

Australia: University of Melbourne expels pro-Palestinian students

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The University of Melbourne, one of Australia's most prestigious universities, has expelled two students and suspended two others for their involvement in pro-Palestinian protests on campus.

The decision marks a further shift to outlaw political free speech on the campuses and more broadly and must be opposed by students, staff and all those who defend basic democratic rights. It comes amid a deepening offensive spearheaded by the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to outlaw opposition to Israel's genocidal assault on the Palestinian people which Australian imperialism, along with the major powers in North America and Europe, has supported for the last year and a half.

The disciplinary action at the University of Melbourne is in response to a protest on October 9, 2024, where several students demonstrated at academic Steven Prawer's office.

Prawer is Jewish and a professor in the School of Physics working in materials science and quantum technologies. He is also the academic lead of the University of Melbourne's joint PhD program with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem participates in research and training programs for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Part of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Mount Scopus campus is reportedly built on illegally occupied Palestinian territory.

During the October 9 protest, students requested to speak with Prawer to call for an end to the collaboration with the Hebrew University. They also put up pro-Palestinian stickers, a Palestinian flag and recited pro-Palestinian chants. Among the stickers were those that read "antisemitism is a crime, anti-Zionism is a duty," "Steven Prawer, your work will break your soul before it breaks the resistance" and "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."

According to the University of Melbourne Student Union-run *Farrago* magazine, the sit-in at Prawer's office lasted 90 minutes before the police issued a move-on notice with which the students complied.

The *Farrago* article states that one student issued with expulsion attended the protest for no more than 10 minutes

and did not engage in any sanctionable actions. The university's disciplinary committee nonetheless found that the student's attendance alone constituted "harassment and intimidation."

Two students facing suspension will have their enrolment deferred until March 2026.

University of Melbourne Vice Chancellor Emma Johnston on Monday upheld the formal recommendations of the disciplinary committee for the expulsions and suspensions. The students are appealing the decisions.

Prawer told the pro-Zionist *Australian Jewish News* that the protesters were "short-sighted, counterproductive, outrageous, uneducated [and] ignorant," and that he was targeted because he is Jewish.

This is in line with a campaign being waged by the Labor government and corporate media to falsely equate opposition to Israel's genocide and to the ultra-nationalist political ideology of Zionism with the Jewish faith. This has been the main tool used by governments around the world to silence and intimidate opponents of the genocide.

Prawer's involvement in pro-Israeli projects reveals that the protest at his office has nothing to do with the fact that he wears a kippah.

In 2017, Prawer received an Australian Research Council grant of more than \$200,000 to collaborate with the Israeli Center of Advanced Diamond Technologies on diamond membranes for technologies such as infra-red frequency combs for chemical sensing. The research was reported to have "security" applications.

He has previously been a committee member for the Australian Technion Society set up to internationally promote the development projects of Technion (Israel Institute of Technology)—a university with close ties to the IDF.

Prawer has been an outspoken supporter of Israel. He spoke at a pro-Israeli rally organised by the Australasian Union of Jewish Students (AUJS) in May 2024, calling for the defence of Israel's onslaught.

At the rally, Prawer declared: "[We] will not allow the

campus to become a virtual no-go zone for Jewish academics and students... They should show the same sensitivity as they do for indigenous and other minority groups.”

Prawer was also a witness in the Australian government’s Commission of Inquiry into Antisemitism at Australian Universities Bill set up in 2024 to create the conditions where anti-Zionist protests and speech are outlawed on the campuses. During the inquiry, Prawer stated that universities had to take antisemitism on the campuses “seriously and combat it in the same way we have combated other serious cultural issues such as sexual harassment or child abuse in our community.”

The parliamentary committee, launched by the Albanese Labor government, calls for sweeping new laws to prohibit anti-genocide speech on the campuses.

Already, universities around the country are actively silencing pro-Palestinian protesters.

Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah, a well-known pro-Palestinian academic at Sydney’s Macquarie University, has been targeted by Zionist groups and the Labor government. She was stripped of her research funding earlier this year.

At the University of Melbourne, more than 20 students were threatened with disciplinary action last year for their involvement in the occupation of a building on campus during an anti-genocide protest. The students’ case revealed that the university tracks students’ movements through the university Wi-Fi network.

At the Australian National University in the country’s capital Canberra, two students were expelled in June for their involvement in a pro-Palestinian encampment on the campus. The expulsions were reversed in September after widespread opposition to the attack on the democratic rights of students.

The University of Sydney called on SafeWork New South Wales to initiate an investigation into lack of action to “protect” Jewish staff and students. SafeWork this week found insufficient grounds for such an investigation. There are hysterical calls in the corporate media and Zionist groups for the decision to be reversed.

The attack on pro-Palestinian protests is not limited to the universities but part of a broader assault on the basic democratic rights of the whole working class and principled youth and professionals being spearheaded by the Labor party.

The Victorian state Labor government has charged five protesters for publicly denouncing Israeli war crimes and Zionism. Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has ferociously denounced pro-Palestinian protesters and in February the federal government passed sweeping “hate speech laws” under the guise of tackling supposed

antisemitism.

That these attacks on free speech are being carried out by Labor highlights that this is a pro-war, capitalist party of big business that cannot be appealed to through protest to alter its ongoing support for Israel’s war crimes.

For more than 19 months, there have been protests against Gaza’s genocide involving millions around the world. But the genocide continues and is being deepened.

This is because the Gaza genocide is not some isolated policy, but part of a broader expansion of imperialist militarism around the world led by the United States. The major capitalist countries around the world are preparing for a catastrophic conflict, above all led by the US ruling elite’s bid to remain the dominant power through military means targeting Russia and China.

Ballooning military budgets and the threat of world war means an assault on the basic social and democratic rights of the working class. The ruling elites in the imperialist centres know that their program of slashing education, healthcare and welfare to fund war is deeply unpopular.

The attack on protests against the Gaza genocide is part of a wholesale assault on anti-war, anti-establishment and anti-capitalist sentiment which is growing among masses of workers and youth. This has found its sharpest form in the US where the fascist Donald Trump leads an administration which is disappearing pro-Palestinian students and attacking immigrants and political opponents.

Individual protest actions and stunts to try and change the minds of pro-Zionist figures and politicians are a bankrupt dead-end. What is required to end the genocide and imperialist war more broadly is a political fight against the Labor government itself and the development of a global anti-war movement against the system which is the cause of war: capitalism.



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