

Australia: Police break up Sydney College of the Arts occupation

By Oscar Grenfell
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Police and security guards forcefully removed students occupying the Sydney College of the Arts (SCA), the visual arts school of the University of Sydney, last Wednesday, with the support of the university administration. The occupation, which lasted for 65 days, was reportedly the longest in the University of Sydney's history.

It was initiated in response to the university's plans to close the SCA's Rozelle facility, slash up to 50 jobs and merge the SCA with the university's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the overcrowded main Camperdown/Darlington campus.

According to Let SCA Stay, a group involved in the occupation, police smashed the college's door down at 6:45 a.m., without giving any warning.

Fifteen police officers were accompanied by as many as 20 university security guards. They reportedly removed the occupiers with force, with one student claiming to have been dragged out by the wrist. Others said their property, including art works around the campus, was destroyed and discarded.

One of the occupiers, Che Baines, told the University of Sydney Union that after police broke down the door, they shouted that the students had "30 seconds to comply otherwise disciplinary action would be taken." Barnes said she saw one female student, "escorted out of the building ... with about five [officers] on her, holding her arms and pushing her from behind."

Having removed the occupiers, security and police proceeded to tear down all banners and posters throughout the campus opposing the restructure.

On October 7, the police and university security had already removed students camping overnight at the Camperdown/Darlington campus to protest the attack on the SCA. The following week, campus security destroyed an approved art exhibition opposing the

closure, ripping down poster art.

University management responded to anger over the last week's police action by issuing a statement defending the eviction and accusing the occupation of creating distress for SCA students and staff. It threatened disciplinary action against those involved and expulsion for anyone who attempted to reestablish the occupation.

"The university has the right to exclude anyone who has been party to the occupation from its campuses," it said. "It has chosen not to do so at this stage, but students and their representative groups have been warned that any further attempt to occupy could see the university exercise this right."

The university has a documented history of closely collaborating with police, including from the riot squad, against students and staff opposing cuts to jobs, conditions and courses.

In April, riot police, operating with the support of university authorities, violently removed 30 student protesters from the main library. The students were opposing an event featuring Simon Birmingham, the federal Liberal-National government's education minister, who has played a key role in deepening the assault on higher education carried out by Labor and Coalition governments. As many as 20 riot police participated in the attack, which included forcefully dragging students from the library.

In 2013, Tom Raue, vice-president of the University of Sydney Union, leaked a secret report prepared for the union. It indicated that university management had coordinated an aggressive response to limited student and staff strikes called in opposition to a restructure, which included plans for the destruction of hundreds of jobs. In the course of clashes between protesters and the police, 11 students were arrested, one suffered

internal bleeding, another a broken leg and one was placed in a dangerous choke-hold.

The frequent use of police against any opposition or protest on campus is bound up with the transformation of universities into for-profit entities increasingly reliant on corporate partnerships and private endowments for their funds, and with close links to the state.

In April, for instance, the University of Sydney received its largest ever one-off donation, of \$35 million from substantial property owners. The university is also home to the United States Studies Centre, which has high-level ties to the political establishment, and plays a key role in promoting the US-Australia military alliance and formulating Australia's militarist foreign policies.

The ability of the university and police to shut down the occupation is a product of the bankrupt politics of the pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alliance (SA) and Solidarity, that animated the protest. The political perspective of these groups has been to pressure the university administration with the assistance of Labor and the Greens—capitalist parties that have slashed university funding and been instrumental in pushing through the pro-market restructuring of tertiary education.

In the lead up to the removal of the occupation, these organisations hailed a series of tactical manoeuvres by the university as “victories.” On October 15, for instance, SA's *Green Left Weekly* declared: “The campaign to save Sydney University's Sydney College of the Arts is celebrating another victory in its long battle with management.”

It touted vague comments by university management, indicating it would hold off on the closure of the SCA until later in 2017, even though the university had made clear there would be no new student intake next year. SA likewise declared that the resignation of the college's dean, Colin Rhodes, last September was a major step forward. As the attack on the occupiers demonstrates, however, that was merely a cosmetic public relations ploy.

The pseudo-lefts, and the leadership of groups such as Let SCA Stay, promoted illusions in Labor and the Greens, providing them with a platform at protests to fraudulently posture as friends of the arts and opponents of the assault on higher education. At the

same time, the occupation was kept isolated from other students at Sydney University and other institutions that are facing similar attacks, not to speak of the working class, which is confronting a wholesale assault on jobs, wages and living standards.

These organisations remained largely silent on the fact that the attack on the SCA is part of a wholesale restructure at the University of Sydney, which will reduce 122 undergraduate degrees to just 20 and slash 16 faculties and schools to just 9. Similar projects, at the University of Melbourne and elsewhere, have resulted in the destruction of hundreds of jobs.

The pseudo-lefts also promoted the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which postured as defenders of SCA but has engaged in backroom negotiations with the university administration over the restructure and the future of SCA. The NTEU at the University of Sydney and other universities has played the central role in enforcing repeated rounds of job cuts, sackings, and regressive Enterprise Bargaining Agreements, which have played a central role in the corporatisation of higher education.

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