

Zionists try to prevent Hanan Ashrawi receiving the Sydney Peace Prize

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The unanimous decision by the Sydney Peace Foundation, functioning under the auspices of the University of Sydney, to present the 2003 Sydney Peace Prize to Palestinian leader Hanan Ashrawi, has resulted in an avalanche of intimidation, coercion and bullying by Zionists and other right-wing layers in Australia intent on forcing a retraction. Behind their scurrilous campaign is an attempt to equate any criticism of the criminal policies of the Sharon regime with a defence of terrorism.

Begun in 1998, the Sydney Peace Prize is the only international award of its kind presented in Australia and provides \$50,000 in prize money to the winner.

All previous beneficiaries, including Desmond Tutu, former UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson, former Australian Governor-General Sir William Deane and East Timorese leader Xanana Gusmao, have delivered their Sydney Peace Prize lecture in Sydney University's Great Hall. This time, however, in a blatant accommodation to right-wing pressure, the University's Chancellor, NSW Supreme Court Justice Kim Santow, has carried out an unprecedented act of political censorship, refusing to make the Great Hall available.

Sydney's Lord Mayor Lucy Turnbull has publicly announced she will boycott Ashrawi's lecture tonight, as well as the award ceremony being hosted by NSW Premier Bob Carr at state parliament tomorrow.

Turnbull took it upon herself to unilaterally declare that neither she nor any other councillor would attend the presentation in an official capacity. She justified her position by claiming that Ashrawi did not deserve the prize because she had not condemned "Palestinian violence" vigorously enough.

Nick Farr-Jones, a City of Sydney councillor and former captain of the Australian Rugby Union team, told the media that Turnbull did not brief councillors or correspond with them prior to announcing her decision. He insisted he would attend either in an official or personal capacity.

Since August, when it was announced that Ashrawi had won this year's prize—an announcement that was delayed for some months—various Zionist leaders have embarked on a campaign to force the Sydney Peace Foundation to rescind its decision. According to Professor Stuart Rees, the foundation's director, his office has been exposed to "relentless pressure". He hinted at threats made to the effect that sponsors of the award "might

be affected if they pursue their association with this peace prize".

Carr admits to being pressured by sections of Sydney's Jewish and Zionist leadership. Australia-Israel and Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC) executive director Dr Colin Rubenstein declared his organisation would lobby the premier regarding his presentation of the award and the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies requested a meeting with Carr over the issue.

From Israel, Bar Ilan University's Associate Professor of Political Studies Gerald Steinberg has launched a petition opposing the decision as one honouring "war, murder and hatred". The Australian Academic Friends of Israel put out a similar petition, while the State Zionist and Jewish Community Councils of Victoria have supported their NSW counterparts in trying to silence Ashrawi and depict her as a terrorist.

Prime Minister Howard and Foreign Affairs Minister Downer have weighed into the fray, aligning themselves with the insidious campaign against Ashrawi by proposing their own Peace Prize nomination—former Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, Washington's hand-picked stooge installed to sideline the elected president of the Palestinian Authority, PLO chairman, Yassar Arafat.

Hanan Ashrawi was born in 1946, two years before the founding of the state of Israel, and grew up in the West Bank town of Ramallah, just outside Jerusalem. When Israel's Six-Day War broke out in 1967, Ashrawi, 22 years old, was a student of English Literature at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon. By the end of the war, Israel had seized the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem and West Bank, including Ashrawi's home town.

The Israeli government refused to allow "absentees" to return, forcing Ashrawi to travel and study overseas for the next six years. She gained her PhD in America and in 1973 was allowed to return to Israel.

Ashrawi has served as the Official Spokesperson of the Palestinian Delegation to the Middle East Peace Process and was Minister for Higher Education and Research in the Palestinian Authority, resigning from that position in 1998. She remains a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

In September 1993, the PLO signed the Oslo Agreement with the government of Israel, agreeing to the establishment of a

separate Palestinian state in the Israeli-occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in exchange for recognition of the legitimacy of the Zionist state. Ashrawi became an open enthusiast of the “peace process,” advocating that the Palestinian people give up 78 percent of their land, in order to win autonomy over just 22 percent.

