

Australian university moves to sack academic critical of Israeli and US wars

By Oscar Grenfell
11 December 2018

The University of Sydney management last week suspended Dr Tim Anderson, a senior lecturer in the faculty of political economy, banning him from campus and moving to terminate his employment.

This is an attack on basic democratic rights. It is aimed at silencing Anderson, a well-known figure who has spoken out against Israeli attacks on the Palestinians, as well as the US-instigated civil war in Syria. More broadly, it is calculated to intimidate other academics and students opposed to escalating militarism and war.

In a Facebook post on December 4, Anderson reported he had received a letter the previous day from Stephen Garton, the university's provost and acting vice chancellor, accusing him of "offensive conduct" and suspending him immediately. The university's management has stated it wants to sack Anderson by the end of the year.

The trigger for the sanction was a graphic Anderson used in a "Human Rights in Development" course, which allegedly depicted a Nazi swastika imposed over the Israeli flag. Opponents of Israel's brutal oppression of the Palestinians have, at times, compared the actions of its government to the murderous practices of Germany's Nazi regime.

The graphic pointed to the disingenuous character of reporting on Israel's bombardment of Gaza in 2014. It quoted major media outlets and international institutions, which described Israel's bombing campaign as "precision attacks," compared with primitive Palestinian rocket firings, which were characterised as "indiscriminate."

The graphic noted that the Israeli assault resulted in 1,088 Palestinian deaths, at least 75 percent of whom were civilians, whereas Palestinian rockets killed 51 people, six percent of whom were civilians. It

cautioned students to "identify independent evidence," "be wary of moral equivalence claims carrying inbuilt assumptions" and recognise that "both the objectives and actions of the parties are important."

In his Facebook post, Anderson said he had been the subject of "petty and absurd" complaints for 18 months, which constituted "an unusually aggressive regime of political censorship, in which no decent university should be involved." He said most of the complaints related to his "criticisms of war propaganda against Syria, Iraq and Palestine."

Anderson said he would oppose the attempt to fire him, saying his suspension was in violation of the university's own intellectual freedom rules, which state that staff have a right to "express unpopular or controversial views, provided that in doing so staff must not engage in harassment, vilification or intimidation."

Significantly, by December 7, just three days after the suspension was made public, 30 prominent academics and lecturers at the university had issued a statement condemning the move against Anderson.

They described Anderson's suspension as "an unacceptable act of censorship and a body-blow to academic freedom," which, by "instilling a fear of arbitrary reprisal ... stifles the very freedom of debate and of thought that education requires."

It warned that "academic freedom is meaningless if it is suspended when its exercise is deemed offensive," and noted, "there can be no better-known or more banal occurrence in intellectual history than the suppression of ideas on the grounds of their offensiveness to powerful interests."

Signatories included Dr David Brophy, one of the few Australian academics to have publicly opposed a McCarthyite witch-hunt against "Chinese influence"

being stoked by the political and media establishment; Associate Professor Jake Lynch, who has previously been targeted by Zionist organisations and university authorities for his defence of the Palestinians; Emeritus Professor Frank Stilwell, formerly a key figure in the university's political economy department; and Dr Bruce Gardiner, an English teacher whose forced redundancy was withdrawn by the university authorities in 2011 after a widespread public outcry.

The statement noted that its signatories did not necessarily subscribe to all of Anderson's views, or the comparison of Israel with Nazi Germany, but insisted that "the drawing of historical comparisons between the actions of states is essential to intellectual and educational work, and must not be subject to a priori constraints."

The targeting of Anderson is a highly political decision. He has been denounced repeatedly by the Zionist lobby, which has close ties to the Labor Party and the Liberal-National Coalition, for his condemnations of Israeli attacks on the Palestinians. At universities across Australia, criticisms of Israel have been virtually outlawed, as part of a broader attempt to suppress widespread anti-war sentiment.

The federal Coalition government has also attacked Anderson. In April last year, Education Minister Simon Birmingham called for an investigation into Anderson for comments he made questioning US claims that the Syrian government was responsible for a sarin gas attack in the town of Khan Sheikhoun.

The incident had been seized upon as the pretext for the Trump administration to launch a bombing campaign against Syrian government forces, threatening a wider conflict involving Russia. Anderson had noted there was no evidence of a sarin attack, and that US-backed Islamist rebels had a far greater motive for carrying out such an action, because they were suffering major military setbacks.

Birmingham's intervention followed hysterical articles in the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph*, describing Anderson as a "sarin gasbag," and calling for him to be drummed out of the university. The clear message was that academics who oppose Australian-backed US-led wars and military interventions should be demonised, suppressed and driven from university campuses.

The atmosphere of intimidation is inseparable from

Australia's integration into the US-led military machine and its preparations for war, including with China. Since 2011, successive governments, Labor and Coalition alike, have committed Australia to taking part in a potentially catastrophic US conflict with Beijing. They have expanded US basing arrangements and the integration of the Australian military into the US war machine.

In June, the Coalition government and Labor passed "foreign interference" laws, which are aimed at criminalising anti-war activities and organisations, in the most sweeping attack on democratic rights since World War II. Government spokesmen and "analysts" at prominent US-aligned think-tanks have called repeatedly for a campaign against alleged "foreign interference" by Chinese scholars and others at universities.

Australian campuses are already heavily integrated into war preparations, with defence research facilities and pro-war think-tanks operating at most universities.

In 2006, the United States Studies Centre was established at the University of Sydney, with US and Australian government funding. Its explicit aim is to overcome mass opposition among workers and young people to Australian involvement in US-led wars. Anderson is one of the few academics to have publicly opposed it.

The WSWS has fundamental differences with Dr Anderson, who falsely argues that the bourgeois-nationalist regime in Syria and the oligarchic government in Russia constitute a bulwark against US imperialism.

The University of Sydney's attack on Anderson, however, is a dangerous escalation of a broader assault on democratic rights that must be opposed. Students, academics and workers must demand that Anderson's suspension be lifted immediately and the threats of termination withdrawn, as part of a fight against a turn to authoritarian and police-state methods of rule by the entire political establishment.

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