

University of Sydney seeks to ban anti-genocide protests and all political dissent

Jack Turner
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In another historic assault on free speech, the University of Sydney (USYD) is moving to prohibit any form of political dissent on campus, and particularly the mass opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

USYD, historically a centre of political opposition to war and inequality, is being transformed into a spearhead for the Labor government's censorship measures aimed not just at USYD staff and students but the working class as a whole.

On November 26, the USYD Senate accepted all 15 recommendations from a report it commissioned by barrister Bruce Hodgkinson after the end of a weeks-long anti-genocide student encampment in July.

USYD's Chancellor David Thodey announced the findings of the report, stating that it "requires changes to our long-standing traditions of political activism on campus." He declared that these traditions were "out of step with contemporary work health and safety standards and our obligations to maintain psychosocial safety on campus."

In the past it has been rare for a chancellor, rather than a vice-chancellor, to become involved in the day-to-day work of a university, let alone publicly announce major policy changes.

Thodey is a representative of the Australian corporate elite. He is an ex-IBM executive, former CEO of the privatised telecommunications provider Telstra, and current chairman of accounting software company Xero and Ramsay Health Care, Australia's largest private hospital and healthcare multinational.

Hodgkinson's recommendations include a proposal for a "New Civility Rule." The rule will require that anyone using a word or phrase in "a lecture, seminar, tutorial or a meeting which takes place within any of the University's facilities" and does not "identify to the

audience the context in which it is used... should be recognised as misconduct and treated accordingly."

This crackdown on any statement that could be targeted as unacceptable includes, but is not limited to, all USYD staff and students.

The report includes extensive recommendations to sanction organisations conducting a meeting "using university facilities" that do not "comply with the University's Civility Principles." In addition, any officeholders must have completed USYD's online "Engaging with Civility" module. Failure to do so "would amount to misconduct" for the individual and result in withdrawal of funding in part or whole for the organisation.

The formulations are so broad as to include any activity by student groups and unions, including internal meetings. These measures could be used against university workers preparing strikes against cuts or opposing the Albanese Labor government's pro-market and militarist agenda.

Hodgkinson called on USYD to establish "formal protocols" with the New South Wales (NSW) and Australian Federal Police, in order to further integrate police onto campus and intimidate staff and students.

The report endorses USYD's existing ban, imposed in July, on student encampments and extends this to call for the banning of "lecture bombing" (a student giving a short speech prior to the start of a lecture) and the hanging of banners on university footbridges.

The obvious and immediate aim of the "Civility Rule" is to outlaw expressions of opposition to the genocide in Gaza. The report quotes extensively from Rabbi Jill Jacobs who attempted to falsely conflate anti-genocide phrases with antisemitism.

Jacobs asserted that "most Jews" interpreted the widely-used anti-genocide protest chant, "from the

river to the sea, Palestine will be free” as “a call to expel Jews from Israel.” Since “the impact is often more important than the intent,” Jacobs stated, such slogans should not be tolerated unless “there is an opportunity to clarify their meaning.”

NSW Council for Civil Liberties president Tim Roberts denounced the restrictions as “the end of basic forms of political expression at the university.” He stated that USYD may be in breach of section 31 of the University of Sydney Act, “which prohibits it from imposing disciplinary sanctions against students for expressing their political views or beliefs.”

Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has spearheaded the assault on anti-genocide protests including the student encampments at multiple Australian universities, including USYD, in May. Albanese slandered the protests as “antisemitic” and displays of “hatred” that “do not have a place” in society.

In June, Australia’s Full Federal Court ruled that USYD was justified in sacking academic Tim Anderson in 2019 for comparing Israel with the Nazi regime and criticising US war propaganda.

This was followed in July by USYD adopting a Campus Access Policy, which all but prohibits protests on campus for any reason, including the establishment of a picket by workers.

In November, legal firm Levitt Robinson filed a lawsuit under the federal Racial Discrimination Act against two USYD academics, John Keane and former National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) USYD branch president Nick Riemer, equating their public opposition to Zionism with antisemitism.

Similar assaults are underway internationally. In the US, universities are being transformed into fortresses, with public access to campus curtailed and protests prohibited at multiple campuses. Students have faced criminal charges for peacefully protesting and have been threatened with having their academic records placed on hold or degrees withheld. In Germany, police beat up and arrested Humboldt University students protesting the genocide in May.

The NTEU, the main union covering university workers, will do nothing to oppose the new measures. NTEU national president Alison Barnes absurdly called on “university leaders... to stand up against this sort of heavy-handed approach.”

The USYD NTEU branch committee stated in an email to members that it “expresses the most serious concerns about all these measures... and will be very active in this area in 2025,” but did not clarify what, if anything, that would involve.

These measures are part and parcel of the assault on fundamental democratic rights underway as the Albanese government backs the genocide, increases spending on preparations for war and attacks workers’ living conditions. To fight USYD’s attack and this wider agenda, workers and students need to form independent rank-and-file committees and link up with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

If you agree with this call, contact the Committee for Public Education, the educators’ rank-and-file network, to discuss how to form rank-and-file committees and obtain help to do so:

Contact the CFPE:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact