

University of Sydney meeting discusses attacks on democratic rights

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Growing concerns among academics, students and others over politically motivated threats to academic jobs at the University of Sydney were expressed at a public meeting on campus last Wednesday. Called by the Student Representative Council, and the Defend USYD Civil Liberties group, a collective involving academics and students, the forum also revealed significant political issues that need to be clarified in order to develop the fight to defend democratic rights.

The meeting, attended by over 150 people, was called in opposition to university management's threatened disciplinary charges against Associate Professor Jake Lynch and a number of students for participating in a protest on campus. It passed a resolution calling for the university to drop proceedings against Lynch and the students. Broader issues, however, relating to the assault on democratic rights, including the ban of a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) anti-war meeting by university management, and the sacking of SBS journalist Scott McIntyre for criticising the promotion of militarism on Anzac Day, were also raised throughout the event.

Lynch and the student protesters have been subjected to a politically motivated witch-hunt by senior figures in the Coalition government and the Labor Party, the Murdoch media, and right-wing Zionist organisations, over a protest carried out at a lecture delivered by Colonel Richard Kemp, the former commander of British forces in Afghanistan and a prominent supporter of Israel's oppression of the Palestinian people.

While university management has dropped bogus charges of anti-semitism against Lynch, he still faces the prospect of being sacked under the university's punitive code of conduct for academics. Five student protesters have also been targeted for disciplinary measures.

During the course of the meeting, individuals associated with the Defend USYD Civil Liberties group circulated a petition, entitled "Defend the right to criticise Anzac Day," opposing the ban of the SEP meeting. It stated that the ban was "of a piece with a growing culture of punishing dissenters on campus, and helps to legitimise broader attacks on those who dare to speak against Australia's history of war." The petition followed a determined campaign by the SEP against university management's refusal to provide a venue for its meeting, "Anzac Day, the glorification of militarism, and the drive to World War III," which followed a similar ban by the Labor Party-controlled Burwood Council.

Six publicly advertised speakers addressed the meeting, which was then opened up to contributions and questions from the floor.

Kyol Blakeney, president of the SRC, denounced the campaign against Lynch and the student protesters. He noted that the SRC had also publicly opposed the political censorship of the SEP's meeting, in a statement that pointed to the hypocrisy of Vice Chancellor Michael Spence's claims to defend free speech on campus.

Fahad Ali, president of Usyd Students for Justice in Palestine, while denouncing the attacks on civil liberties, presented them as an attempt to suppress the voices of "marginalised" groups, above all the Palestinians.

Federal Greens Senator, Lee Rhiannon sought to narrow the focus of the meeting to the influence of Israeli-backed lobby groups, in order to obscure the broader assault on democratic rights, which her own party has facilitated. While referring to "McCarthy-like witch-hunts," she presented the vice-chancellor as the hapless victim of pressure from "the Israeli government

lobby.” Tellingly, she made no reference to the ban on the SEP’s meeting or the sacking of McIntyre, neither of which the Greens have opposed.

Michael Thomson, president of the University of Sydney branch of the National Tertiary Education Union, which covers academic staff, also opposed the attacks on Lynch. His remarks promoted intellectual freedom provisions in the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) established between the NTEU and the University in 2013. That agreement, which saw the union support the slashing of over 50 staff positions, is proving as worthless in the defense of academic freedom as it has been for jobs.

New South Wales Council of Civil Liberties President Stephen Blanks warned that “the university is being turned into a corporate enterprise in which dissent and protest is inconvenient for the corporate reputation of the university.” He only called, however, for the university not to accede to “external pressure.”

Nick Riemer, an academic who has also been targeted for attending the Kemp lecture, importantly placed the attack on Lynch in the context of a broader assault of democratic rights. He stated: “I wonder what they’ll tell us tomorrow, or the day after. Perhaps that it’s disrespectful to hold a political meeting? They’ve already banned a meeting on Anzac day and militarism... Or maybe they’ll tell us that we can’t be too critical of politicians at conferences, or in our tweets. Is this irresponsible hyperbole? It’s a matter of public record that these kinds of censorship are already happening at our university.”

Statements opposing the attacks on Lynch from prominent human rights lawyer Julian Burnside and journalist Wendy Bacon were also presented to the meeting.

The political issues in the meeting only came to a head, however, when Zac Hambides, a leading member of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, spoke in the discussion period.

Hambides pointed out that the witch-hunt against Lynch, along with the ban on the SEP’s meeting and the sacking of McIntyre, were intimately related to the militarist foreign policy of the Australian government and the preparations by the US and Australia for war against China. Reviewing the general silence on the attacks that had taken place, he stressed that there was

no constituency in the Australian political establishment for the defense of democratic rights, including from “the unions, the Greens, and Senator Rhiannon.”

At this point, numbers of audience members tried to prevent Hambides from concluding his remarks. Those closest to the unions, the Greens, and the pseudo-left organisations oppose any exposure of the reality that democratic rights cannot be defended outside of a political struggle against the entire official political establishment and its representatives.

Amid continued interruptions, Hambides explained that the Greens had been in a de-facto coalition government with the Gillard Labor government, which had signed on to the US “pivot to Asia” directed against China, and imposed austerity measures against the working class. He concluded by insisting that the threat of war, and the assault on democratic rights, could only be opposed on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective rooted in the working class.

Following Hambides, a number of other academics, staff and students denounced the attacks on Lynch and the protesters.

John Kaye, representative of the Greens in the NSW Legislative Council, simply repeated Rhiannon’s line that the attack on Lynch’s democratic rights would not have occurred, had it not been related to the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the activities of the Israeli lobby. His remarks were a conscious attempt to suppress any further discussion and debate on the political issues raised by Hambides.

Omar Hassan, president of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative club on campus, declared that McIntyre and the Socialist Equality Party were the “face” of attempts by the university and the media to “suppress a progressive voice in our society”. He did not explain, however, why his party, Socialist Alternative and its publication, *Red Flag*, had remained silent on the bans imposed on the SEP’s public meeting.



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