

University of Sydney shuts down pro-Palestinian encampment, slanders students

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The University of Sydney (USyd) issued an eviction notice to a pro-Palestinian encampment on campus last Friday, which was then reported to all staff yesterday in an email that slandered the students. The main organising group of the encampment responded by announcing that it would be shut down immediately.

While some students remained as of yesterday, they are isolated and face the prospect of forceful removal. The USyd encampment, one of the first to be set-up almost two months ago, was among the last to be dismantled. Similar encampments at more than a dozen universities across the country have ended, with only a handful remaining, including at the Australian National University in Canberra and the University of Newcastle.

The attack by USyd management is a broader warning of an official drive to suppress opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza and to imperialist war.

In labelling the encampments as “dangerous” and then dispersing them, the political establishment is seeking to set a precedent that can be used against weekly mass demonstrations opposing the Israeli mass murder and all other protest activities directed against the genocide.

The response of the pseudo-left organisers of the encampment, essentially to accede to management’s threats and demands, also contains lessons. It demonstrates that the fight against attacks on democratic rights cannot proceed under the leadership of protest groups whose entire perspective is to issue appeals to the powers-that-be, whether individual university managements or the government.

The eviction notice was issued after a series of meetings between encampment organisers and management had failed to secure any agreement. As at other universities, the encampment had been demanding that USyd divest from Israel, to which it has numerous ties, including through its collaboration with US-based global arms corporations.

The notice was outlined in a Monday email to staff from vice-chancellor Mark Scott. Billed as “Protest encampment update,” the email combined absurd rationales for the eviction, with denunciations of the student protesters.

Scott repeated platitudes about democratic rights. “Since 24 April when the encampment began, we’ve repeatedly stated

that we support the right to peaceful protest, provided it doesn’t cause significant disruption to core University operations,” he wrote.

The University, however, had decided that it would hold its “Welcome Fest” for Semester 2 on the same lawns occupied by the encampment. The “Welcome Fest,” featuring stalls, many of them likely corporate, was a “core University operation” and so the encampment had to go.

USyd is a vast campus, so the suggestion that there was nowhere else the “Welcome Fest” could be held was transparent nonsense.

The various “Welcome” programs appear to begin on July 15. Squaring that circle, between events starting almost a month from now, and the urgency of an immediate eviction, Scott declared that “the lawns have become damaged” as a result of the encampment. Remediation would take “some time.”

While all of this was an attempt to deflect from the university conducting political censorship, the email contained a sharp sting in the tail confirming this is precisely what was taking place.

Apropos of nothing, Scott proclaimed: “we have zero tolerance for any form of racism, threats to safety, hate speech, intimidation, threatening speech, bullying or unlawful harassment, including antisemitic or anti-Muslim language or behaviour. We unequivocally condemn violence, terrorism and any breach of human rights.”

The clear implication was that there was some connection between the encampment and these various threats to “safety” of students and staff. Those are grave insinuations to make against students, without a shred of supporting evidence.

The only thing Scott could point to was a feature article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* over the weekend, which alleged that Islamist activists had attended the encampment and participated in some of its protests. Scott referred to these as “concerning allegations regarding external influences on the protest encampment.” The *Herald* article, too, was big on insinuations and guilt by association, but indicated no threats to “safety.”

The timing of the article was notable. Coming immediately after the eviction notice, and then being referenced by Scott in his Monday email, the *Herald* article had the clear function of legitimising the dispersal of the encampment.

Most significantly, Scott declared that throughout the encampment, management had been collaborating closely with state police. He indicated higher-level cooperation, though, noting that the university had received a “recent briefing of the Universities Foreign Interference Taskforce, which included briefings from intelligence officials, ASIO, and several senior government officials.”

That is highly disturbing. The purpose of the “Foreign Interference Taskforce” is to align universities ever more directly with Australia’s participation in US-led militarism globally, particularly directed against China in the Indo-Pacific. The Taskforce is whipping up a McCarthyite atmosphere, in which much research collaboration with Chinese academics and institutions are banned and academics are subject to draconian national security secrecy provisions.

Scott did not spell out any relationship between “foreign interference” and the encampment, but the insinuation that the encampment was somehow the result of plots by nefarious actors, possibly “foreign,” was clear. The reference to ASIO, the domestic spying agency, and other unnamed intelligence officials, together with government representatives, indicates the attack on the encampment has been coordinated at the highest levels of the state.

That is in line with a venomous campaign against the encampments, led by Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. Last month, he branded the peaceful student protests as “divisive” displays of “hatred” that “do not have a place” in society.

That declaration goes far beyond campuses. Since October, the Labor governments at the state and federal level, acting on behalf of the ruling elite, have been straining to shut down protests opposing the genocide and their own complicity in it. Having dispensed with the encampments, Labor, over recent weeks, hysterically denounced protests outside the electorate offices of its members of parliament, presenting those too as “dangerous” and an affront to the democratic process.

The connection between the attack on the encampments and the wider assault on protest was evident on Sunday. The weekly mass demonstration marched from the City to USyd. But USyd security guards and state police officers blocked it from entering the encampment. Organisers stated that management had threatened to impose penalties on university students who entered the campus, including potential lifetime bans.

All of the accusations that have been levelled against the encampments could be deployed against the broader protests. That includes obscene claims that chants calling for the liberation of Palestine advocate attacks against Jewish people, that protests are a “disruption”, and that they threaten “safety.”

The statement announcing the end of the encampment, put out by a group dominated by the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative, pointed to none of these implications. It complacently declared that the encampment had been a major success and had wracked up numerous “achievements,”

without enumerating any of them. The students would return to campus next semester, and the struggle “would continue.”

In other words, Socialist Alternative has no intention of taking up a fight to defend democratic rights, including of its own student members.

That is entirely connected to the political perspective advanced by the pseudo-left. On the campuses, they have restricted protest to appeals to individual university managements to divest from Israel. Numbers of the encampments have been wound up on the basis of pledges by the managements, not to divest but merely to “disclose” their ties to Israel.

The pseudo-left has consistently been hostile to any fight to mobilise workers in defence of democratic rights, including the right to protest on campus. That was underscored in the encampment closure statement’s laudatory reference to the National Tertiary Education Union, which covers academics and staff. Like all the unions, it has done nothing to oppose the genocide or the associated crackdown on democratic rights.

The position advanced by the pseudo-left on the campuses is a microcosm of their broader perspective. Throughout, it has been to issue plaintive appeals to the Labor government to shift course and end its involvement in the genocide. That covers up the relationship between the mass murder in Gaza and the broader war drive, especially against China, and subordinates opposition to the very government that is greenlighting Israel’s historic war crimes.

The only way to defend civil liberties, including the right to protest, is by mobilising the social and political power of the working class, independent of the corporatised trade unions. What is posed is a political struggle against the government, the entire political establishment, and the capitalist profit-system itself, which is hurtling towards nuclear world war and dictatorship.



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