Oppose University of Sydney's suspension of students who protested former prime minister!

Oscar Grenfell, SEP candidate for NSW Legislative Council
28 February 2023

Management at the University of Sydney has suspended two students for a semester because they participated in a protest at an address delivered by former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to the university's Law Society last year.

The students, Deaglan Godwin and Maddie Clarke, are both elected members of the university's Student Representative Council. They are also associated with the Socialist Alternative organisation.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has irreconcilable and well-documented political differences with Socialist Alternative. This, however, is a basic question of democratic rights. The SEP unequivocally condemns the suspensions of Godwin and Clarke and demands that university management reinstate their right to study immediately.

The issues, moreover, go beyond the two students. The university authorities have seized on what was a "radical" protest stunt, to attack not only Godwin and Clarke, but the student body and its rights as a whole.

At the centre of the SEP's campaign in the upcoming New South Wales (NSW) state election is the fight against war. A key component of this struggle against militarism is the defence of democratic rights, which are always among the first casualties of war.

As Australia has been ever-more deeply integrated into the US-led preparations for a catastrophic conflict, the universities have become militarist hubs where even the pretense of basic civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, is being dispensed with.

The protest, for which Godwin and Clarke have been suspended, occurred last September. Turnbull was the featured speaker at an event put on by the university's Law Society, which has long functioned as one of the bastions on campus of the political establishment.

Turnbull, of the Liberal Party, was prime minister from 2015 to 2018. His government intensified Australia's alignment with US war plans, carried out significant cuts to education, healthcare and other areas of social spending and continued a protracted assault on democratic rights. This included attacks on refugees and the bipartisan passage of sweeping "foreign interference" laws, aimed at outlawing anti-war activity and facilitating xenophobic witch hunts particularly targeting Chinese individuals.

At the protest, Godwin, Clarke and others denounced Turnbull as a right-wing representative of the ruling class.

Clarke has stated that she is in fact suspended for two semesters. Due to the latest reprimand, a deferred suspension over a separate anti-abortion protest has reportedly been enforced against her. That means Clarke cannot study for an entire year.

The suspensions came after Turnbull absurdly denounced the protesters as "fascists," whose actions were supposedly "at odds with every value Sydney University holds." The clear implication was that the demonstration was beyond the pale and action needed to be taken against those who participated in it.

In an article published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* over the weekend, the two students declared: "We were suspended for protesting against Malcolm Turnbull, but we'd do it again."

The students noted that their suspension was being imposed on the grounds that they had supposedly violated Turnbull's "freedom of speech." They acknowledged that they had disrupted the event, but insisted that their intention was not to shut it down.

Clarke and Godwin wrote: "Universities claim to be a marketplace of ideas, a space for evolving minds to discuss and debate. Sydney University has clearly demonstrated which ideas and speakers are allowed and which are not. If you're a politician or businessman, you are given a platform. If you're a student who challenges the status quo, you are met with the full force of the university's disciplinary processes."

They added: "This is a concerning attack on freedom of speech and the democratic right to protest. If we can't protest against the rich and powerful, what are we meant to do to put forward our alternative to the current state of the world?"

In separate comments to the *Guardian*, the students provided additional information on the repressive process that was used to impose their suspensions. The university, they claimed, had hired an "external investigator." Clarke and Godwin were compelled to meet with it twice last October. While they were subjected to questioning, they were not permitted to see any evidence against them or even to know who had initiated the complaint.

According to Clarke and Godwin, documents related to their suspension remain sealed under confidentiality clauses. They also stated that other students who participated in the protest against Turnbull have had suspensions imposed against them which have not been enforced, but could be in the event of further "infractions."

In a statement to the *Guardian*, a University of Sydney representative repeated the claim that the students had been sanctioned for violating freedom of speech and academic freedom, asserting: "We have a rich history of activism and protest on our campuses, and all students and staff have the right to express themselves freely, as long as it's done safely and in accordance with our policies and the law."

University of Sydney's war on democratic rights

The recent history of the university suggests otherwise. Over the past decade, it has been at the centre of an aggressive crackdown on democratic rights at universities across the country, especially targeting

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opposition to war. Examples include:

• The University of Sydney management's repeated deployment of campus security against students who have protested cuts to courses and attacks on the pay and conditions of staff. The management has repeatedly collaborated with the police against such demonstrations.

