

Australia: Education Department head calls for police in schools amid anti-Muslim witch-hunt

Our reporters
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In a television interview last Sunday, New South Wales (NSW) Education Department head Mark Scott underlined the purpose of the ongoing media witch-hunt of Muslims centred on unsubstantiated allegations of “Islamic extremism” in working class schools.

Laying out the aim of the campaign—to boost the powers of the police and erode democratic rights—Scott told Channel Nine’s “60 minutes” program: “Our schools need to be open and engaged with police, have the police as a presence to the school if necessary, even on a social level.” In other words, police should be given carte blanche access to schools, without even any suspicion of a crime or wrongdoing having taken place.

His remarks were featured in a segment on the removal of the principal and vice-principal of Punchbowl Boys High School, a working class school in Sydney’s south-west, at the beginning of the month. Scott explicitly confirmed that both had been removed for opposing the implementation of a state government “deradicalisation” program that compels teachers to inform on their students.

Speaking of the deposed principal, Chris Griffiths, Scott stated: “I was concerned that he was given three occasions to welcome that program into the school and he decided not to and it was on learning that that I decided I wanted a full appraisal at that school.”

The program, rolled out last year alongside an initiative of the federal Liberal-National government, includes a definition of “anti-social and extremist” behaviour that is so vague, it could cover virtually any political opinions or oppositional sentiments.

There are many unanswered questions surrounding the Education Department’s so-called “appraisal.” The term “appraisal” does not appear in any of the policies outlining the department’s role in managing schools. At the same time, the department has refused to make public

the “recommendations” of its “appraisal.”

Significantly, the “deradicalisation” program, “School Community Working Together,” is supposedly voluntary—meaning that unwillingness to implement it could presumably not be used as the official grounds for the removal of school staff.

The refusal of the department to make public the appraisal that led to Griffiths’s removal underscores that his dismissal was, above all, a political decision. Rob Stokes NSW education minister has admitted to effectively giving the go-ahead for Griffiths’s sacking, while federal education minister, Simon Birmingham immediately endorsed the removal.

In addition to threatening other principals inclined to oppose the government’s agenda of boosting police powers in schools, the ousting of Griffiths has been used to whip-up anti-Muslim hysteria. This is to cultivate a right-wing constituency and divert anger over a deepening social crisis in an anti-immigrant and racist direction.

The “60 minutes” program was a prime example. Headlined “Lessons of Hate,” its cover image featured the silhouettes of children holding up automatic weapons. The program, however, did not include any information substantiating the claims of “Islamic extremism” at Punchbowl Boys High School or anywhere else.

The hysterical tenor of the program was set by one of the interviewees, Sarkis Achmar, who declared that Australia would “face atrocities everyday” as a result of terrorism.

Achmar repeated the unsubstantiated allegations contained in the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* last week that children as young as ten were at risk of being “radicalised.” The tabloid’s report was based on the anonymous comments of a former teacher at Punchbowl Public School, whose remarks were shot through with the

anti-Muslim catch-phrases of right-wing organisations and were not corroborated by any evidence.

On the program, Achmar was billed as a youth worker. In fact, he is representative of a layer of officials and administrators of community programs, who work closely with government authorities and the police.

In 2015, for instance, the *Australian Financial Review* reported that the Bankstown Multicultural Youth Service, of which Achmar was the project manager, was a partner in the Abbott Liberal-National government's \$13 million "Countering Violent Extremism" strategy. Achmar's comments, intoning against the threats of "violent extremism," have repeatedly been featured in Murdoch-owned tabloids and other publications.

Over the past days, WSWs reporters have spoken to workers and young people about the media witch-hunt, and the issues posed by the intervention of the Education Department at Punchbowl Boys High School.

David, a 16 year-old high school student in south-western Sydney, said: "A couple of years ago, our principal came out and announced that students weren't allowed to talk about politics or religion at school. She said any students caught talking about these things should be reported and action would be taken.

"A lot of my friends disagree with what happened at Punchbowl High. They thought it was stupid that the principal was removed for not implementing a program where kids are getting suppressed for speaking their opinions. One of my friends pointed out that Australia is meant to be a democratic country, but at the schools, you're not allowed to voice your opinion anymore.

"There are a lot of Muslim kids at my school. They're like everyone else. They don't come to school saying 'I'm going to behead someone' or anything like that. They're some of my best friends at school. ISIS isn't representative of Muslims. It's a product of what the US and their allies have done in the Middle East, and it's used to divide the working class and portray Muslims as bad."

Sam, a facility manager in Punchbowl, commented: "Even if there was one 'bad egg' in Punchbowl, what about the rest of us. If you walk down the street, everyone knows each other and is friendly. They want to rip that community apart."

Sam spoke out against the bogus "war on terror." "If you turn on the TV, you'll see children being bombed in Syria and Iraq," he said. "The US might say there was one terrorist there, but the children being killed don't deserve to die."

He noted that democratic rights are also under attack in Australia. "I have a cousin who had his passport taken off him because he visited a friend in Jordan," he said. "His friend was dying and he was only gone for two days, and when he got back, the authorities stripped him of his passport."

Amer, a Middle Eastern worker in the suburb of Lakemba, commented: "I think what has happened at Punchbowl High School is all about propaganda. They have no evidence of anything. We want to get a proper investigation and people to hear the truth. The news says this and that, but they never provide proof of anything.

"It is political. They want people to think one way—that the enemy in this society is Muslim people, or maybe another nationality, and all of the problems in society come from them. Islamophobia is worldwide. Every society, every religion has problems. They have some bad people and some good people. But any time a Muslim person does something wrong, the media makes a big deal about it."

Zari, a 20 year-old electrical contractor, said that he had met the deposed vice-principal of the school. "I think it's absolutely rubbish because they are targeting the wrong people, making them lose their jobs," he said.

"I have met Mrs Dennaoui, she is a lovely lady. She does not deserve what has happened to her. Students have the right to say and believe whatever they want. We have to develop our own attitude. I am entitled to say whatever I want, not having to think twice about it."



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