

Australia: Anti-protest policy used to block IYSSE club event at University of Newcastle

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Last month, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at the University of Newcastle (UoN), was prevented from holding an anti-war and anti-genocide speakout at the Callaghan campus by security, in collaboration with management and the University of Newcastle Students' Association (UNSA).

This was a blatant attack on the democratic right of students to conduct political activity on campus, particularly targeting widespread opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza and the Australian Labor government's complicity in it.

The speeches that IYSSE members were going to deliver would have explained a socialist perspective to stop university job cuts, the Gaza genocide, unfolding global war and attacks on democratic rights.

The justification used to block the planned speakout was that the event would constitute "harassment" of passing-by students, according to the Campus Access Policy (CAP). As such, security had to seek approval from "higher up," i.e., management, and were reportedly told that the speakout could not proceed.

For their part, UNSA, who were originally going to loan the public address system for the event, accepted security's decision without opposition. UNSA was founded in 2020 as a management-controlled replacement of the existing student unions, as a means of suppressing student opposition.

In the past, the IYSSE has held speakouts at UoN almost annually since 2010, without issue. On those occasions, consultation with security was not required and speakers were loaned by UNSA.

The CAP was implemented on October 3, 2024, as part of a wave of university policies being created or tightened against student protests beginning around May of that year. The timing of this was not

coincidence, but a response to mass opposition, particularly among students, to the Gaza genocide which began the previous year.

The genocide has provoked the largest anti-war protests since the 2003 anti-Iraq war movement, including encampments on campuses internationally. This sentiment has continued to grow, demonstrated by the recent Sydney Harbour Bridge march on August 3, the nation-wide mass rallies of August 24, and the National Student Referendum on Palestine held between August 20–28, which have collectively attracted hundreds of thousands of workers and youth.

The immediate target of the policies rolled out on a series of campuses was the student encampments, with every policy prohibiting camping.

Far more sweeping powers are granted to the university management however, to crack down on student opposition. At several universities, there are restrictions on putting any material such as banners, posters and chalk on university structures outside approved locations. Notices that do go up in places other than the approved notice boards require approval at the University of South Australia, and in the case of some universities, including the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and Australian National University (ANU), they may only be made by students and staff, as detailed in their policies released in June 2024 and February 2025, respectively.

At the University of Western Australia, a student was suspended in April this year for putting up unapproved posters, under the university by-laws revised in November 2023.

Under most policies, protests must be held outdoors, with requirements that they cannot block the passage of anyone walking by or disrupt university activities. These restrictions are deliberately vague to enable the

policies to easily be used against almost any protest. Notice must be given in advance of protests at UoN, UNSW, the University of Sydney (USYD), and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), while at the University of Queensland (UQ) any event on campus now requires approval.

Only students and staff are allowed to organise events being held on campus at UoN, USYD and UTS, and limitations have been placed at those campuses, as well as UQ, on the use of megaphones and other amplifiers. At UoN, using such a device “in close proximity to a person” is listed as harassment and banned. The IYSSE was blocked from holding its speakout because security merely suspected this might occur.

General members of the public are not allowed to attend protests at the University of Melbourne (UoM) as of May 2024, and in subsequent months similar policies were implemented at Adelaide University and the University of South Australia with the latter two institutions having put up signs around campus threatening police referral. This is a measure against students turning to and mobilising the working class, the type of struggle necessary to put an end to the genocide.

In general, if the policies are violated then the police can be called in at the university’s discretion. This highlights the collaboration between the universities and the state in suppressing public opposition.

Beyond these specific policies, several other attacks have been made on protesting students. Two were expelled from the UoM after they demonstrated in support for Palestine, while dozens more have been threatened with disciplinary proceedings and suspension. At WSU in October 2024, armed police violently arrested two students for participating in a peaceful sit-in against Israeli massacres of Palestinians.

All of these attacks on students are part of the Labor government’s broader offensive against the opposition to genocide and militarism more generally. Official statements and media coverage have endlessly slandered protestors as antisemitic. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese labelled the peaceful encampments as “divisive” displays of “hatred.”

The NSW Labor government attempted to shut down the Sydney Harbour Bridge march that took place on August 3 and has implemented anti-protest laws since the genocide began.

This is in line with events globally. The same blatantly false accusation of antisemitism has been levelled against protestors and students internationally. The increasing militarisation of universities and consequent attacks on democratic rights are a product of a global turn by imperialist governments, including Australia, toward a more open pursuit of their predatory interests.

Government policy on universities has particularly been aimed at militarisation under Labor, with the Universities Accord presented in February 2024 explicitly outlining a program of pro-business and pro-war restructuring of higher education throughout Australia. The arts and humanities are being systematically defunded because STEM students are required to develop military technology, especially the nuclear-powered submarines which the government seeks to purchase and develop under the AUKUS pact with the US and UK.

The deepening assault on democratic rights is another refutation of the fraudulent line peddled by various pseudo-left groups that endless protests appealing to the powers-that-be will halt the genocide and the associated crackdown on civil liberties.

To fight against the deepening authoritarianism and imperialist war, students must turn to the working class, the revolutionary force in society. The aim must be to build an international anti-war movement, based on a socialist perspective directed against the source of the deepening barbarism, the capitalist system itself.



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