

Australian journalists take a stand against official media's backing of Israeli war crimes

Oscar Grenfell
26 November 2023

In a significant rebellion against the pro-Israeli bias of all of Australia's major news outlets, almost 300 journalists have signed a public letter demanding a shift in the coverage, including the right to label the war crimes and genocide against the people of Gaza as what they are.

Reporters from Nine Entertainment's *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Age* newspapers have signed, as have journalists at the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the *Guardian* and the *Saturday Paper*.

While the official coverage of Israel's bombardment has been appalling across the board, the ABC has played a particularly pivotal role in legitimising Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) talking points, cynically deploying a reputation for more independent and objective reportage to legitimise the unfolding genocide.

The journalists' letter begins bluntly. "Israel's devastating bombing campaign and media blockade in Gaza threatens newsgathering and press freedom in an unprecedented fashion. Newsrooms around the world have a duty to cover these events with integrity, transparency and rigour."

It cites the massive death toll in Gaza, including more than 6,000 children killed, as well as "at least 53 journalists" who have lost their lives over the past seven weeks. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, that makes the onslaught against Gaza the deadliest conflict for journalists since it began tracking the killings of reporters in 1992.

The letter declares: "We join hundreds of our colleagues in the US, Reporters Without Borders, the International Federation of Journalists and others in calling for an end to attacks on journalists and journalism itself." It also calls for "an end to violence

against civilians in Gaza, the West Bank, Israel and Lebanon" and for "the perpetrators of crimes against journalists and civilians [to] be held to account."

Its demands include a call for "Australian newsroom leaders to be as clear-eyed in their coverage of atrocities committed by Israel as they are of those committed by Hamas." As is the case internationally, the Australian media outlets invariably refer to Israelis who were "murdered by Hamas," and to Palestinian civilians who were simply "killed," often without the perpetrator of that killing even being clarified.

The journalists outline concrete areas of change. First, they call for media outlets to "adhere to truth over 'both-sidesism'". Both-sidesism is not balanced or impartial reporting; it acts as a constraint on truth by shrouding the enormous scale of the human suffering currently being perpetrated by Israeli forces."

That is an essential point. In a conflict between oppressors and oppressed, a faux neutrality always means siding with the oppressors. The implications of "both-sidesism" are clear, if one considers some of the worst crimes of the 20th century. Would it have been objective reportage to "both-sides" the Third Reich's war of extermination against the Soviet Union, or its genocide of European Jewry?

The letter calls for newsrooms to "centre the human tragedy" of what is unfolding, including by highlighting the massive Gazan death toll. It insists on the need for a "skepticism" of Israeli government and military claims, and notes pointedly that both have a record of spreading misinformation.

It states that journalists must "give adequate coverage to credible allegations of war crimes, genocide, ethnic cleansing and apartheid, and don't avoid using the term 'Palestine' where appropriate." That is a direct rebuke to ABC management.

When its pro-Israeli coverage comes under attack, ABC executives insist that they cannot use terms such as “war crimes” or “genocide,” as this would not be impartial. Such descriptors, they say, can be applied only after they are confirmed by international investigation and prosecutions, i.e., long after the genocide has been completed, if ever.

The journalists called for greater and more objective coverage of the “anti-war movement,” which has seen massive pro-Palestinian protests in Australia and worldwide over the past seven weeks. These have been downplayed, buried or simply not reported by the mainstream media.

The journalists also sharply insist on transparency of conflicts of interest, including “all-expenses paid trips to Israel” being disclosed by journalists. Many of the reporters most aggressive in their legitimisation of the Israeli government’s actions have been on such trips.

Perhaps most significantly, the journalists state that outlets must “provide historical context when referencing the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel. The conflict did not start on October 7 and it is the media’s responsibility to ensure audiences are fully informed.”

That context, they write, includes the mass displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in the establishment of Israel in 1948, the illegal occupation of Palestinian territories since the 1967 war and the mass imprisonment of Palestinians, including children, in Israeli jails where they are subjected to torture and abuse. The essence of the official coverage of the past seven weeks has been to suppress, deny and obscure this context, outside of which nothing can be understood.

As if to prove the point made by the journalists, executives at Nine Media immediately cracked down on its reporters who had signed the letter. *Sydney Morning Herald* editor Bevan Shields, *Age* editor Patrick Elliget, national editor David King and executive editor Tory Maguire issued a directive, barring signatories from reporting on Israel and Palestine.

In issuing the ban, they stood by all prior coverage, and insisted that there would be no deviation from the line that has been set, i.e., a slavish promotion of Israel as it commits mass murder.

The Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph* reported: “Senior editors at Nine newspapers are said to be

‘abhorred’” by the letter.

The other significant response was from the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), the union covering media staff. It hastened to assure the news corporations that it had not organised or issued the letter.

That response sums up the role, not just of the MEAA, but of all the unions. They have actively resisted calls from workers to take action against the genocide, instead shielding the Labor government and its full support of the bombardment.

The MEAA issued a statement condemning Nine’s censorship of reporters, but notably that statement was far weaker than the journalists’ letter itself. It was based on the very same “both-sidesism” condemned by the journalists, and the vague and mealy-mouthed calls for “peace” that have typified all statements that have been issued by the union leaderships.

That underscores the necessity for workers, including in the media industry, to begin organising independently, as the journalists have done, in opposition to the political and media establishment’s full support for the Israeli war crimes.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact