

Australia: Sydney university academic under investigation for exposing Israeli lies

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University of Sydney sociology professor Sujatha Fernandes has been placed under investigation by management on accusations of breaching the university's policy by calling into question media reports about alleged Hamas atrocities last October 7.

The investigation was instigated following demands by Zionist groups, notably the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ). The ECAJ claims to be the peak representative body of Australian Jews, and receives substantial government funding on that basis, even as it functions as a mouthpiece of the genocidal Israeli state.

This is another witch-hunt that threatens free speech and other basic democratic rights, including academic freedom. It follows the recent full Federal Court decision to uphold the university's 2019 sacking of academic Tim Anderson, primarily for comparing Israel with the Nazi regime and criticising US war propaganda.

In fact, a university spokesperson has said the case against Fernandes is based on the same rule cited by the judges to justify Anderson's removal. That is a clause in the union-management enterprise agreement at the university which restricts academic freedom to conduct displaying "the highest ethical, professional, and legal standards."

According to the *Australian*, a Murdoch media flagship, Fernandes gave a lecture to first-year students in April in which she pointed out that "western media has suppressed coverage of the atrocities, peddling fake news (promoted hoaxes that Hamas beheaded babies and carried out mass rape, in order to shore up support for Israel), and distorting events."

Commenting on a misleading media report, Fernandes said: "The witnesses, they supposedly had said that... it never happened to them. The sources were retracted, all kinds of things to prove that this story... it was not a real story, that a lot of what was in this article, was not true. And yet they haven't retracted the article."

The lecture reportedly took Israel as a case study on "power" in which Fernandes said Israel had engaged in "ethnic cleansing, collective punishment and forced

starvation."

She is reported as stating: "Western governments have largely supported the Israeli government—sending arms to Israel, cutting funds to Palestinian aid organisations, and repressing dissent at home."

All of this is true. None of these facts can be denied. The Biden administration and other imperialist governments, including the Australian Labor government, have backed Israel and armed it with all the weapons it has used to kill more 40,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, while denouncing and shutting down anti-genocide protests.

The same goes for the Hamas atrocities claims. The *Australian* quoted heavily from ECAJ co-chief executive Alex Ryvchin, who repeated the unsubstantiated allegations that Hamas used rape and sexual torture on a mass scale. He accused Fernandes of irrationalism and inability to form evidence-based conclusions, making her "unfit to teach anyone."

Last December, the *World Socialist Web Site* exposed the allegations of mass rape on October 7, noting the lack of actual evidence of the veracity of the charges. It explained that all the supposed evidence came from the Israeli government and its military: none had any independent confirmation, and there was no testimony from either victims or eyewitnesses.

That month too, the *New York Times* published a report establishing conclusively that Israel was fully informed, in detail, of plans by Hamas to attack its border that were executed on October 7. These revelations made clear that Israeli officials, knowing full well where and how Hamas would strike, made a deliberate decision to stand down in order to facilitate the attack.

In March, Al Jazeera published an in-depth investigation into the mass rape allegations, concluding that "while isolated rapes may have taken place, there was insufficient evidence to support allegations that rape had been 'widespread and systematic.'"

The *Australian* article quoted one student who reportedly attended Fernandes's lecture, who claimed that "tolerance

for anti-Semitic ideology is institutional at the university” and there was “a rising trend of anti-Semitism at the university.”

This echoes the slanders being uttered by the Labor government and all the others that are backing and arming the Israeli war on Gaza, that anyone who opposes the atrocities committed by the Zionist regime is antisemitic.

Far from being antisemitic, the global protests are anti-genocide and anti-Zionist, with many Jewish workers and young people taking part.

Honi Soit, the student newspaper at the University of Sydney, reported that when asked about the investigation into Fernandes, a university spokesman said: “Academic staff giving lectures must exercise their intellectual freedom according to the highest ethical, professional, and legal standards.” He added that “when breaches against University policy have occurred,” the management had “acted and taken disciplinary action.”

In the Anderson case, after five years of contorted litigation, the full Federal Court overturned a previous ruling in his favour by placing the onus on him to prove that he acted to the “highest ethical, professional, and legal standards.”

Anderson’s sacking came after similar complaints of antisemitism in response to a lecture he presented on the language used by the media to distort and misrepresent the actions of Israel and the US.

The investigation of Fernandes is part of a systematic campaign of intimidation by pro-Zionist forces. Anti-genocide voices in academia, the media, the arts have been targeted, including by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in sacking journalist Antoinette Lattouf in December.

Health workers too have come under fire, including doctors threatened with deregistration. The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee has organised a campaign in their defence, winning strong support from health workers.

Mass protests defending the Palestinians have been vilified and defamed, or else blacked-out and ignored. These attacks are solely based on the fact that workers have dared to denounce Israel’s genocidal attacks on the people of Gaza.

University of Sydney National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch president Nick Riemer told *Honi Soit*: “NTEU members will not tolerate intimidation or censorship of Palestine solidarity, whether for students or staff. Zionists clearly think that the university’s internal processes are there to be weaponised for their own political purposes. Management must show that this is not the case.”

Anderson’s case demonstrates, however, that far from management standing up to the Zionists, the University of Sydney has been at the forefront of efforts to intimidate or

dismiss academics who call into question Israeli, US and Australian policies. And that the NTEU failed to organise the necessary campaign to defend Anderson, despite strong opposition from academics to his victimisation.

Another academic now being targeted by the *Australian* is Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah, from Sydney’s Macquarie University. Abdel-Fattah is the holder of a prestigious Future Fellowship funded by the Australian Research Council. Abdel-Fattah is also being investigated for breaches of the university’s code of conduct after pressure was applied to Macquarie.

Abdel-Fattah posted on X/Twitter last month: “On Zionist attempts to pressure the government to revoke my Future Fellowship and for Macquarie University to dismiss me. This is not just about me. Zionists are not just about trying to remove me from academia and destroy my academic career. The funding I received was not just for me. As a Future Fellow I am engaged in my own research as well as leadership and mentoring.”

Because the NTEU at Macquarie University had not made a statement on Abdel Fattah, the WSWS contacted branch president Nicholas Harrigan for a comment. He said: “The NTEU is deeply concerned about the Vice Chancellor’s public statements that put a huge number of conditions on academic freedom. The number of conditions provide many opportunities to discipline staff who engage in legitimate but heated public commentaries.”

All university staff and students must come to the defence of Fernandes and Abdel-Fattah. This means speaking out and preparing industrial and political action against the suppression of free speech. Experience has shown that such a struggle will not come from the NTEU.

Neither the NTEU nor any other trade union has called a single strike to block supplies to Israel or prevent the Labor government from continuing to support the Netanyahu regime’s genocide in Gaza.



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