In the ensuing decade, the “two-state solution” has led the Palestinian people to disaster, not least because of the unrelenting drive of Zionist zealots, with the tacit support of the Israeli government and its backers in Washington, to expand Israel’s borders further into the occupied territories by setting up new Jewish settlements. Their aim is to finally expel the entire Palestinian population, through a policy of violence and intimidation, and push it into Jordan.

This is the source of the intifada, the uprising of Palestinian youth and workers against the Israeli regime. But Ashrawi’s crime, in the eyes of her opponents is that, despite her backing for the imperialist-sponsored Oslo Agreement, she has nevertheless refused to equate the violence of the oppressed with that of the oppressor. She has continued to speak out, with a certain degree of courage and eloquence, in defence of the right of the Palestinian people to oppose the Israeli aggressor.

In an interview in 2001, Ashrawi exposed Israel’s “grand deception,” which she described as “official spin that not only dehumanises and demonises the Palestinians, but ..is an attempt at blaming the victim and resuscitating labels that represent us as a subhuman species, and genetically violent terrorists, hence undeserving of any human treatment”. She said a “false symmetry” had been manufactured “between occupier and occupied, oppressor and oppressed... serving to eradicate the full horror of the occupation while depriving the victims of their right to resist.”

Ashrawi went on to condemn the insistence by the Bush administration on a “bilateral solution,” which only served to allow Israel “to pursue its policies of subjugating a whole nation and imposing a unilateral and unjust solution”.

That Ashrawi is facing a campaign to strip her of the Sydney Peace Prize is yet another expression of the ruthless methods employed by the Sharon regime and its international backers to suppress and silence any opposition. It also provides a revealing insight into the dirty behind-the-scenes intrigues, veiled threats and stand-over tactics carried out within business and ruling circles in Sydney, Australia’s financial capital.

According to a report by *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist Alan Ramsay on October 25, powerful economic interests have been brought to bear. Ramsay cites a “file note” of a telephone conversation between Katherine Greiner, chairwoman of the Sydney Peace Foundation until her resignation earlier this year, and Stuart Rees, director of the foundation. The note quotes Greiner telling Rees on October 9 that unless the foundation withdrew its prize to Ashrawi, “The business world will close ranks... My friend, I’m telling you what the reality is. The foundation will be destroyed. I’d hate to see its work come to

nothing over this. Our critics are saying it’s an awful choice”.

In answer to Rees’ objections that he would not be “subject to bullying and intimidation,” Greiner responds by accusing him of “not listening to logic”. She goes on to explain that one of the country’s major banks had been “highly critical” of the decision at a reception that she attended the previous night. “We could not approach them for financial help for the Schools Peace Prize. We’ll get no support from them.”

“[I]f you persist in having her here,” Greiner warned, “they will destroy you...[T]hey (Sydney Town Hall) will desert us as well...”

Professor Rees has accused Lucy Turnbull of bowing to political pressure from wealthy sections of the Jewish community who wield considerable clout, especially in Sydney’s eastern suburbs where her husband, Liberal Party federal treasurer Malcolm Turnbull, is vying for pre-selection in the federal seat of Wentworth.

“She won’t be seen in the same company as Ashrawi. She doesn’t even want to be seen in the lecture theatre,” commented Rees.

It appears, however, that the Zionist campaign has failed—for two principal reasons. The first is the position articulated by Premier Carr, to which a number of business leaders—as well as significant sections of Australia’s Jewish community—subscribe, namely, that the best interests of Israel will be served by the implementation of the Oslo Agreement that Ashrawi has championed. More broadly however, many ordinary people—several of whom have sent letters to the media—clearly believe that a voice speaking in defence of the Palestinian people should be heard.



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