

University of Sydney announces further attacks on free speech

Jack Turner
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On June 2, amid the escalating US-Israeli genocide in Gaza, the University of Sydney (USYD), Australia's oldest university, announced new policies that represent another far-reaching assault on political dissent and basic democratic rights.

USYD, historically a centre of political opposition to war and inequality, is being further transformed into a spearhead for the Albanese Labor government's drive to stifle and crack down on anti-war opposition, not just at universities, but throughout the population.

Just before students started their pre-exam study week, Vice Chancellor Mark Scott sent an all-staff email unveiling policies to come into effect that day, impacting staff and student use of university IT resources, emails, the flying of flags, the display of promotional material and posters, and social media.

The announcement came just after the University of Melbourne, another prestigious university, expelled two students and suspended two others for their involvement in pro-Palestinian protests on campus.

At USYD, staff and students must not now post on social media anything that could risk "psychosocial" harm while engaged in "University-related conduct." The term "psychosocial" harm is particularly related to any expression of opposition to the US-Israeli Gaza genocide, on the specious claim by Zionist groups that it could distress Jewish students.

"University-related conduct" is defined so broadly it includes social media posts made while physically on campus or using university WiFi, posts made during work hours, or posts relating to the university in any way. Posts made anonymously or under a pseudonym are not exempt.

When using personal accounts, staff are forbidden to mention their academic title or qualifications, and students their enrolment status, supposedly to eliminate any connection to USYD.

No "collective statements" can be made without giving "others in that part of the University a chance to comment," while not placing any "undue influence or pressure" on them

to agree.

No one is permitted to make political announcements before, or during lectures, including the lecturer.

No political mass emails can be sent to staff and students who are not already interested in "that topic."

A breach of any of these rules can result in denial of access to university information and communications technology (ICT) resources, university disciplinary action, and civil or criminal proceedings.

In addition, posters can only be placed on permitted billboards and must include the name and contact details of the person who "authorised" it. No posters can be displayed that contain a "psychosocial hazard." The vice-chancellor has the right to prevent the flying of any flag.

"A new, more user-centric webpage" for complaints is being developed, which will be used to encourage staff and students to notify management of alleged breaches of the policies.

These policies stem from November's report by barrister Bruce Hodgkinson, commissioned by university management after an eight-week anti-genocide student encampment was shut down in June last year.

That report recommended the adoption of a "New Civility Rule" that requires anyone using a word or phrase in any of the university's facilities to identify their "context" or face misconduct proceedings.

The immediate aim of the "Civility Rule" is to outlaw expressions of opposition to the genocide in Gaza. The report quoted extensively from Rabbi Jill Jacobs who attempted to conflate anti-genocide phrases with antisemitism. Jacobs asserted that "most Jews" interpreted the widely-used anti-genocide protest chant, "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" as "a call to expel Jews from Israel."

Hodgkinson's report also called on USYD to establish "formal protocols" with the New South Wales (NSW) and Australian Federal Police, in order to further integrate police onto campus and intimidate staff and students.

This was in addition to USYD last July adopting a Campus

Access Policy, which all but prohibits protests on campus for any reason, which would include the establishment of a picket by workers.

New South Wales Council for Civil Liberties president Timothy Roberts denounced the new policies as “a continuation of an alarming trend of political repression and the loss of academic freedom at the” university. Roberts restated a warning he made previously that the university could be in breach of the University of Sydney Act, “which prohibits it from imposing disciplinary sanctions against students for expressing their political views or beliefs.”

The readiness of management to flout the legislation is a warning. While the immediate target is clearly opposition to the intensifying Gaza genocide, these measures could be used to suppress any opposition to management, the government or the political establishment.

These developments are a measure of the concern in ruling circles about the growth of anti-war and anti-capitalist sentiment among students and more broadly in the working class, as indicated by the large vote against the opposition Liberal Party in the May 3 federal election because of its association in the minds of many people with the violent agenda of the Trump administration.

The new policies could be used, for example, against the use of social media, mass emails or posters to oppose job cuts, call for an end to the genocide or demand the reallocation of funds from the military to education.

This is under conditions in which the Labor government is continuing to support the Gaza genocide materially, diplomatically and politically, as well as defending the US-backed Israeli onslaught on Iran. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese personally intervened against the anti-genocide student encampments last year at USYD and other Australian universities to falsely label the protests “antisemitic” and say they had “no place” in Australian society.

Since then also, unrest has developed over more than 3,000 job cuts being announced at public universities across the country after Labor introduced reactionary caps on enrolment by international students, making them scapegoats for the housing affordability and cost-of-living crisis.

The USYD policies were announced despite the state Labor government’s SafeWork New South Wales agency this month finding insufficient grounds to conduct an investigation into the university’s alleged lack of action to “protect” Jewish staff and students.

A SafeWork spokesman told the *Australian* that “adequate systems relating to the psychological risk of workers were in place” at USYD. The agency’s initial investigation, conducted over five months, with two on-site visits and 23 interviews with complainants, had been initiated by

complaints instigated by Zionist groups over the university’s handling of the encampment.

There are hysterical calls in the corporate media and among Zionist groups for the reversal of SafeWork’s decision not to investigate further, based on claims that the agency’s initial report found Jewish staff and students were at “psychosocial” risk.

USYD’s new policies set a precedent that can be used across the university sector and the working class more broadly as the Labor government escalates its pro-war agenda.

The Gaza genocide is not an aberration. It is part of a broader expansion of imperialist militarism throughout the Middle East and around the world led by the US ruling class, which is bidding to reassert its dominance through trade wars and military means, above all targeting Russia and China.

Similar assaults on democratic rights are intensifying internationally. In the US, universities are being defunded by the Trump administration for allegedly not suppressing dissent sufficiently. Students have faced criminal charges for peacefully protesting and have been threatened with having their degrees withheld.

The main campus trade union, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), has yet to propose any action against the new policies, apart from the USYD branch committee promising, in a June 12 email, to circulate a fact sheet “outlining for staff their rights” under the rules, and to hold a members’ meeting to discuss a response.

To fight USYD’s attack and the wider repressive agenda, including the cuts to jobs and international student numbers, workers and students need to form independent rank-and-file committees at all universities and link up with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

If you agree with this call, contact the Committee for Public Education, the educators’ rank-and-file network, to discuss how to form rank-and-file committees and obtain help to do so:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: CFPE_Australia

Facebook: facebook.com/groups/opposeaeusellout



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact