

Australia: Deakin staff defend students involved in pro-Gaza university encampments

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A campaign by the political establishment and university administrations to disperse student encampments opposing the Israeli genocide in Gaza is continuing, in line with last week's declaration by Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese that the peaceful protests were a divisive display of "hatred" and "ignorance" that did not "have a place" in society.

Threats to deploy the police against the encampments over the past two days have not yet eventuated, but such a state assault remains an imminent danger. Meanwhile, the administrations are using draconian administrative and bureaucratic processes to try and force students to disperse. There are clearly fears in ruling circles that major police operations at universities could inflame broader opposition.

The encampment at Monash University was the first in the country to be dismantled yesterday afternoon. There are conflicting reports of what occurred. While the administration claims protesters left voluntarily, one of the students, Madeline Curkovic, told the *Age* that "the university had forcibly dismantled the camp."

Members of the encampment have also stated that nine of them had previously received notices of pending discipline, which could include suspension or expulsion from the university. They say they have been falsely accused of "causing or threatening to cause harm," simply for arguing with and yelling at an individual who repeatedly sought to disrupt the encampment.

That is significant, given that Monash was the first of three encampments to be violently attacked. In the early hours of May 2, middle-aged men carrying Australian and Israeli flags menaced students and damaged property at the encampment, as university security personnel looked on. That and two similar assaults at Adelaide University and the University of Melbourne

have been blacked out by the media and have not been condemned by the Labor government, even as it falsely presents the encampments as a threat to safety.

A growing number of administrations have issued eviction notices. Yesterday, La Trobe University in Melbourne issued such a directive, joining Deakin University in Melbourne and the Australian National University in Canberra. The La Trobe statement acknowledged that the encampment had been peaceful and had not disrupted classes, but it declared: "the University has considered the risks associated with the continued encampment activity and has taken this decision in the interests of the safety, wellbeing and amenity of all campus users and visitors."

The comment underscores the bogus character of the entire campaign. While mouthing platitudes about "safety," the universities are moving to abolish the right to protest on campus and are threatening students who would defy such an attack on democratic rights with violence.

The sharpest expression has been at the University of Melbourne. Yesterday, the administration repeated an earlier threat to authorise major police action against students who have occupied the West Arts building. In a meeting with student activists, it bluntly rejected calls to break ties with US and other weapons companies that are directly implicated in the genocide.

Yesterday's warning was a repeat of a statement by one of the university's deputy vice chancellors Michael Wesley on Thursday. In a hysterical diatribe, Wesley had stated that students had "crossed a red line" and would face a "major operation" against them. He slandered demonstrators as "professional protesters" and outside agitators.

The WSWS noted yesterday that Wesley "spoke more like a national security official than a campus

administrator.” That is not so surprising. Wesley previously worked at the Office of National Assessments, since renamed the Office of National Intelligence, Australia’s leading intelligence agency. Billed as an expert on international affairs and security, Wesley is currently on the Australian Federal Police Commissioner’s Advisory Board.

The attacks by these state forces on the student protests, overseen by the Labor government, underscores the urgency of a fight to defend democratic rights. That means mobilising the social and political power of the working class. The potential has been underscored by an open letter defending the students, which has now been signed by almost 900 university students and academics across the country.

The National Tertiary Education Union, however, has not called any action to defend students. The unions more generally have rejected all demands that they hold strikes to oppose Australia’s involvement with the genocide.

This demonstrates that workers must take matters into their own hands, including through the formation of rank-and-file committees independent of the unions. That must be part of a political struggle against the Labor government, its program of war and an accompanying assault on civil liberties.

Members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality spoke to Deakin University staff at a protest on Wednesday evening opposing the demands that the encampment there be removed.

“I think it’s super powerful that the students are driving this issue,” Sara, a researcher, said. “What’s happening in Palestine is absolutely atrocious, and I am disappointed and shocked that the world has allowed the genocide to continue for as long as it has.”

“I am also shocked and disappointed to read what Deakin said to the encampment, of having to pack up and leave. I felt it was important to come, to provide support.”

Lorenzo, another Deakin researcher, said the encampments emerged “because no one else is doing anything.”

“Something must be done at some point, and the students are bringing that upon themselves, for a better future for themselves, life conditions and the world they want to live in. Students are, generally speaking, younger, and they see the world as it is not the world

they want to live in. So they want to change it for the better. They see the lack of commitment of institutions. The responsibility falls on them not because they want to, otherwise no one else will do anything.”

John, a member of the Faculty of Arts and Education on a fixed-term contract, said the genocide was “not hidden. You can’t use the excuse that it happened and we didn’t know. We see it on a daily basis.”

John also spoke out against the propaganda of the political and media establishment. “The way information is distorted, often these distortions we attribute to the behaviour of authoritarian regimes. We tend to have a rose-tinted view of what so-called democracies do.” The university worker opposed “the connections between the universities and the industrial military complex,” adding, “unfortunately, educational institutions are complicit in this globalised aspect of war.”

“There are a number of examples of violent crackdowns on student protests of various kinds of forms of civil disobedience,” John said. “I’m not surprised in terms of the reaction of governments both here and elsewhere. Again, what democratic governments state, and their deeds are often very different things.”

Elliot, a tutor in the Faculty of Arts and Education, said: “Students have led so many humanitarian causes and protests across the world. It’s great that students have set up encampments here. I have been following what has been happening in the US.

“Protests are being deemed as threatening and disruptive. But protests have been around forever and there’s nothing different to how students are protesting now. If you talk to anybody or read about the things people have said, it’s very hard to see any antisemitism in what people are actually doing and saying.”

“I think the encampment is peaceful and it’s students having their say about an important issue in our time,” Elliot added. “I can’t see any reason why it needs to be shut down. There’s no danger to other students or staff.”



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