

Australian artists denounce Labor's support for Israeli assault on Gaza

Richard Phillips
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Like their counterparts around the world, hundreds of Australian artists, musicians, writers and cultural workers across all disciplines have been speaking out against Israel's war crimes in Gaza and the Labor government's unwavering support for the Zionist regime.

On Wednesday night, popular Australian-Ghanian rapper and musician Genesis Owusu called for support for Palestinians and a Gaza ceasefire at this year's live broadcast of the ARIA music industry awards.

Owusu won the ARIA 2023 award for best album for his record *Struggler*, as well as prizes for best hip/hop release and best independent music release. It was the second time since 2021 that he has won ARIA awards in these categories. The *Struggler* album, Owusu says, was inspired by *Metamorphosis*, Franz Kafka's 1915 novella.

In his short acceptance speech, Owusu said his album was "about humanity and our stubborn perseverance to wake up every day and make it through an oppressive existence. It's an album about the strength of community.

"There are atrocious, atrocious things happening in the world right now that I think, as a community, we should be putting our minds, hearts and bodies behind to stop it at any junction that we can," he said. "Ceasefire now, ceasefire now, ceasefire now. Free Palestine!"

Owusu's brief but powerful speech is just the latest in a rising tide of statements by creative workers in Australia.

Late last month over 1,000 creative workers from every field—visual artists, photographers, writers, journalists, actors, filmmakers, musicians—signed an open letter to Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and

Tony Burke, the federal arts minister.

Organised by Artists Against Apartheid and titled "Stop the genocide in Gaza," the letter forcefully denounced the Labor government for voting down an October 16 resolution in the federal parliament "condemning war crimes committed by Israel in its ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people."

Among those signing the open letter were Tara June Winch, Jennifer Down, Melissa Lucashenko and Michelle de Kretser, all winners of the Miles Franklin award, Australia's most prestigious literary prize; artist Abdul Abdullah, photographer Hoda Ashfar, currently exhibiting at the Art Gallery of NSW; actors Meyne Wyatt and Osamah Sami; and many other acclaimed figures in their fields of work.

The letter called for "an immediate ceasefire, immediate access to Gaza for humanitarian aid, an investigation into Israel's egregious attacks and war crimes on Palestinians in Gaza, and an end to Israel's illegal occupation and apartheid regime."

It declared: "The state of Israel was created on stolen land 75 years ago. In the years since its 'creation' it has repeatedly subjected Palestinian citizens to systematic theft of land, ongoing displacement and dispossession, ethnic cleansing, the desecration of holy sites, settler violence and excessive use of force, war crimes in breach of the Geneva Conventions, and legal discrimination. It does so because western governments embolden it with their unconditional support; with their 'no' votes. As people who are writing this on stolen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lands, we should understand our responsibilities to Indigenous communities better than anyone..."

"As artists and cultural producers, our work has the power to shape public opinion. Today, as the media wages a war against truth and strips this colonial

project of its historical context, we have a unique responsibility to use our voice and artistic practices to say NO MORE! Now is the time to protest apartheid and amplify the just cause of the Palestinian people and their resistance against 75 years of occupation.

“We do not create our art merely for entertainment or for profit. We create because it is a human imperative in the same way that speaking out against war crimes is a moral imperative.”

Two weeks later, on November 11, members of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) issued a letter condemning the Labor government and its refusal on October 28 to support a United Nations General Assembly resolution proposing a ceasefire.

The letter has been signed by over 500 members of the union, which covers journalists, artists, entertainment and media workers. It called on Albanese and Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong to “unequivocally demand that the Israeli government withdraw its military from the Gaza Strip, stop the bombing of Gaza and immediately end the blockade that has cut off water, electricity and medicine to Gaza.”

It continued, “We stand with Palestinians and Jews critical of Israel against all forms of racism, discrimination and settler-colonial violence... [and] stand in solidarity with calls to end the system of apartheid, ethnic cleansing and settler-colonial control that Israel has perpetrated in Palestine for more than 75 years.

The letter supported calls by Palestinian unions, including the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, for trade union action across the world to “End all complicity and stop arming Israel.” It also called on journalists and editors to “consciously and deliberately make space for Palestinian perspectives, prioritising the voices of those most affected by the violence.”

Significantly, the letter also referred to “the silencing and intimidation that our members experience when expressing support for or reporting on Palestine.” It called on the union to “support members standing up for the MEAA Journalist Code of Ethics in their workplaces on this issue.

The letter did not provide any details about the intimidation of journalists, editors, or cartoonists. It was published, however, two days after the Australian

Broadcasting Corporation management had to call a mass meeting of 200 of its journalists angered over the state-funded network’s biased reportage of Israel’s attacks on Gaza.

MEAA members’ calls for action have fallen on deaf ears with the union bureaucracy not organising any meetings, protests or industrial action involving its 15,000-strong membership.

In fact, the MEAA did not even issue a statement about the genocide in Gaza until November 6, four weeks after Israel’s assault began. The union leadership’s statement “grieve[d] the unfathomable loss of life occurring amidst this crisis” and issued a perfunctory call for a ceasefire, while condemning “all acts of violence in the region.”

Australian artists and cultural workers, and their peak bodies, which have publicly aligned themselves with the Palestinians have done so in the face of financial threats by pro-Israeli lobbyists and propagandists.

A day after the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA), Australia’s peak body for visual arts, published the “Stop the genocide in Gaza” letter, it received an email from the law firm, Arnold Bloch Liebler. The firm is headed by Mark Liebler, the national chairman of the Australia Israel and Jewish Affairs Council and provides free legal work for NAVA and other arts bodies. The email claimed the open letter was biased and “laced with misinformation” and provided “contextual justification” for Hamas. Unless NAVA removed the open letter from its website, the law firm said it would no longer do pro bono work for the association. NAVA defied these threats and refused to remove the letter.



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