

Australian rugby player Israel Folau challenges sacking over social media posts

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Australian professional rugby player Israel Folau announced on April 17 that he will challenge moves by Rugby Australia (RA) to sack him under the ruling body's code of conduct. The matter will go to a tribunal hearing on May 4, after which further litigation is possible. Meanwhile, he remains stood down from all levels of competition.

Folau was issued a breach of contract notice by RA on April 12 over a religiously-motivated social media post in which he proclaimed hell awaits "drunks, homosexuals, adulterers, liars, fornicators, thieves, atheists and idolaters." The comment sparked a storm of controversy in the corporate media in both Australia and neighbouring New Zealand, with immediate demands for Folau to be sacked for damaging the sport's image.

Folau's homophobic pronouncements are backward and reprehensible. However, the moves by RA to tear up his contract and end his career are an attack on his basic right to freedom of expression. Workers and young people should oppose the anti-democratic decision, which sets a precedent for anyone to be sacked if they express political or religious views that are deemed harmful to the "reputation" of sporting bodies and the multi-billion dollar corporations that sponsor them.

Thirty-year-old Folau, who was born in the small Pacific island nation of Tonga, is a highly talented athlete who has played in all three of Australia's major professional football codes. In 2007 he began playing in the National Rugby League and two years later became the youngest player ever to represent Queensland in the popular State of Origin series against New South Wales. He also played two seasons in the Australian Football League before switching to Rugby Union. He played his debut international match for

Australia's Wallabies against Britain in 2013.

RA's chief executive Raelene Castle alleged that Folau committed a "high-level" breach of the players' code of conduct. She claimed the player had flouted verbal and written agreements after a similar social media post last year, also condemning gay people to hell, that he would not use "disrespectful language" again. That post, coming after Folau had opposed Australia's 2017 gay marriage referendum, prompted a similar media uproar.

Castle claimed the action taken is about the "responsibilities an employee owes to their employer," not punishment for Folau's religious beliefs. The wording of the code of conduct, however, is so broad that any utterance deemed offensive by sports authorities, sponsors or politicians can trigger a case.

Players can be punished for conduct that "may have caused offence to the general public's sensibilities" and/or "reputational damage" to RA. In determining whether a player has committed a breach, RA's Code of Conduct Committee is empowered to consider "any other factor" that it "determines is relevant to the circumstances of the case."

In effect, players are banned from making any statements that might jeopardise the profitability of the sport. They are expected to perform as mindless, purely physical machines without individual opinions about the world.

Such methods will inevitably be used against the expression of more progressive views. In the US, footballer Colin Kaepernick was blacklisted by the National Football League after his 2016 protest when he knelt during the national anthem to protest social injustice, in particular the rash of police killings of African-Americans.

Multi-million dollar sponsorship deals are at stake.

Australian airline Qantas, which vocally supported same-sex marriage, threatened to pull its sponsorship of the Wallabies over Folau's comments, saying they "don't reflect the spirit of inclusion and diversity that we support."

The "values" of sports bodies and their backers are determined, not by the sentiments of the general population but by the ideological agenda and financial needs of the corporate and political elite. In 2016, RA reported income from broadcasting rights of \$A61.4 million, from a total \$127.8 million in revenue, including match-day revenue and sponsorship. Significantly, it is facing a loss in 2019 due to a slump in revenue.

Dominant sections of big business and the political establishment have embraced identity politics, based on so-called "inclusiveness" of different genders, sexual orientations and ethnicities. The aim is to provide a "progressive" fig-leaf for rapacious and profit-driven operations while offering career advancement or commercial opportunities for a minority of affluent women, gay people and ethnic minorities.

With breathtaking hypocrisy, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, a fundamentalist Christian who opposed same-sex marriage, described Folau's comments as "terribly insensitive." Opposition Labor Party leader Bill Shorten denounced them as "hateful." Both politicians commended RA for its swift actions.

In New Zealand, where Rugby Union is the national sport, the Folau controversy has stoked calls by the Labour-led government, including the Greens, to outlaw so-called "hate speech"—i.e., demands to escalate censorship measures—following the Christchurch terror attacks. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said Folau was a popular "role model," and she totally disagreed with "what he's said and the way he's using his platform."

Sydney Morning Herald columnist Peter Fitzsimons brushed aside concerns about freedom of speech, religion and due process, declaring that anyone raising such issues just didn't "get it." He counterposed such basic principles to the supposed "outrage in the rugby and wider community" caused by Folau's comments, and their purported impact on "youth suicide rates among teens troubled about their sexuality."

In fact, censorship by the state and corporations will do nothing to combat homophobia, racism and other

forms of bigotry that are deliberately promoted by capitalist politicians, the church and the media in order to divide the working class. Folau's opposition to homosexuality is no different from the reactionary anti-gay positions promulgated by a host of "respectable" organisations, including the Catholic Church, and sections of the ruling Liberal and National Party Coalition government. Former Prime Minister Tony Abbott has publicly aligned himself with a US Christian right-wing organisation, the Alliance Defending Freedom, which supports the re-criminalisation of homosexuality.

Folau's views reflect the fetid beliefs propagated by mainly evangelical churches which target Pacific Island communities across the Pacific, and in Australia and New Zealand. The religious missionaries have long been utilised by all the imperialist powers to cover for the brutal suppression and exploitation of the Pacific peoples. The churches continue to dominate the lives of most Pacific Island communities, and preach passive submission to their most oppressed and impoverished layers.

The move to sack Folau is part of an attack on basic democratic rights across-the-board in Australia and around the world. It is one more sign that elementary rights—such as free speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, the principle of innocent until proven guilty—are being shredded as the ruling elites prepare for class war against a resurgent working class.



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