

Australian universities moving to shut down student encampments against Gaza genocide

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Over the past 24 hours, a campaign against student protest encampments opposing the Israeli genocide in Gaza has ratcheted up sharply. Two universities have issued eviction notices, others have held “crisis meetings,” and at the University of Melbourne, a senior manager has made a frothing denunciation of protesters and called for the police to mobilise against them.

Whether the crackdown is being nationally coordinated or not—and the timing strongly indicates that it is—the repressive actions of university administrations are in line with demands from the political and media establishment, particularly Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

This week, he has denounced the protests as “divisive” displays of “hatred” and “ignorance” that do not “have a place” in society. Albanese claimed that antisemitism is greater than at any point in his lifetime, in a deepening of the lying conflation of opposition to Israel’s horrific war crimes with anti-Jewish bigotry.

The remarks have had the character of an incitement to the Zionist thugs and far-right forces who, on three occasions over the past fortnight, have violently attacked student encampments in the dead of the night. They have been aimed at creating a climate of intimidation and manufactured hysteria in which the university administrations will feel compelled and emboldened to dismantle the protests.

That was underscored by a statement from University of Melbourne deputy vice-chancellor Michael Wesley yesterday. Referencing the fact that students at the university are continuing an occupation of the Arts West building they began on Wednesday, Wesley declared that “red lines have been crossed.”

Without evidence, he said protesters were “intimidating” other people and “have caused considerable damage.” Speaking more like a national security official than an academic administrator, Wesley asserted that “intelligence” had shown that many involved were not students but “professional protesters.”

“They are outside agitators and the sort of actions they are taking suggest to us that they could be potentially

dangerous,” he said. “The way they have organised themselves within the building would suggest to us that they are preparing to resist being forcibly evicted.”

The deputy vice chancellor menacingly stated that police would now “be including the campus in their regular patrols. When it comes to ending the protest, we will largely be reliant on Victoria Police. This is going to be a very substantial operation.” Victoria Police this morning stated there had been no formal eviction notice from the university, and so they could not immediately act.

Wesley’s comments, however, are chilling. The use of quasi-military terminology about “red lines” and “substantial operations” is a warning that the university authorities are prepared to greenlight violence against protesters who are not accused of physically harming anyone, or of committing any real wrongdoing.

The statements are a practical application of what Albanese meant when he said the protests did not “have a place” in society.

While a tense situation persists at the University of Melbourne as of this writing, management at Deakin University in the same city has issued a second eviction notice, after student demonstrators defied one earlier this week. The Australian National University (ANU) has demanded that an encampment be dismantled by the end of today.

Last night, University of Queensland vice-chancellor Deborah Terry convened a “crisis meeting,” after right-wing provocateurs tried to incite a disturbance at the encampment there. Yesterday the University of Sydney sent an email to all students and staff, alleging, without proof, that protesters had “intimidated” lecturers and committed other infractions. This morning, the Murdoch-owned *Australian* crowed that the email had been a response to its “inquiries,” based on the papers’ collaboration with pro-Israeli members of academia.

Under the deceptive banner of combating non-existent “violence” and ensuring student “safety,” the administrations are going to war against the most basic democratic rights on campus, including free speech and

political protest. While the claim is continuously made that this is necessary to protect Jewish students, no evidence of harm or threats against students has been presented. Many anti-Zionist Jewish students have played a leading role in the protests.

The clear aim is to ban all displays of opposition to the genocide on university campuses. That occurs under conditions where, as the encampments themselves have centrally noted, virtually all of Australia's universities have extensive ties to a military-intelligence complex that includes US and other weapons firms that are directly involved in the mass slaughter of Palestinians.

The precedent that is being set, however, goes beyond the campuses. The still relatively small encampments are being targeted in a test-case for a wider ban on protests and demonstrations, amid mass opposition to the genocide, a growing anti-war sentiment and intense hostility to all the parliamentary parties.

That has openly been stated by commentators in the corporate media, who have asked how it will be possible to end the student encampments, while continuing to allow mass demonstrations against the genocide in the city centres. It is demonstrated by an escalating "discussion" of senior politicians, including in the Labor government, about protest slogans calling for the liberation of the Palestinians and an end to the genocide being a "dangerous" threat to national security.

This broader turn to authoritarianism underscores the critical importance of opposing the attacks on the encampments. The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) condemn the witch hunt of the students and call for workers to mobilise in their defence. If the government and the universities succeed in violently dispersing the encampments, it will set a benchmark for assaults against workers' struggles across the board.

The basis for such a mobilisation exists. It was demonstrated this week in the United States, in the vote by some 48,000 graduate students and university workers to take strike action against a brutal crackdown on pro-Gaza encampments.

In Australia too, there is sympathy for the students and hostility to their vilification. An open letter defending the encampments has now been signed by more than 900 university workers and academics across the country, including almost 200 at the University of Melbourne and scores at other institutions.

As weekly mass protests throughout the genocide have shown, the opposition goes much deeper, existing in all of the major working-class neighbourhoods and workplaces of the country.

A central obstacle to a mobilisation of workers in defence of democratic rights and against the genocide is the trade union bureaucracy. All of the Australian unions have rejected a desperate appeal from Palestinian unions for action to stop the genocide, including to block military and related supplies to Israel. Not a single strike or industrial action has been held.

The complicity extends to the National Tertiary Education Union, which covers academics and many staff. While making general statements in support of the students, it has not committed to any action whatsoever.

That underscores the urgency of workers, including university staff, organising independently, through the establishment of rank-and-file committees to prepare action against the attacks on the protests, the genocide and war.

Above all, what is posed is a political struggle. The pseudo-left organisations that dominate at the encampments are trying to cover this up. Instead, they are directing students to impotent appeals to their "own" university managements to cut ties with Israel.

The involvement of the universities in the supply chains of militarism, however, is a political issue and a subordinate component of the broader militarisation of the country being spearheaded by the Labor government, with the support of all the official parties. That is not only in aid of the genocide, but centrally involves the US alliance and Australia's integration into Washington's advanced preparations for war with China, which the pseudo-left and encampment leaders never mention.

And as Albanese's comments this week make clear, the assault on the encampments is not simply a question of the proclivities of university managers, but of a turn to dictatorial forms of rule to impose the program of war and the accompanying assault on social conditions.

While workers must defend the encampments from attack, students must turn to the working class, the fundamental revolutionary force in society, and take up the struggle for a socialist program, directed against the source of the horrors in Gaza, the descent into a new world war and the evisceration of civil liberties, the capitalist system.



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