

Workers and youth defend Palestinian student barred from Sydney school formal

Our reporters

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In the days since it was revealed that a Sydney high school has taken disciplinary action against a student for wearing a Keffiyeh to his year-12 graduation, opposition has been voiced by students and workers.

The boy of Palestinian descent had worn the traditional scarf at the event marking the end of his studies at Condell Park High School, a working-class school in south-western Sydney. School officials demanded he take it off and then banned him from his formal, which is being held tomorrow night.

The boy's family has filed a complaint with the Australian Human Rights Commission, alleging racial discrimination, demanding an apology and an overturning of the sanction on the boy attending the formal.

As an International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) statement this week explained, while the growing restrictions on the Keffiyeh are unquestionably racist, much more is involved.

This is part of an attempt to outlaw widespread opposition to the Gaza genocide and the complicity of the Australian government. More broadly, there is a bid to clamp down on anti-war and oppositional sentiment, amid a descent into war everywhere, including Australia's frontline role in the US-led preparations for a disastrous conflict with China.

Up to 100 people attended a protest outside Condell Park High School yesterday, condemning the attack on the boy and demanding that it be overturned.

A statement was read on behalf of the boy by one of the speakers. It explained: "I wanted an apology and to be allowed to attend the formal. This request was sent to the school, the department and the minister. The response came over three weeks later, in a letter from the department's lawyers, they said that the school had done nothing wrong.

"They also said that in order for them to allow me to go to the formal, I had to agree not to wear my keffiyeh at the formal ... and to drop any and all claims against the school and the department."

The statement is both courageous and highly revealing. It demonstrates that what is involved is not simply overzealous

school officials, but a deliberate policy from government and the state apparatus.

The minister referred to by the boy would be Prue Car, who not only holds the education portfolio, but is also the deputy premier, i.e., the second highest figure in the New South Wales (NSW) Labor government.

That government has been at the forefront of a clampdown on hostility to Israel's mass murder of the Palestinians, including with attempts to ban protests, major police mobilisations and even raids targeting anti-genocide activists.

The NSW Labor administration, in turn, is collaborating closely with the federal Labor government. It has virulently attacked the mass opposition to the historic war crimes, while assisting them politically, diplomatically and organisationally.

The widespread opposition to the attack on the boy has evidently triggered something of a crisis for the NSW authorities. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported this morning that Department of Education Secretary Murat Dizdar had offered to meet with the boy and his family.

An anonymous department spokesperson told the *Herald* that the education bureaucracy was "working towards a resolution to enable all students to celebrate their achievements at the school formal in a safe, respectful and harmonious environment."

That is a doubling down. If the education authorities told a Jewish student that he could not wear a yarmulke because it might offend others, they would rightly be denounced as racist. The suggestion that a Palestinian scarf could threaten "safety" and "harmony" is no different.

Members of the IYSSE participated in the protest, calling on students to turn to the working class, including teachers, in a fight against authoritarianism, the genocide and the broader eruption of imperialist militarism. They explained that to secure a decent future, young people must take up the fight for a socialist alternative to the deepening capitalist barbarism.

A parent at the school told the IYSSE: "I am a mother of a

student at Condell Park High and I witnessed the student go up on stage wearing his heritage on his shoulders and I am a mother that also has Palestinian heritage. Both my parents are Palestinian, both grandfathers are Palestinian, one had to leave for Lebanon, and here we are now, still fighting for it.

“My daughter’s here today wearing her great-grandfather’s keffiyeh. Schools have been told that they are to be ‘impartial.’ Even at my time working at other schools, students were told they could face-paint, but they weren’t allowed to have anything Palestinian.

“How can you be impartial about genocide? You can’t. How can you shut up to it? Other students got up on that stage that day, showcasing their heritage, wearing whatever they wanted, feathers, capes etc. Nothing was said to them. I know last year a student got up holding a Samoan flag, nothing was said to him.

“So why has this Palestinian issue happened? We’re not being antisemitic; we are not against anyone that’s Jewish. It’s their religion. As a Muslim, I respect their religion, I expect my religion to be respected as well. There’s a major difference between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. Do not get them mixed up.”

A student said: “This is a Lebanese area. It’s in a population where the majority of people are Arab. There are Palestinians, Lebanese, Muslims and Arabs. They take away our right to acknowledge our pain at what’s happening in Palestine. It’s horrible.”

Her friend added: “There are so many things at our school that are wrong but to deliberately ban someone for supporting their culture? The student was at the school for 5 years and they ban him from the formal over a piece of cloth that has such a deep meaning. But they can’t stand for it. Why? Because they are supporting genocide?”

On Monday, the IYSSE campaigned in Condell Park, alerting residents to the nearby attack on civil liberties. There was substantial anger.

Kate, an early childhood education worker, said: “We’re migrants ourselves, so we’re really up for multiculturalism and social equality. It doesn’t matter what your background is, it doesn’t matter what culture you’re from, you’re supposed to be respected here, free to express yourself and your opinion.

“We’re worried for our children as well, because in the future they might face this. We have our own cultural dress that they might want to wear. What are they going to do?

“We thought Labor was more to do with humanity—this is not something we’d expect that Labor would do.”

Deniz, who works in security, said: “It’s completely crazy—a year 12 kid! Where’s the democracy? For this to affect a 17-year-old attending a graduation is absolutely ridiculous. It’s very extreme.

“If the keffiyeh is a ‘sign of antisemitism’—it’s very dangerous for a government to say that. Whenever they bring ‘antisemitism’ to any formula, everything stops.

“People need to be allowed to express their feelings, in a peaceful way of course.

“The protests have gone on for 13 months and nothing’s happened. Did they impact on the government, on policy change? No. Because the government is very firm on what they stand for.”

Sarah, said: “Every individual has the right to dress and express their thoughts as they please, and represent their culture or religion or any identity however they want.

“It’s an end-of-year function, that student has the right to wear what he feels comfortable in.

“If you discriminate against one group, then it becomes a domino effect on everyone else.”

Although Sarah “was really surprised that this happened here, where it’s 90 percent Middle-Eastern culture,” she agreed that “the working class” was targeted in the crackdown on democratic rights.

Minh, a third-year electrical apprentice, said: “I had no idea of this happening. To me, it’s just unbelievable. It’s not acceptable. The kid should be allowed to represent his ideas instead of being punished like this. Ethically, it’s wrong.

“The formal is a once-in-a-lifetime event, it’s a very big deal for a 17-year-old.”

To defend democratic rights, fight genocide and war and build the socialist movement, we urge students and youth to contact the IYSSE today.

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