• In 2015, the management launched an official "investigation" into Jake Lynch, a prominent academic and then the head of the university's Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies. Lynch had attended a lecture on campus delivered by retired British Colonel Richard Kemp. Kemp's address was a promotion of Israel. The speaker had also played a key role in the neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan. When protesting students were forcefully ejected by security, Lynch voiced his opposition. In response, he was slandered by Zionist forces and in the press, a witch hunt aided by the opening of an "investigation," even though it was eventually compelled to clear Lynch.

• The same year, management banned a Socialist Equality Party meeting opposing the glorification of militarism on the centenary of the disastrous World War I landing of Australian and New Zealand at Gallipoli, Turkey. The university blocked the meeting after it had been denounced by fascists affiliated with the now-defunct United Patriots Front. In communications with staff, then-Vice Chancellor Michael Spence claimed that the censorship was being carried out at the recommendation of unspecified policing agencies. On the same day the SEP meeting was to be held, the university conducted a pro-war celebration of Anzac Day.

• In 2019, the management sacked academic Tim Anderson, after he had shown an image of a swastika superimposed over the Israeli flag. The dismissal again followed a campaign by right-wing Zionist organisations. Last October, the Federal Court ruled that Anderson had been unlawfully fired. Justice Thomas Thawley found that Anderson was exercising his intellectual freedom and that the graphic had been created for academic purposes.

And now, this same administration has the audacity to lecture students about the importance of free speech, as it levels heavy penalties against pupils whose only "offence" has been to protest!

The University of Sydney is at the forefront of the transformation of universities into corporatised arms of big business and the military-intelligence establishment. Its repeated attacks on the pay and conditions of staff have served as a benchmark for universities across the country.

The University of Sydney was among the first campuses to establish an explicitly pro-war institute on campus. The US Studies Centre, funded by the Australian and American governments and major corporations, was founded in 2006 to overcome widespread hostility to war in the wake of Washington's invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. It is a key forum for strategic discussions on preparations for Australian involvement in war with China.

The attacks at the University of Sydney are part of a broader onslaught. At campuses across the country, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, the youth movement of the SEP, has repeatedly faced censorship and attempts to drive it off campus. Last year, Macquarie University in Sydney disaffiliated the IYSSE club. The student union at the University of Melbourne did the same. Both seized on minor clerical issues to prosecute what were clearly acts of political censorship.

Last December, the IYSSE around the world launched a campaign to build a global anti-war movement of the working class. The urgency of that fight is demonstrated by the rapid escalation of the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, the continuous provocations being directed against China and the evisceration of democratic rights that is accompanying the war drive.

Protest stunts, like the one directed against Turnbull, do nothing to develop such a movement. Instead, they obscure the essential political issues, including the Albanese Labor government's escalation of ruling class support for the US war offensive in Ukraine and against China. As with all protest politics, they essentially amount to an appeal to the powers-that-be to change their course and their personnel. Instead, students should turn to a study of the lessons of history, the revolutionary program of Marxism and Trotskyism and to a fight for socialism in the working class, the only social force that can stop war and overturn its source, the capitalist profit system.

The IYSSE is holding a series of meetings to discuss the socialist perspective required to end the war in Ukraine and prevent a catastrophe in this region.

Melbourne, VIC
7 p.m. AEDT, Tuesday March 14
Lecture Theatre 2, 295 Queen Street (entrance via Little Lonsdale St), Melbourne CBD
Victoria University: City Queen Campus
Register: https://www.eventbrite.com/e/for-a-mass-movement-of-youth-and-students-against-imperialist-war-registration-559858029437
T?he event will also be livestreamed for those who cannot attend in person, including the immunocompromised. Register for the Zoom livestream at this link:
https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_RwFpGh4fTwaALq5z9vuhvA

Newcastle, NSW
7 p.m. AEDT, Thursday March 16
Lecture Theatre V205 (Mathematics Building)
University of Newcastle (Callaghan campus)
Register for the Zoom livestream at this link:
https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_JrpMFl4dRzSx8sAZwia35Q

Sydney, NSW
Wednesday March 15
Venue and time TBC

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