesters then rallied on Eastern Avenue and marched to nearby Victoria Park. Students ran to City Road and blocked traffic. Police pulled students off the road and issued fines. Some students began to run back towards the campus but police, including two horseback-mounted officers, blocked them and chased them down. Police issued participants a total of 21 fines of at least \$1,000 each.

On September 25, police dispersed an outdoor meeting of students on the grounds that it could involve more than 20 participants. According to meeting organisers, only 15 students were present when the

police moved in.

The police cited public health order number 4, which prohibits all public gatherings of more than 20 people “for a common purpose, including an organised or planned event, in a public place.”

The political exploitation of this provision is evidenced by the fact that sporting events can have crowds of thousands. Reportedly, 7,209 people attended a rugby league game on October 2 in Sydney’s west, for example.

The breakup of student and staff protests is not motivated by concerns for anyone’s health and wellbeing. Tutorial classes have resumed, many of which regularly have over 20 students in a single room for up to an hour, which is far more likely to result in the transmission of the virus than an outdoor rally.

The police attacks on campus escalate the anti-democratic measures taken to shut down protests in opposition to police violence and climate change.

In early June, over 100,000 people participated in rallies across the country over a single weekend against police violence, as part of the global multiracial protests that erupted following the police killing of George Floyd in the US.

The New South Wales government moved to block the Sydney Town Hall rally. An appeal court overturned the ban at the last minute, after tens of thousands of people already had begun rallying. The state Labor Party government’s police in neighbouring Victoria threatened fines for participants and rally organisers.

Since June, rallies in Sydney have been met with a heavy police presence. One week after the initial rally, 1,000 riot squad and other police were deployed against protesters in a massive show of force. Police blockaded Sydney Town Hall to prevent the rally from going ahead. When protesters moved to nearby Hyde Park, police chased them down and broke up the protest.

The use of police on campus is a marked escalation of the authoritarian actions being taken by governments, under the cover of COVID-19 pandemic safety rules. The ruling elite is exploiting the health disaster to accelerate the decades-long assault on the jobs, conditions and social rights of the working class, including the right to education, and is increasingly using force to try to suppress opposition.



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