

Australia: NSW Labor, Canterbury-Bankstown Council ban discussion of Gaza genocide at Lakemba Ramadan night market

Oscar Grenfell
22 March 2024

Labor governments, state and federal, which have supported Israel's criminal assault on Gaza for the past five months, are ramping up their attempts to suppress popular opposition to the genocide.

The New South Wales (NSW) state Labor government and the Labor-controlled Canterbury-Bankstown Council have decreed that the genocide cannot be discussed at the Ramadan night markets in the south-western Sydney suburb of Lakemba. They are using private security, police, threats and intimidation to enforce this ban.

Tens of thousands of people attend the nightly markets throughout Ramadan, a holy month for adherents of the Islamic faith. The markets began more than a decade ago, with informal street vendors selling food to people breaking their fast. The council has since taken over the event, corporatised it, and transformed it into a substantial money-maker.

Now, the council is asserting its appropriated and undiscussed right to suppress political discussion at the market, including of the unfolding genocide in Gaza.

Last night, two Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners were accosted by private security that is hired by the council. The SEP campaigners were distributing a WSWs statement, warning that Israel is seeking to eradicate the Palestinian people of Gaza. They were discussing the need for a movement of the working class to fight this historic war crime and all the governments supporting it, including the federal Labor administration in Australia.

Two individuals arrived who said they were managers at Canterbury-Bankstown Council but refused to provide their full names or positions. They told the SEP campaigners that "no political or religious material" could be distributed at the market because it was exclusively a "cultural event." When the SEP members noted that they were on a public street, the council representatives said that it had been transformed into an "event site" that they had complete control over.

One of the council representatives said it was "inappropriate" to discuss Gaza at the market, because the event was "about smiles and happiness." She said the council had "no position whatsoever" on the mass slaughter of the Palestinians.

The council staff and security said that the "situation could be escalated" and threatened to call the police on the SEP campaigners, so they left.

Such conduct would be anti-democratic anywhere. But it is particularly outrageous in Lakemba. The suburb and other nearby areas of the southwest has a very large Islamic and Middle Eastern community. In these working-class areas, anger and opposition to the genocide is near universal.

But the Labor council is declaring that these sentiments are impermissible. The SEP calls on all working people and defenders of democratic rights to oppose the ban and to fight it. The ban is not only directed at the SEP, but at all working people. Barring discussion of the genocide directly serves the Israeli war criminals and their collaborators, including the federal Labor government.

In enforcing the ban, the council and the NSW Labor administration are collaborating with fascistic Zionists, the Murdoch media and repressive police agencies.

A week ago, footage was uploaded to Instagram, showing a group of people chanting "Free Palestine" and "Free Gaza" at the market. They also called for the liberation of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, which has repeatedly been desecrated by the Israeli regime, including with violent police raids.

The Australian Jewish Association (AJA), a Zionist organisation, found the footage and concocted a provocation. The AJA issued complaints to the NSW government and turned to the Murdoch-owned *Daily Telegraph*, a right-wing tabloid that has a long history of vilifying immigrants in general and Muslims in particular.

AJA chief executive Robert Gregory told the *Telegraph* that he had received "feedback from Jewish people in

attendance that they did not feel safe ‘when the Ramadan event turned into an extremist anti-Israel protest.’”

It is highly improbable that Jewish people connected to the AJA, a tiny organisation, were in attendance right at the moment when a small group of people briefly chanted for the freedom of the Palestinians. It is much more likely that the AJA found out about the chanting by scouring pro-Palestinian social media pages where the video was posted.

If AJA supporters were at the night market, they were there to create a problem. Like other Zionist organisations, the AJA supports all of Israel’s crimes, including its mass murder of Palestinians. But unlike other Zionist groups, the AJA does little to hide the fact that it is a racist anti-Arab and anti-Muslim outfit. It has repeatedly collaborated with and praised far-right politicians, including Lauren Southern, a Canadian fascist, bonding over a shared Islamophobia.

The AJA targeted the night market before Ramadan began, with Gregory writing to the NSW government and warning that it could become “an anti-Israeli hate-fest.”

The AJA is what it is. Even other Zionists have derided it as a lunatic fringe organisation, fearful that its far-right rhetoric and often absurd provocations will discredit the Israeli cause.

But the NSW government and Canterbury-Bankstown Council immediately sprang into action after the AJA complained about the chants defending the people of Gaza.

The state government funds the market through its “Multicultural NSW” agency. In addition to transferring substantial cash to the council, this mechanism also serves the purposes of censorship, with Multicultural NSW stipulating that none of the monies can “fund political activities.”

The *Telegraph* reported that Multicultural NSW had written to one of the AJA connected complainants, stating “I wish to advise that Multicultural NSW has also brought this matter to the attention of the Engagement and Hate Crime Unit within the NSW Police Force.”

That is extraordinary. People are being reported to a specialised police unit, with connections to intelligence, for chanting “Free Palestine.” And calling for an end to genocide is equated with a hate crime. Multicultural NSW, despite its name, is clearly engaging in vilification and harassment of Muslims and of all other opponents of the Israeli war crimes.

The *Telegraph* confirmed from both sides that Multicultural NSW chief executive Joseph La Posta and Canterbury-Bankstown head Matthew Stewart held multiple discussions on Wednesday about the chanting. The attack on the SEP campaigners several days later indicates that these discussions were about cracking down on any discussion of the genocide.

Throughout the past five months, Labor governments, official institutions, the corporate media and Zionists have carried out a witch-hunt of those who oppose the genocide. That has included orchestrating the sacking of journalists and the intimidation of artists, doctors and teachers.

The extension of this campaign into a working-class area with a large Middle Eastern and Muslim population marks a new stage of this offensive.

It is the implementation, in a slightly different form, of the NSW government’s immediate response to the genocide, which was to try to ban all public protests in defence of the Palestinians. The state administration of Premier Chris Minns moved in that direction, largely based on the claim that protesters had shouted “gas the Jews” outside the Opera House on October 9. They hadn’t, the chant had been made up by... the AJA. Almost half a year later, the racist Zionist group and Labor are still at it.

The SEP, which has a five-decade-long history of political campaigns in the southwest and is especially well known in Lakemba, calls for workers to demand an end to the ban on discussing the genocide at the market.

But above all, certain conclusions must be drawn. Labor, at all levels, from the federal government down, is a pro-imperialist party of militarism, war and authoritarianism. That is why it is supporting the genocide, as well as the US-led war against Russia in Ukraine and the preparations for a catastrophic conflict against China in the Indo-Pacific. This agenda, serving the interests of the banks and corporations, is incompatible with democratic rights.

A movement of the working class must be built, in Australia and internationally, against the genocide and the war drive. Its perspective cannot be to appeal to Labor and other capitalist parties but to fight against them on the basis of a socialist program directed against the source of war, the capitalist system.

The working class needs its own political party to spearhead and lead this struggle. That is why the SEP is campaigning to be a federally registered political party, which will enable it to stand in elections under its party name and present a socialist alternative to Labor. Contact the SEP today and sign up as an electoral member.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)