

Australian university staff denounce arrests of anti-genocide students at Western Sydney University

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Hundreds of academics and professional staff at Australian universities have signed an open letter to Western Sydney University (WSU) management condemning this month's arrests of three WSU students for participating in a peaceful sit-in protest against the escalating Israeli onslaught on Gaza and Lebanon.

The letter, also signed by WSU students, is another indication of the widespread opposition of university workers and students to the suppression of demonstrations against the genocide and wider Middle East war being pursued by the Israeli regime, backed by the US and other imperialist governments, including the Labor government in Australia.

Published in the *Overland* magazine, the letter demands an independent investigation into the police mobilisation against the students, an immediate halt to any further police involvement in campus protests, and the dropping of the charges and far-reaching bail conditions imposed on the arrested students.

It states: "As academics who share a commitment to the democratic rights of assembly, protest, expression and dissent especially within the context of institutions of higher learning, we are outraged that police brutality is being unleashed against students engaging in protest of the ongoing genocide in Gaza and massacres in Lebanon, which have already claimed over 44,000 lives, with some experts estimating the numbers are in the hundred [of] thousands."

The letter describes the massive police operation at the WSU Parramatta South campus on October 9, the violent arrests of two students and the later arrest of another student at her home, all on trumped-up charges, such as assaulting police or security guards and resisting arrest.

"In a disturbing violation of democratic rights, police and riot squad arrived heavily armed and escalated what had been a peaceful sit-in. Shocking footage widely circulated online shows police officers intimidating students and staff, and forcefully arresting two students. Plainclothes officers

armed with weapons were deployed alongside uniformed police, further intensifying the situation.

"An additional raid and arrest were made in the day following the protest, fuelling fear and panic in the student population. The students were charged with assault and resisting arrest and draconian bail conditions were imposed including being banned from campus and from contacting members of WSU for Palestine Collective including academic staff."

The letter states: "Despite later denials from university officials, the deployment of police units appears to have been coordinated at high levels of university administration and government."

It notes: "Before the protest began, WSU's director of campus safety and security, Anthony Attard, sent an email to staff indicating that measures were in place to prevent the protest from disrupting university activities, alluding to the police presence that was already visible across the campus."

As the WSWWS previously reported, the huge police operation, which included armed undercover officers, initially disguised as students, must have been organised at the top levels of the New South Wales state Labor government, which controls the police force, in collaboration with the university management.

The open letter points out that the WSU arrests are not isolated incidents. "They are part of a broader pattern of police repression across Australian universities against those who protest against Israel's atrocities."

This repression is not confined to campuses. The arrests are part of an intensified offensive by the federal and state Labor governments, which fully back the Israeli regime, to vilify and try to shut down protests against the escalating barbarism by the Netanyahu government, armed to the tune of billions of dollars by the Biden-Harris administration.

The letter does not name the Labor governments responsible. In recent weeks, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, NSW Premier Chris Minns, Victorian Premier

Jacinta Allan and other Labor leaders have issued statements demanding that protests against the pulverisation of Gaza and Lebanon not proceed.

As the US-armed Israeli rampage spirals into a war against Iran for domination over the entire Middle East, they have branded peaceful protesters, including anti-Zionist Jews, as antisemitic or terrorism advocates, trampling over their basic democratic rights.

The Labor governments are moving in the same direction as other imperialist countries, like the US, Germany, and Canada, where peaceful anti-genocide protests have been met with brutal police repression.

The letter seeks an “immediate assurance that Western Sydney University (WSU) will stop enabling police presence on its campuses for the purpose of suppressing and deterring student protests.”

It demands: “Accountability from Western Sydney University’s leadership, particularly Vice-Chancellor George Williams, who must explain the university’s role in this violent suppression and commit to protecting students’ right to protest.”

Far from providing any such assurances or accountability, however, the WSU management has defended its response. In fact, it has escalated its attack by suspending the three arrested students and barring them from campus and all contact with their teachers, imperilling their studies and futures.

The October 9 protest demanded that WSU divest from Israeli-linked companies involved in weaponised planes, drones, and other instruments of war. But it also voiced a broader outcry against the worsening massacres in Gaza and Lebanon.

One reason that WSU students have been targeted is that WSU is a predominately working-class university, with many students from Palestine, Lebanon and across the Middle East. There is clearly concern in the Labor governments and the ruling class as a whole that the anti-war anger and sentiment is deepening throughout the working class.

Significantly, the day before the arrests, on October 8, the Socialist Equality Party’s youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and its club at WSU, finally forced the Student Representative Council, via a petition signed by nearly 300 students, to call a student general meeting, which voted for a socialist strategy to halt the genocide and war.

The resolution overwhelming adopted by that meeting advanced the understanding that to fight genocide, war and attacks on democratic rights, students have to turn to the working class, and take up the fight to mobilise its immense social and political power.

The resolution’s five-point action plan endorsed the call of the Palestinian trade unions for strike action to halt all supplies to Israel and urged that workers demand it be implemented by the Maritime Union of Australia and other transport unions.

Recognising the refusal of the union bureaucrats to do so, the motion called on workers to take matters into their own hands, undertake independent action and impose bans. It urged students and youth to fight for this perspective among workers at the docks, factories, warehouses, hospitals, schools, in transport, logistics and other workplaces.

It concluded: “Students must turn to the building of a socialist movement of the working class internationally, against the outmoded capitalist system, which offers only a future of barbarism and nuclear catastrophe.”

This resolution, which has been endorsed by the WSU Rank-and-File Committee, provides a lead for all workers and youth. The experiences of the past year have proven that the Gaza genocide, the mass killing in Lebanon and the broader war drive of imperialism cannot be stopped by making appeals to university managements or the governments responsible for these historic crimes.

Labor’s backing for Israel’s barbarism is part of its involvement in the wider eruption of imperialist militarism, which is metastasising into a global war. That includes mounting support—including the supply of tanks—for the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the transformation of Australia into a central base of operations for US attacks in the Middle East, as well as war against China, identified as the chief threat to American hegemony.

To end this barbarism means a political fight against Labor, imperialist war globally and the capitalist system itself, based on a socialist program.

The IYSSE club at WSU is holding its annual general meeting at 1 p.m. tomorrow, October 23, both online and in PS-EB.3.33A (CLS), Parramatta South Campus, to discuss and take forward the campaign for this powerful perspective. WSU students can join that meeting by registering here.

To contact the WSU Rank-and-File Committee, email us at: rfc.wsu@gmail.com.

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