

Zionist-led witch hunt threatens anti-genocide dissent and free speech at Australian universities

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Australia's political and media establishment is pushing for blanket suppression of opposition by university staff and students to the Israeli genocide in Gaza, or any of the other escalating acts of terrorist violence by the US-backed Zionist regime.

An initial witch-hunting Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee hearing was conducted yesterday. Seven university vice-chancellors and other officials were questioned and accused of failing to combat alleged antisemitism on campuses by not forcibly shutting down anti-genocide student encampments earlier this year.

This offensive is falsely equating opposition to Israel's mass murders in Palestine and Lebanon, supported by all the imperialist powers, with antisemitism, despite the active involvement of many Jewish students in the protests in Australia, as in the US and worldwide.

Yesterday's hearing featured University of Sydney vice-chancellor Mark Scott deliver a grovelling public apology for supposedly not protecting Jewish students from being upset by the anti-genocide demonstrations, based on uncorroborated testimony by Zionist student leaders.

At the same time, Scott revealed that his administration had declined an offer by New South Wales (NSW) Police to send in "fully-equipped riot police" with "the possibility of clearing the camp." Scott said management had feared that this "dramatic escalation" would unleash "other forces."

That revelation points to the NSW state Labor government, no doubt acting in concert with the Albanese federal Labor government, demanding a violent police crackdown on anti-genocide encampments, as occurred across the US.

Instead, university managements eventually struck deals with student protest organisers to shut down the encampments in return for essentially meaningless promises to review university investment and research links to Israel.

As the WSWS warned in May: "Under the guise of combating 'violence' and ensuring 'safety' on campuses,

the administrations and the Labor governments are stripping away the most basic democratic rights to free speech and freedom to protest on the campuses."

The McCarthyite witch-hunting on display yesterday is set to be ramped up. The Senate committee is holding hearings into a bill calling for a Commission of Inquiry into Antisemitism at Australian Universities.

If passed, the bill would provide a legal mechanism for censoring, silencing and criminalising anti-genocide and anti-Zionist views on all university campuses, including by student clubs and visiting speakers.

It would establish a demonising national inquiry, with the powers of a royal commission to summon witnesses and order the production of documents, with prison terms of up to two years for failure to comply.

The Australian Human Rights Commission, which is already conducting a similar Albanese government-initiated inquiry into "racism" on campuses, is on board. Its submission to the committee said it would "welcome the opportunity to work collegiately with (a judicial inquiry) in addressing anti-Semitism in Australia."

Such an inquiry would follow the lead of the US Congress, where committee hearings have been staged for legislators to hound and demand the resignation of university presidents and other officials for not shutting down anti-genocide encampments quickly or violently enough.

That was despite more than 3,000 students being arrested across the US for protesting against the Gaza genocide and defending the rights of the Palestinians.

Now universities in both countries are enforcing new codes of conduct that greatly limit where, when and how students can protest.

This is part of a wider effort by governments and institutions in the US, Europe and elsewhere to outlaw opposition to the Palestinian genocide, even as Israel repeatedly conducts war crimes comparable to those carried out by the Nazis and extends its offensive to the West Bank

and Lebanon.

In Gaza, the destruction of infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, water treatment plants and sewerage treatment plants—along with universities—has created a humanitarian disaster, with disease running rife through the displaced Palestinian population. What is being carried out is the systematic state-sponsored and imperialist-backed destruction of the Palestinian people.

As in the US, what is being prepared in Australia is a witch-hunt against not only the opponents of the genocide and the actions of the Israeli state but against university officials who allow freedom of political speech on their campuses. This is setting the stage for a wider attack on basic democratic rights, particularly targeting anti-war and socialist opposition.

The proposed Commission of Inquiry would have far-reaching powers and would not be bound by rules of evidence. It could, for example, demand action by universities to ensure no lectures and tutorials include material deemed to be antisemitic.

It could also demand policies and procedures to prevent staff or students advocating boycotts or other protests against Israeli institutions, and rules to ban people from campuses or expel students.

Of deep concern to opponents of the bill, including many Jewish groups, is its inclusion of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism.

The Jewish Council of Australia submission to the Senate committee objected that the IHRA definition reinforced “the unsound conflation of antisemitism with criticism of Israel.” It said the IHRA examples “have been weaponised globally to chill criticism of Israel and Zionism, with a particular impact on silencing Palestinian voices” and “its widespread adoption in the university setting would undermine academic freedom of inquiry and speech.”

As the WSWS wrote in 2020: “The IHRA definition is a mechanism for outlawing political criticism of the Israeli state, its criminal oppression of the Palestinians and the right-wing religious nationalism on which it is founded.”

The IHRA examples of antisemitic behaviour include, “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavour” and “Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.”

This is not the first attempt to force universities to adopt the IHRA definition. In November 2022, the Parliamentary Friends on the IRHA sent a letter to all the country’s vice chancellors calling on them to adopt it. Of the country’s 39 universities, those adopting the definition include Macquarie, Monash, Melbourne, Sunshine Coast and Wollongong.

This is part of a multifaceted attack on the opponents of the Gaza genocide. In July the Albanese government appointed Jillian Segal, a business executive and lawyer who has explicitly defended the fascistic crimes of the Zionist regime, as “Special Envoy to combat anti-Semitism.” As the WSWS reported in July: “The announcement was condemned by anti-Zionist Jewish groups, who noted that the government was weaponising false claims of antisemitism to justify the genocide.”

The false claim that opposition to Zionism is equivalent to antisemitism has already been used to discipline academic staff in Australia. Earlier this year the Federal Court upheld the University of Sydney’s sacking of lecturer Tim Anderson for comparing Israel with the Nazi regime and criticising US war propaganda. That university then placed sociology professor Sujatha Fernandes under investigation on accusations of breaching the university’s policy by calling into question media reports about alleged Hamas atrocities last October 7.

The genocide in Gaza is not an isolated development. It is part of an emerging World War III, with the US and its imperialist allies trying to offset their economic decline through military violence. This includes the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the escalating US economic and military confrontation with China, both of which raise the danger of a nuclear conflict.

Around the world, governments are turning to authoritarian forms of rule in order to impose the agenda of war and the accompanying assault on democratic rights and social conditions. The genocide and drive to war cannot be ended through appeals to the same capitalist governments that are backing the slaughter, nor the university administrations.

Staff and students need to turn out to the working class nationally and internationally, the sole revolutionary force in capitalist society, and fight for a socialist program aimed at ending the entire system that leads to war and dictatorship.



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