

Australian universities suppressing opposition to Gaza genocide

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This week, two universities, one in Sydney and the other in Melbourne, sought to bar any opposition to the Israeli massacre of Palestinians in Gaza using lies, intimidation and censorship.

At Victoria University (VU) in Melbourne, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) club was instructed on Thursday that it could not publicly mention Gaza on campus. The IYSSE is the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party. At the University of Sydney (USyd), a meeting of the Solidarity club, opposing the Israeli onslaught, was banned by management.

For decades, free speech has been under assault at Australian universities as they have been corporatised and subordinated ever more directly to militarism and war. The attempt to outlaw opposition to a genocide as it is unfolding nevertheless marks a new leap. It is a turn to anti-democratic methods of political suppression commonly associated with police states and dictatorships.

The two universities are very different from one another.

VU has several campuses across Melbourne, including in its working-class western suburbs. The university has a large Middle Eastern student cohort, as well as other migrant groups and international students particularly attuned to the realities of US-led militarism in the world. USyd is one of the country's elite sandstone universities, with extensive ties to the US and Australian militaries and major corporations.

That both universities carried out near-identical attacks against opponents of Israeli war crimes, at almost the exact same time, is a warning to all students and youth. Whether the censorship is being nationally coordinated or not, an atmosphere is being created in which organised opposition to the bombardment of Gaza is forbidden.

Yesterday, IYSSE campaigners at VU's main Footscray Park campus were approached by Andrew Williams, the

university's "Critical Incident Coordinator," who was accompanied by a security guard.

Williams informed the IYSSE representatives that he had authorised security to tear down all posters for the club's Annual General Meeting (AGM) next Thursday, entitled "Stop Israel's Genocide Against Gaza!" Williams stated that the IYSSE was not allowed to hold the AGM about Gaza, to distribute leaflets about it, or conduct any other activities on campus related to the Israeli bombardment.

Yesterday evening, Williams, in a message to an IYSSE member, confirmed this edict. He indicated that next week's meeting could only relate to the formal business of an AGM. If the IYSSE wished to do anything else at all on campus, it would need to seek approval.

When he first accosted the IYSSE campaigners, Williams had declared that management was taking action against the student club because its activities "may make some students feel unsafe." Williams said, however, that there had been no formal student complaints against the IYSSE whatsoever and that the instruction had instead emanated solely from management itself.

The conduct of VU management can legitimately be described as Orwellian. Representatives of a student group handing out leaflets are harried by a "critical incident coordinator" and by security. They have their most basic civil liberties and human rights to freedom of speech summarily abolished. The stated ground is that exercising that freedom of speech "may make some students feel unsafe." But then the management representative admits that these "feelings" are entirely hypothetical, as are the people experiencing them!

In any event, even if there were students who objected to an IYSSE campaign for political reasons, that would hardly justify the suppression of democratic rights on campus. It would create a precedent for management to shut down any political campaigning on campus,

especially anti-war campaigning, which is precisely what is occurring.

The references to “safety” are particularly obscene, given the content of the IYSSE’s activities. It is opposing the continuous bombardment of a civilian population by a heavily armed state that is backed by all the world’s imperialist governments, including the Labor administration in Australia.

The IYSSE is campaigning against an onslaught that has included the Israeli government murder of more than 3,000 children in little over three weeks. What does VU management have to say about their “safety”? Perhaps the attention of the “critical incident coordinator” should be directed to the “critical incident”—genocide—occurring in the Middle East rather than the suppression of those handing out leaflets opposing this historic war crime.

VU management is, in fact, enforcing the dictates of those in the Australian political and media establishment who support the mass murder of the Palestinians. The reference to “safety” echoes the lie that any opposition to the murderous actions of the Israeli government somehow constitutes antisemitism, even though that opposition includes large sections of the Jewish population.

Earlier this month, the VU branch of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) passed a motion demanding an end to the Israeli bombardment, opposing the occupation and expressing solidarity with the Palestinians. The motion was notable under conditions where the state and national leaderships of the unions have adopted a complicit silence over the genocide and have refused to take any action against it.

In response, the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper published a scurrilous article denouncing the motion. The article cited the remarks of Zionist leader Dvir Abramovich, who declared, “This inexcusable, immoral and vile motion is beyond sick,” and said that the university lecturers and academics who passed it were “on the side” of Hamas.

It is those frothing calls for political censorship of opponents of the Israeli bombardment that VU is now implementing.

The IYSSE has well-documented differences with Solidarity. It is a pseudo-left organisation that promotes the trade union bureaucracy and the big business Labor Party.

But the response to a meeting its USyd club had called for Wednesday was deeply anti-democratic and remarkably similar to that meted out to the IYSSE at VU. According to an open letter to management by Nick

Reimer, the head of the USyd NTEU branch, the meeting was banned on the extraordinary grounds that it “may be linked to terrorist activities.” Solidarity stated that management had also said the event may “pose a material risk to campus safety.”

Management rejected the refutation of those bogus assertions by Solidarity and Reimer and proceeded with the censorship. Solidarity reported on Facebook that management “sent security to prevent students from accessing an empty classroom and prevented the forum from taking place anywhere on campus.”

The invocation of terrorism is highly threatening. Australia has a vast battery of anti-terror legislation, providing sweeping powers for police raids, spying, detention without charge and decades-long terms of imprisonment. USyd management, speaking for the political establishment, is warning that those who oppose war crimes and support the rights of the Palestinians may be treated to such punishment.

These are threats and anti-democratic measures that students, young people, academics and all defenders of civil liberties cannot accept. At campuses across the country, protests and meetings should be organised to oppose this crackdown and to organise a determined campaign against it. Universities cannot be transformed into tinpot dictatorships and police states!

Resolutions should be passed at all NTEU and other university union meetings and more broadly, rejecting such censorship and preparing concrete measures against it, including strike action.

Such activities should not only oppose the censorship and bans, but also defy it. Meetings and demonstrations must be held at all universities against the genocide that is unfolding in Gaza and the full complicity of the Australian government.

As the IYSSE has insisted, such a struggle must turn to the working class, mobilising its vast social and political strength to halt the bombardment.



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