

Australia: University of Melbourne threatens about 20 pro-Palestinian students with disciplinary action

Eric Ludlow
29 June 2024

About 20 students at the University of Melbourne (UofM), one of Australia's most prestigious universities, have this week been threatened with disciplinary action for their involvement in the student encampment on campus against the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, perpetrated by Israel which has been supported by imperialist governments including in Australia.

The move at UofM is the latest in a series of coordinated attacks by university managements, the corporate media and the political establishment in Australia against the rights to protest and freedom of expression of students on campus.

UofM management is attempting to discipline its students a month after the encampment on campus was shut down. That has a vindictive and intimidatory character, given that whatever events management claims were associated with the encampment are in the past and have no impact on campus now.

The UofM move is part of a broader crackdown. It follows the expulsion of two pro-Palestinian students by the Australian National University (ANU) in the nation's capital Canberra and the forced shutting down of the student encampment and slander of students at the University of Sydney.

According to the *Age*, other Melbourne universities have also sent misconduct notices to students involved in protests against the genocide. Monash University has reportedly issued nine, while La Trobe University and Deakin University have sent two each.

Working with the government, the university administrations are seeking to make an example of the students to dissuade broader layers from taking up a fight against the genocide and war. This was highlighted by the hysterical campaign by the Labor federal government over peaceful protests at their electorate offices over the past weeks.

A dangerous precedent is being set in the targeting of students.

Peaceful pro-Palestinian protesters are being vilified and the democratic rights of anyone who opposes genocide and war are being trampled. In other countries, like the US, Germany, and Canada, peaceful anti-genocide protests on the campuses have been met with brutal police repression and thousands of

students violently arrested.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE)—the youth and student arm of the Socialist Equality Party—calls for the immediate dropping of the misconduct charges against pro-Palestinian students at UofM and other universities. The IYSSE demands that disciplinary action already levelled against students who protested the genocide be revoked.

Already an updated petition calling for the disciplinary charges against the UofM students to be withdrawn has been signed by more than 18,000 people.

The petition states:

We, the community, condemn these threats and intimidation made by the University of Melbourne to these brave students and staff, who have been peacefully calling for disclosure and divestment of the University of Melbourne's ties to weapons manufacturers supplying Israeli Occupation Forces.

It notes that the students face potential failure of subjects and expulsion.

The university administration's decision comes about a month after the encampment at UofM was ended through a mutual agreement between management and the encampment organisers, Unimelb for Palestine (UM4P).

UM4P put out a statement on Thursday on the university's disciplinary notice. It states that the anti-genocide students were given "general misconduct" notices for their involvement in the occupation in late May, of the Arts West Building on campus.

According to UM4P, the university has included CCTV footage and location tracking of the students through their use of the university's Wi-Fi network in compiling its evidence against students. If accurate, these revelations constitute a serious breach of students' privacy by the university.

It also raises questions about the potential involvement of the state in assisting the university administration in monitoring

students' activities on campus.

Such attacks on the student protesters were threatened a month ago by Michael Wesley, UofM deputy vice-chancellor (Global, Culture and Engagement).

In a leaked video produced after the Arts West occupation began, Wesley declared: "red lines have been crossed." In the video, which circulated on social media, Wesley baselessly claimed the student protesters were "intimidating" people and had "caused considerable damage."

Wesley menacingly stated that police would regularly be patrolling the campus and "ending the protest" would be "a very substantial operation."

While the encampment has long since been wound up without police involvement, Wesley's ominous threats highlight the attitude which has carried over into the university's "substantial operation" to punish students who have purportedly crossed "red lines."

University administrations at UofM and other campuses are attacking student free speech in coordination with the highest levels of the state.

Their actions are in line with a venomous campaign against the encampments which is being spearheaded by Labor prime minister Anthony Albanese. Last month, he branded the peaceful student protests as "divisive" displays of "hatred." Albanese declared the anti-genocide protests "do not have a place" in society.

These declarations clearly apply beyond the campuses. Indeed, in a bid to prevent broader engagement by workers and youth in anti-genocide protests, the UofM administration has put up notices "prohibiting members of the public from protesting on campus."

The attacks on the democratic rights of students in Australia follows the same pro-war program as the Albanese government not only supports the mass murder in Gaza, but also the associated militarist build up in this region aimed against China.

Student encampments were set up at more than a dozen campuses. Now just a handful remain including at ANU, the University of Newcastle and the University of Tasmania.

The shutting down of the encampments has been directly arranged or acceded to by the middle-class leaderships of the protest movements on the campuses. They have either openly worked with university management to pen deals which commit the universities to nothing, or they have refused to mount a broader struggle against the attacks against students, including their own members.

At the University of Melbourne itself, the deal between UM4P and the university administration to end the encampment last month was the first of its kind in the country. In response to the encampment organisers' acceptance of the demand that the protest be shut down, the university agreed to disclose some research ties with defence companies. The caveat from management is that it will not disclose anything it deems

would go against "confidentiality" or "national security" considerations. This was touted as a "victory" by the encampment organisers.

This week the university administration revealed some ties to weapons manufacturers. It lists nine projects involving five different companies (Boeing, Lockheed Martin and General Electric from the US; Mitsubishi from Japan; Nova Systems from Australia). Three of those projects have no dollar value associated with them due to "confidentiality."

Moreover, the university states that, over multiple years, a further \$27.8 million worth of research funding is coming from the Australian Department of Defence and \$15.4 million from the US Department of Defence. Neither of these sums is itemised.

Neither does the university make any declarations that these projects with defence companies or government departments will cease or be pegged back. Indeed, that was not part of the deal. All the university was compelled to do was enumerate publicly *some* of what has been open knowledge for the past decade or more: that UofM, like all the universities in Australia, is intimately tied to the growth of militarism.

Students must draw lessons from these experiences.

The genocide in Gaza and the broader war drive of imperialism cannot be stopped by making plaintive appeals to universities any more than it can by appealing to governments.

The bankrupt line of pressuring the Labor government to end its support for the genocide has been put forward at protests for the past eight months, by the Greens and various pseudo-left groups such as Socialist Alternative and Solidarity.

This perspective has served only to subordinate workers and young people to the very government that continues to back the mass murder, while covering up the connection between the Gaza genocide and the broader eruption of militarism, including the war drive against China and the US-NATO proxy conflict with Russia that threatens nuclear catastrophe.

To fight the genocide and attacks on democratic rights, students and youth must turn to the working class, and take up the fight to mobilise its immense social and political power. Such a turn must involve a political fight against Labor, imperialist war globally and the capitalist system itself, which is responsible for the descent into barbarism.

Join the IYSSE to take up this socialist program today.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact