Australian parliamentary witch hunt: Labor spearheads Zionist demands for sacking of Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah

Mike Head
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Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's Labor Party government is ramping up a Zionist-led media and parliamentary witch hunt over the supposed failure of university chiefs to do enough to suppress opposition to the widening Israeli genocide in Palestine.

Under the fraudulent banner of combatting antisemitism, Labor's chief representative on a parliamentary committee last week demanded the sacking of Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah, a prominent pro-Palestinian academic at Sydney's Macquarie University.

Like many others in Australia and internationally, including academics, students and journalists, Abdel-Fattah has been falsely accused of anti-Jewish "hate speech" and supporting terrorism, for opposing the US-backed atrocities in Gaza and the occupied West Bank.

The assault on anti-war dissent, free speech and basic democratic rights was intensified at public hearings in Canberra last Wednesday, conducted by an "Antisemitism at Australian universities inquiry." This witch hunt, conducted by the Parliamentary Joint Committee On Human Rights, was authorised last year with bipartisan support by Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition.

Josh Burns, the Labor MP chairing the inquiry, led the offensive on Wednesday, aggressively declaring university leaders had failed to act decisively against Abdel-Fattah and other academics who have denounced Israel for its ongoing mass killings of Palestinians.

The first to face a 45-minute hounding was Macquarie University vice-chancellor S. Bruce Dowton. That was followed by a similar length interrogation of Queensland University of Technology (QUT) vice-chancellor Margaret Sheil.

The proceedings were revealing.

Professor Dowton opened his testimony by seeking to assure the committee of his management's support for its blackguarding of opponents of the Israeli onslaught. "Since the abhorrent attack on 7 October 2023, Macquarie University has stood in absolute solidarity with other Australian universities and Australian civil society against the rise of antisemitism on campuses or anywhere in our nation," he stated.

Dowton effectively lined up with the exploitation by all the imperialist governments, including Albanese's, of the Hamas-led incursion—which Israel's Netanyahu government had advance notice of—to justify the genocide and the ethnic cleansing operation now openly proclaimed by US President Donald Trump.

That was not enough for Burns. He demanded that Dowton denounce Abdel-Fattah for saying that Zionists have no right to "cultural safety" from condemnations of Israel. In response, Dowton described her comments as "very disturbing" and said the university "absolutely" did not endorse them.

But Burns went further. "And have you done anything to ensure that that [the] university professor doesn't have influence over the spaces at your university?" he insisted. "Has there been any action taken?"

Dowton said privacy and confidentiality protocols, and potential legal challenges, had to be considered, and therefore declined to publicly give details of actions against Abdel-Fattah.

Burns objected. "Has there been any disciplinary action against that staff member?" he demanded. "Have they been removed as a staff member from the university?"

After Dowton said Abdel-Fattah had not been "removed," Burns asked: "So what have you done about it, vice-chancellor?"

Burns's interrogation went on, becoming increasingly heated. When Dowton explained that the university's enterprise agreement with staff provided Abdel-Fattah with certain procedural and legal rights, Burns accused him of protecting her.

"It sounds like you're protecting the staff member and not your students," Burns declared.

Burns also demanded to know what Dowton had done to "ensure compliance" with an Australian Research Council (ARC) investigation into Abdel-Fattah's ARC research grant for a study of "Arab/Muslim Australian Social Movements since the 1970s: a hidden history."

The ARC investigation was instigated in January at the direct written request of the Labor government's Education Minister Jason Clare "as a matter of priority." This is an overt political intervention, based on phony allegations that Abdel-Fattah breached the grant rules.

Dowton sought to distance himself from Abdel-Fattah, saying she was only employed by Macquarie University as a research fellow due to an earlier ARC grant she won in 2018. He assured Burns that the university was actively cooperating with the ARC investigation.

For the rest of the 45-minute session, Burn's interrogation of

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Dowton was continued in the same vein by Liberal National Party MP Henry Pike, Liberal Senator Matt O'Sullivan and "Teal" independent Kylea Tink.

Next, Burns turned his attention to the QUT's Professor Sheil. She began her appearance by offering another grovelling "unreserved" apology for "the hurt caused to anyone" by an anti-racism symposium at QUT, at which Abdel-Fattah spoke, together with other anti-genocide scholars, including Sarah Schwartz, the executive officer of the Jewish Council of Australia.

Burns celebrated Sheil's step. "Thank you, vice-chancellor," he stated. "We haven't heard an apology yet in this committee, so that's a first. I thank you for that."

Education Minister Clare had also personally phoned Sheil in January to demand that the university management instigate disciplinary action over the symposium.

Sheil sought to appease the government and the committee by saying she had commissioned an inquiry into the symposium by former Federal Court judge John Middleton. She pledged in advance to accept his recommendations "in full."

Again, this did not satisfy Burns. "What confidence can you give that such a symposium or such an event wouldn't happen again?" he demanded.

Sheil assured the committee: "I'm confident we will learn from this external review, and there will be processes and procedures that we either amend or we follow or advertise in a different way. I'm sure we're going to learn from this, absolutely."

This amounts to a declaration that the university will block or shut down any event that criticises the expanding Israeli assault on Gaza and the West Bank and the underlying US-backed agenda to totally reorganise the Middle East in Washington's interests.

Far from relenting, Burns went further. He demanded action against symposium organiser, indigenous academic and writer Professor Chelsea Watego. Burns objected to a recent article by Watego, in which she posed a question: "Who has access to state militaries, land, weapons, media, political influence, government support, international recognition and money?"

Burns claimed that these comments, evidently referring to the corporate elite, "sound very eerily like the sorts of tropes that are directed towards Jewish people." He said that they and "any other remarks that the professor has made" should be placed under review. Sheil answered: "Of course."

This exchange underscores the warning made by Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee (RFC) in its January 21 statement calling on academics, university workers and students at Macquarie and more broadly to come to the defence of Abdel-Fattah. Her victimisation is not an isolated development. The most basic rights of academic freedom and free speech are at stake.

This witch hunt is part of a wider attack on anti-war and other political dissent internationally and in Australia. The Labor government is totally involved in this as part of its commitment to US militarism, including the AUKUS pact preparations for war against China.

An initial witch-hunting Senate committee hearing was conducted last September. Seven university vice-chancellors and other officials were questioned and accused of failing to forcibly shut down anti-genocide student encampments earlier in the year.

These Labor-led parliamentary hearings are following the lead of the US Congress, where hearings were staged last year, backed by the Biden-Harris administration, for legislators to hound and demand the resignation of university presidents for not ending student encampments quickly or violently enough. That was despite more than 3,000 students being arrested across the US.

Labor is now intensifying moves similar to those in the US, where the fascistic Trump administration is going beyond the Biden White House to demand nothing less than the suppression of all political opposition on university campuses and the deportation of students who have taken part in anti-genocide demonstrations.

This is setting the stage for a wider attack on basic democratic rights, particularly targeting anti-war and socialist opposition. Not just in the US but around the world, governments are turning to authoritarian, oligarchic forms of rule in the face of opposition to ever-greater social inequality, militarism and attacks on democratic rights.

Just last week, the Albanese government joined hands with the Liberal-National Coalition to ram far-reaching supposed "hate speech laws" through parliament that could be used to prosecute Abdel-Fattah, Schwarz and others.

As the Macquarie University RFC statement concluded: "The defence of free speech is inseparably linked to the fight against the capitalist profit system itself, which is the root cause of military aggression, war and barbarism."

To discuss how to take forward this fight and defend Abdel-Fattah and all other witch-hunted educators, please contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network.

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