

Student disciplined at working-class Sydney school because he wore a Keffiyeh

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Australia)
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In an outrageous act of censorship, administrators at Condell Park High School have banned a student from attending his Year 12 formal this Thursday because he wore a Keffiyeh scarf to a graduation event in September.

The thirteen-month long Israeli genocide of Palestinians in Gaza has been accompanied by a sweeping assault on anti-war opposition in Australia and the other imperialist countries complicit in the mass murder. Even in that context, the attack on a 17-year-old for merely having worn a scarf is particularly vindictive.

It is all the more striking, given the location and its demographics. Condell Park, near Bankstown, is a working-class area with consistently higher rates of joblessness and poverty than state averages. As with much of south-western Sydney, it has a large Middle Eastern and Islamic population, and opposition to the Israeli genocide is overwhelming.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) joins the condemnations of this attack from the student, his family and working-class youth more broadly.

The IYSSE, as the youth wing of the Socialist Equality Party, calls for the widest opposition, including protests, to demand that this discrimination is overturned. We particularly appeal to teachers and staff to dissociate themselves from this attack and take a stand in defence of their students!

Above all, what this incident yet again demonstrates is the need to build a political movement of the working class against the Gaza genocide, war and the accompanying attacks on basic democratic rights.

The account of the youth and his family provided to the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) is damning. The student of Palestinian descent wore the Keffiyeh to the September graduation ceremony, during which they were encouraged to wear cultural garb associated with their national backgrounds.

According to the *Herald*, “Photographs from the September event show other students wearing other cultural artefacts, including feathered cloaks and garlands, over their

graduation gowns.”

Despite this, the 17-year-old was singled out. Staff members allegedly told him that wearing the scarf constituted a prohibited political statement. He was barred from posing for graduation pictures in the Keffiyeh with fellow students and senior staff, who instructed him twice to remove the item of clothing.

The teenager told the *Herald*, “I kept explaining that it’s a cultural thing that I wear on special occasions, but they kept saying that I was making a political statement in a public school and I can’t do that.”

“They said it wouldn’t be the smartest decision to keep it on and that I wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of the higher-ups so close to the end of the year.”

That last comment is highly significant, demonstrating that the issue is not simply overzealous and censorious school staff, but official policy.

That is also shown by what came next. Rather than admitting that they had overstepped the mark, the school officials doubled down. It was two weeks after the graduation ceremony that the student was called into a senior staff member’s office and told that he had been barred from the formal.

Significantly, the student and his family are not backing down. They are taking a stand in defence of their own civil liberties, and those of students, youth and the working class generally. Representatives of the family wrote to the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education demanding an apology and that the boy be permitted to attend his formal.

That not forthcoming, the family has filed a complaint with the Australian Human Rights Commission alleging discrimination.

In comments to the *Herald*, the boy’s sister correctly stated: “The keffiyeh is a centuries-old garment worn by my family, grandparents, great-grandparents and many others in the Palestinian community. The public school system, which should be an inclusive environment, should not be punishing children because of their cultural background.”

Since the genocide began, there have been reports of

students and staff in public schools in NSW, as well as the neighbouring state of Victoria, being prohibited from wearing pins and other items expressing solidarity with the Palestinians.

These attacks come directly from the NSW Labor government. With bombs raining down on Gaza, in November last year the Department of Education issued a policy statement entitled “Supporting the school community during the current conflict in the Middle East.”

It insisted that schools needed to adopt an “objective,” i.e., a neutral position on the genocide. While the policy does not explicitly prohibit the wearing of Palestinian symbols, it is clear from the actions of the Condell Park High administration and other instances of suppressing opposition to the Israeli slaughter that it has how they have been instructed to interpret it.

The very notion of “impartiality” concerning genocide is offensive. The inevitable logic of such a position, if projected back in history, would have been to turn a blind eye to the worst crimes of capitalism, such as the Holocaust.

The purported neutrality, moreover, is a sham. Since day one of the Israeli offensive, official Australian institutions, from federal and state governments down, have supported the Zionist terror campaign, while delegitimising all opposition. This has been led by the Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and the state Labor administrations, especially in NSW and Victoria.

They have continually vilified opposition to the genocide as antisemitic, falsely conflating hostility to the Israeli war crimes with anti-Jewish prejudice.

This has been the cover for a full-scale offensive aimed at banning anti-war sentiment generally. Young people have been a particular target. When school students staged strikes against the genocide last year, they were denounced by state and federal Labor MPs, while the mainstream media provided airtime for Zionist leaders to denounce the children as “human shields” and to threaten menacingly that “all red lines” had been crossed.

Earlier this year, university students established encampments protesting the ongoing mass killings. Albanese slandered them as “divisive” and “hateful,” declaring that they did “not have a place” in society. That was a green light for attacks by the police and university administrations.

Most recently, two students at Western Sydney University were violently arrested by cops on campus merely for protesting the genocide. A third student was arrested early in the morning at her house, in a clear act of intimidation. All were fitted up on bogus charges with harsh bail conditions imposed.

While lying about protests being a threat to safety and community harmony, governments are themselves going on

the offensive, including with xenophobic attacks on Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims. The push to restrict the wearing of the Keffiyeh is plainly discriminatory. If anyone suggested that another item of clothing be barred because it was associated with an ethnic, national or religious group they would rightly be condemned as racists.

More is involved, though, than racial discrimination. The genocide in Gaza, which has now expanded into Lebanon and includes US-Israeli attacks on Iran, is part of a developing global war. Just as the Labor government supports the mass slaughter of Palestinians, so it is preparing for Australia to play a frontline role in a US war against China aimed at asserting the hegemony of the American banks and corporations.

This is a program that is incompatible with democratic rights. It requires the suppression of anti-war sentiment, which is growing and will continue to spread as the reality of a global conflagration between the major powers becomes evident to broader layers of the population.

The IYSSE states bluntly that what young people face is the breakdown and bankruptcy of the whole capitalist set-up. This is a system that offers you nothing but genocide, war and the prospect of nuclear catastrophe, combined with ever greater social inequality, poverty, climate destruction and authoritarianism.

The fight to defend basic civil liberties and end war must be combined with the struggle against capitalism. This means mobilising the social and political power of the working class to fight for the socialist transformation of society.

Socialism means working people democratically controlling the wealth they produce to meet social need, not the profits of the banks and the billionaires. It means a society of genuine democracy and civil liberties and the peaceful advancement of humanity, not wars for markets, resources and profits.

We urge you to contact the IYSSE to discuss these issues and join this fight for a future.

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To contact the WSWs and the
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