

Parents at Barclay Primary School in London, UK protest victimisation of pupils over pro-Palestinian sentiment

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Parents and pupils are protesting a crackdown at Barclay Primary School in Leyton, east London targeting protests and expressions of sympathy with the Palestinians of Gaza.

On November 15, during a Children in Need “mufti” day, when pupils don’t wear school uniform but everyday clothes in support of charity, a number of children showed their support for the besieged Palestinians with flags, badges and stickers.

Barclay Primary School, part of the Lion Academy Trust, is attended mainly by Muslim children who make up about 70 to 80 percent of the pupils aged between five and eleven.

Following this act of solidarity, at a time when protests by schoolchildren, including school strikes were taking place nationally against Israel’s genocide in Gaza, management responded with denunciations and threats. These included warning that such activity could be reported under the government’s anti-democratic Prevent strategy—enforced in schools and throughout the public sector under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015, and used to demonise Muslims in particular.

The parents of eight of the children who wore Palestinian colours received a letter from the school dated November 17 stating, “It has come to my attention that as part of Children in Need day that your child came to school dressed in either Palestinian colours, or wearing badges and stickers.” It added “this overt demonstration of political beliefs” could be offensive to “some members of the school community”.

The letter warned, “Inappropriate comments made at school or demonstrated at school including: extremist or divisive comments can and will lead to formal meetings with the school, referrals to the PREVENT Team or the Hate Crime Team in Waltham Forest.” It encouraged parents who “are upset with external social media communication, then as an external member of the school you are well within your right to escalate this to the Hate Crime Team.”

According to a teacher speaking at a later date, so heavy was the clampdown that “On Children in Need day, another

boy wearing a Moroccan football top with red and green colours was also removed from class, as the colours were deemed to bear a resemblance to the Palestinian flag.”

One of the children involved was eight-year-old Yahya, who has lost friends his own age in Gaza. He wore a small Palestinian flag sticker on his jacket and suffered disciplinary action by school management as a result. His father, Shahid Achhala, said of his son’s wearing the Palestinian colours, “That was him remembering his dead relatives, his dead friends who he’d speak to on FaceTime in Gaza.” Shahid told the *5 Pillars news* organisation at a protest outside the school Thursday that his son felt “criminalised” by the school.

Yahya returned to school the following Monday after Children in Need day, with a Palestinian flag sewn into his coat. This time he was isolated from his peers for four days. On November 23, Yahya was told he would not be allowed on school grounds wearing the coat. At first, he was allowed to complete his schoolwork from home, but this arrangement ended when his class teacher was told by management not to provide the boy with any more work, or to accept any work that he had completed.

The treatment of Yahya and the other children and their families sparked widespread protest. Dozens of parents and carers at the school sent a formal complaint letter in response to the school’s letter to eight families. They noted that Barclay’s claim to be apolitical was absurd, writing, “As parents and carers, we have found it particularly difficult to read your letter of 17 November comparably with your letter of 4 March 2022 in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

“Instead of wishing for a peaceful resolution in Ukraine 'and all the other conflicts in the world' as you seemingly did in March 2022, you purport to deprive children of their rights to freedom of expression, going so far as to imply that wearing red and green could justify an escalation to the Hate Crime Team.”

One of those opposing the school's clampdown was a Tik Tok user, Zaki, who has over 80,000 followers. Last weekend he posted a video saying, "Barclay Primary School is basically saying that if you support Palestine, you're going to become a terrorist - or you already are one." The video was viewed over 250,000 times and received more than 1,000 comments before it was taken down by Tik Tok this week.

The school responded with even more threats in a letter to "All parents and carers" against the Tik Tok user, noting that "Sadly, it seems that there is a tiny minority of carers/parents who have elected to work against the school. The full range of measures to get this resolved are being deployed and we will take all steps necessary to address this."

Tik Tok user Zaki was denounced by Aaron Wright, the school executive headteacher for what he described as "false and malicious allegations" being made on social media platforms. The letter warned, "We are working to address this with the police. the Department for Education. Ofsted [school inspectorate] and local safeguarding structures to tackle the disinformation being produced."

With a protest set to take place in 24 hours, another letter was issued on Wednesday this week, closing the school term two days earlier than scheduled. The Lion Academy Trust took the opportunity to slander those protesting, claiming that because of "the unwarranted escalation of direct threats against staff and the school today based on misrepresentations, falsehoods and malicious fabrications the Lion Academy Trust will be closing the Barclay Primary School to all parents and pupils for the Christmas break."

Thursday's demonstration was attended by several hundred parents and their supporters. One told *Sky News*, "The school had a massive Ukrainian flag outside and promoted the fact that they were supporting Ukraine. We had a situation today where Israel is attacking Gaza. Why is it that they are not allowing an eight-year-old child to wear the badge of his homeland, of his heritage?"

Such repression is transforming schools from educational institutions into instruments of the government's crackdown on democratic rights. The crackdown at Barclay Primary began just two days before Education Minister Gillian Keegan expressed "deep concern" that children were walking out of lessons to join protests backing a ceasefire in Gaza. Keegan said schools should treat absences to attend protests "with the utmost seriousness".

Shahid Achhala pointed out at the Thursday protest that the treatment of his child "has made us really angry, especially in the face of the genocide that is going on in Gaza. We've lost family members. Just before Children in Need day, my wife [who is from Gaza] posted a message on

an external WhatsApp group just asking parents to remember the dead children of Gaza on Children in Need day. We subsequently received a letter from the school saying that her comments were political and they threatened us with Prevent policy".

This is just one example of the now routine monitoring in schools of anything deemed as "extremism", which is to be reported to the state. On Thursday the human rights advocacy group Cage International issued a report, "Censoring Palestine, From Schools To Workplaces".

It noted that the "hysteria whipped up by... the mainstream media, commentators and politicians has led to a suppression of any signs of pro-Palestinian support..."

"Between October 9, 2023—December 14, 2023, we dealt with 214 cases—118 school (primary school, secondary school, college) cases, 35 workplace cases, 35 protest/miscellaneous cases, 13 university cases and 13 mosque cases."

It reported, "The 118 cases in schools account for over half of our casework, and span across nurseries, primary schools, high schools and sixth forms. The repression here was aimed at targeting students, student parents, schoolteachers and teaching assistants. 209 of the 214 cases involved Muslims."

Cage International added that "most of these cases were in schools that had systemised policing of any pro-Palestine memorabilia/ clothing by any pupil or teacher in school, as well as some schools adopting the Israeli narrative in so called 'politically impartial' PSHE [Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education] classes or assemblies or broadcasting emails and letters to parents of children in a bid to shut down Palestine solidarity and the freedom of expression of pupils."



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