

Sydney school students condemn disciplining of Palestinian pupil for wearing keffiyeh

Our reporters

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Several dozen people, including students, parents and community members, participated in a protest outside Condell Park High School in south-western Sydney last Thursday. They condemned the disciplining of a Palestinian student by school authorities and the state Labor government.

The 17-year-old boy had worn a keffiyeh, a scarf associated with the Palestinians, to his graduation in September. School administrators demanded he remove the garment, before banning him from his formal on November 28.

The boy and his family protested that ban, including with a letter to the Department of Education and the state Labor Education Minister Prue Car. Their appeals rebuffed, they filed a complaint with the Human Rights Commission alleging racial discrimination.

When the story was made public in the lead up to the formal, the attack on the student provoked widespread opposition. In an attempt to limit the damage, the Department said the boy could attend the formal, as long as he did not wear a keffiyeh. That was a continuation of the discrimination he had protested against.

Several students who arrived at the formal in keffiyehs, expressing their solidarity with the boy, were barred from entering. That response demonstrated again that the issue is not simply the local school administrators. This is a policy dictated by the state Labor government, which has repeatedly cracked down on opposition to the Gaza genocide being voiced in schools, including with several draconian edicts.

That is part of a broader attempt to outlaw opposition to the massive Israeli war crimes, which have been supported by the entire political establishment, led by the federal Labor government. The targeting of a youth, merely for wearing a scarf associated with the

Palestinians, testifies to nervousness in ruling circles over mass opposition among young people to not only the genocide, but the broader agenda of war, austerity and climate degradation.

At the protest, members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) placed the attack on the student in this broader context. They explained in discussions with participants that the turn to authoritarianism and war was the response of the ruling class to a breakdown of the capitalist system, posing the need to build a socialist movement of the working class.

IYSSE members received comments from some of those in attendance.

Saheer Deeb, a former teacher at the school, said that the authorities were “mixing politics with the culture. It’s got nothing to do with the students at all. Students have got the right to celebrate what they have achieved. As a parent and as a grandmother, as a local I have a voice to raise against this government. This is unacceptable. They must apologise to the boy.”

When it was pointed out to Saheer that students around the world are being victimised for speaking out against the genocide in Gaza, she said, “This is unjust. This is not democracy. We are not in a democracy anymore.

“The student is already in pain. He is already distressed because of what’s happening back home in Palestine, and what’s happening here. And with these exams, I think we should not put any more pressure on these students.

“It should go further than an apology. The government should stop the genocide, should not fund any more weapons. They have to boycott all exports to Israel.”

A student commented, “I think it’s really

unnecessary for them to stop the wearing of the keffiyeh as students from other backgrounds are allowed to wear their cultural accessories and it's going to break all our hearts because we all have a soft spot for Palestine.

“There's genocide going on over there, and we can't embrace our culture and wear accessories associated with our background. The government should give us the right to be able to talk about Palestine, what's going on over there. We always do one minute's silence for something that happened years and years ago and we can't talk about what's going on right now. It breaks my heart.

“We have all been told we are not allowed to talk about Palestine and not bring up war, even though it's happening right now. And it's a genocide. Some teachers want to talk about it, but the Department of Education does not allow them to and they don't want to lose their jobs.”

A teacher at another school who lives nearby said, “Every student has the right to exercise their freedom to be able to express their feelings. It is disheartening to know that they are being censored when they have families that are being massacred in Gaza. And instead of providing support this is what the authorities do!

“These are the people who are supposed to be looking after these students. The keffiyeh is not a political item. It has a lot of sentimental and cultural value and traces back to their heritage. So to deprive someone of wearing that to their formal, that is a milestone for that student at a school that is supposed to embrace everyone and they are denied that privilege.

“I heard that some of his fellow students, in solidarity with him, to support him, wanted to wear keffiyehs to the formal but they were denied the opportunity to support him. I mean talk about everyone being there for one another, and showing empathy to the student. And the school that is supposed to be taking care of all these students, it's shameful.

“An apology to the student is a bare minimum. No one should be asking, the school should be offering an unconditional apology without even a second thought. I want to go up and apologise, why wouldn't you? That's the least we can do to show some compassion. The Department of Education as a whole denied that student the right to go to the event and everyone here in an executive position, who denied that student the right,

should be apologising in person.

Another pupil stated: “Even during exams, we're not allowed to wear the keffiyeh. We are told ‘it's not racist, it's just the uniform policy.’ I definitely disagree with everything they're saying. Nothing's changed, they haven't apologised and they will never apologise.”



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