

Australian Labor government ferociously attacks its own senator for condemning Gaza genocide

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The Australian Labor Party is engaged in an increasingly frenzied campaign against Fatima Payman, its only federal parliamentarian to have condemned Israel's war crimes and pointed to the Labor government's complicity in them.

Yesterday, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese suspended Payman from the party caucus after she crossed the Senate floor last week to vote in favor of a Greens motion recognising Palestine. Payman was summoned to the Lodge, Albanese's official residence, for a personal dressing down, while other party leaders, including Foreign Minister Penny Wong have publicly denounced her for violating party discipline.

Beyond the immediate issue of the Greens' Palestine motion and Payman's supposed infraction against Labor protocol, the episode is highly revealing.

For the first month of Israel's genocidal onslaught against Gaza, the Australian government was as aggressive as any around the world in its support for the Zionist bombardment. Albanese gave blood-curling speeches, cheering on the supposed war against Hamas, and state Labor administrations threatened to ban all pro-Palestinian protests.

Late last year, in conjunction with the Biden administration, Labor effected a shift in rhetoric. Albanese and Wong began to express "concern" over the mass deaths of civilians and to reference the need for "humanitarian pauses," between the rounds of bombing, and vague aspirations for "peace."

The onslaught on Payman exposes the fraud of this blather. It demonstrates Labor continues to support the genocide politically, diplomatically and materially, and will brook no opposition, however limited, within its own ranks.

While the immediate trigger for Payman's suspension from caucus was her vote on the Greens motion, that has the character of something of a pretext.

The Labor leadership has undoubtedly been gunning for her since May when Payman broke ranks and became the first Labor MP to brand Israel's actions as a genocide and, most notably, to point to Albanese's direct complicity.

At the time, Payman declared: "Instead of advocating for justice, I see our leaders performatively gesture defending the oppressor's right to oppress..." She added: "I ask our Prime

Minister and our fellow parliamentarians, how many international rights laws must Israel break for us to say enough?"

Some Labor aligned commentators have presented the leadership as having shown restraint. Crossing the floor and violating caucus decisions can result in expulsion from the party altogether, they have noted.

It is clear, however, that the fact Payman has not been expelled is not out of any beneficence on Labor's part. If Payman were expelled from Labor, she could retain her Western Australian Senate seat for another five years and sit on the crossbench. Instead, Labor is seeking to pressure Payman into leaving parliament altogether, so it can be done with her while retaining the seat.

Payman has said Albanese personally asked her to leave the Senate. Then in a statement last night, Payman revealed she had "lost all contact with my caucus colleagues. I have been removed from caucus meetings, committees, internal group chats, and whips bulletins." She had been told not to vote at all in the Senate, and described herself as being "in exile."

The campaign, recalling medieval banishment or the shunning practiced by religious cults, escalated further today, with reports that Payman's Labor-appointed parliamentary staff had simply left her office, not to return.

These actions underscore the sham of parliamentary democracy. In a system designed to ensure the dominance of the two major parties, including through anti-democratic electoral laws and massive corporate donations, there is no scope for even a limited expression of popular opposition within those parties. That extends to an unfolding genocide that has triggered the most sustained anti-war movement in Australian history.

If an MP is perceived to step out of line even slightly and threaten the consensus behind inherently unpopular policies of war and austerity, the party machine comes down on them like a ton of bricks.

The Labor leadership is using all means at its disposal to effectively steal Payman's parliamentary seat, despite that clearly disenfranchising those who voted for her.

Aside from its antidemocratic character, the campaign has an undeniably sinister edge. Having elevated Payman, the daughter of Afghan refugees who is Muslim and female, to bolster its “multicultural” and “diverse” credentials, the Labor leadership is viciously targeting a 29-year-old first term senator and inciting Labor supporters against her. It is not difficult to see that such an offensive could have serious consequences for Payman’s health and wellbeing.

The witch hunt against Payman is all the more striking given that she can claim with justification that her vote in favor of recognising Palestine is in line with formal Labor Party policy. On paper, Labor calls for a “two-state solution” to the crisis. Such a solution obviously requires recognising two states.

But Labor’s position is a sham. Labor attempted to amend the Greens motion to make Palestinian recognition and the realisation of a “two-state solution” conditional on a “peace process” overseen by the Israeli government. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has made clear that his “solution” is to exterminate or expel all of the Palestinians. Labor’s opposition to any, even token, recognition of Palestine is a signal that it shares Netanyahu’s “vision.”

Fittingly, at the same time as the Payman furore, *Declassified Australia* reported yesterday that for the first time in nine months, Department of Defence and government officials have confirmed that Australia has active permits for military exports to Israel. Labor had previously denounced reports of ongoing shipments as “misinformation,” but a Defence official confirmed in a Senate Estimates hearing that “around 66” defence export permits “that relate to Israel” remain active.

Their contents are shrouded in secrecy, but it is known that Australian companies, operating in conjunction with Defence, are the sole global suppliers of key parts without which the F-35 war planes dropping bombs on Gaza could not function. The joint US-Australian Pine Gap spy base in the Northern Territory has also likely provided Israel with intelligence for its airstrikes in Gaza.

This complicity has provoked widespread opposition from workers and young people. So too has the assault on Payman. There have been thousands of comments on social media expressing support for the senator and opposition to the attacks against her.

These sentiments, however, should not blind opponents of the genocide to the highly limited and conditional character of Payman’s own positions. She continues to uphold the “two-state solution,” which was always unviable and is now simply a cover for Israel’s ethnic cleansing operation.

Payman claims to be defending real “Labor values.” But Labor has always been a party of imperialist war, presiding over or supporting every criminal Australian military operation of the past century, including the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Payman last week cited former Prime Minister Bob Hawke as an inspiration to her, noting his rhetorical support for a “two-

state solution.” Hawke epitomised Labor’s militarist role, dispatching Australian troops to the first Gulf War against Iraq, working closely with the American CIA and fervently backing the Zionist state.

Payman’s stand has the character of a warning to the party leadership of explosive popular opposition that could get out of its control. In her May comments, Payman bemoaned a “disconnect” between Labor and the “people of Australia,” urging the government to do something to reverse it.

For their part, the Greens are engaged in cynical and bankrupt political theatre. Their parliamentary motions, recognising a Palestine that increasingly consists of rubble, will do nothing to halt the genocide. Their purpose is to bolster illusions that something can or will be done about the mass murder within the sclerotic and discredited parliamentary set-up.

The same illusion has been peddled by fake-left groups such as Socialist Alternative and Solidarity, which have insisted that the task is to “pressure” Labor to change course and end its support for Israel. The ferocious reaction to Payman again underscores the sham of their position, which serves only to subordinate mass opposition to the genocide to the very government that is complicit in it.

The massive crimes in Gaza, and the global eruption of militarism of which they are a part, will not be ended by a dissident Labor MP or two, or by parliamentary posturing. Together with the increasing danger of nuclear world war, they can only be stopped through a revolutionary socialist movement of the working class, independent of and opposed to the Labor government, the parliamentary parties and the bankrupt capitalist system they all defend.

That perspective is advanced only by the Socialist Equality Party. Sign up as an SEP electoral member today, to ensure there is a genuine socialist, anti-genocide and anti-war party on the ballot at the next election.



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