

Rank-and-file committee members at Sydney's Macquarie University call for urgent staff action to defend Randa Abdel-Fattah

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Members of the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee have called for an urgent staff meeting and action to fight moves to sack Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah, a Macquarie University academic, because of her high-profile opposition to the ongoing US-backed Israeli genocide and ethnic cleansing in Palestine.

Abdel-Fattah's employment has been directly threatened by last week's decision of the Australian Research Council (ARC), acting at the behest of the Albanese government, to freeze her ARC Future Fellowship grant for a study of "the hidden history of Arab/Muslim social movements" in Australia.

Last Thursday, the ARC suspended Abdel-Fattah's fellowship, just a month after federal Education Minister Jason Clare ordered the ARC to investigate her grant "as a matter of priority." This is supposedly based on cooked-up allegations that she bent ARC rules by holding an online workshop as part of the grant, instead of a formal academic conference.

In reality, Abdel-Fattah has been targeted because she, like a number of other academics and journalists, has been falsely branded and demonised as antisemitic for denouncing the atrocities being committed by Israel in the Gaza Strip and the occupied West Bank. These mass killings and aid cutoffs are intensifying, backed by the Trump administration with fresh arms supplies as part of a plan to remove the Palestinian population forcibly.

The ARC move is a step toward terminating her employment because her job, as a fixed-term appointment, depends on the continuation of the research grant. It follows an earlier demand by Labor MP Josh Burns, the chair of a witch-hunting parliamentary committee, to know why Macquarie University had not already sacked her.

On Friday at a Macquarie University management "town hall" staff forum, one of the first questions to vice-chancellor S. Bruce Downton was about the implications for procedural fairness and academic freedom of an ARC grant being suspended.

In response, Downton confirmed that the ARC had asked the university to "suspend all activity on that grant and investigate a range of matters" but refused to provide details.

Downton claimed that the ARC's questions were "not about

academic freedom" but "about the responsible use of the discharge of public funds for a grant awarded by the ARC to Macquarie University."

Such denials of the underlying political agenda fly in the face of the concerted campaign against Abdel-Fattah by Zionist groups, the corporate media and both Labor and Liberal-National Coalition representatives over the past year.

Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee (RFC) member Carolyn Kennett posted a comment in the town hall meeting chat that: "We urgently need to call a rally to pass a motion in defence of Randa Abdel-Fattah like the one in this article," referring to the resolution unanimously adopted by a lunchtime meeting called by the rank-and-file committee on February 20.

That resolution opposed "the victimisation and witch hunt of anti-genocide activist Randa Abdel-Fattah," and called for "a campaign throughout the universities and the working class against it."

It stated: "The attack on Abdel-Fattah is not confined to one academic. It is aimed at silencing any opposition to the US-Israeli mass killings, the Labor government's support for the genocide and the Trump administration's criminal plan to ethnically cleanse Palestine."

Despite determined opposition by National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch officials, NTEU branch meetings at the University of Sydney and Western Sydney University passed similar resolutions last week, as earlier had teachers and support staff at Footscray High School in Melbourne.

Several other participants in the town hall meeting called for Abdel-Fattah's defence or suggested that the NTEU branch committee should "at least" call a members' meeting to discuss the issue.

In a NTEU zoom gathering to observe the town hall meeting, Kennett called on the union to "call an urgent meeting" to defend Abdel-Fattah. "We need to be openly defending her on campus," she wrote.

Kennett stated: "We should take action here. This is one of our colleagues and she has been under sustained attack. We have written statements in her defence. The Macquarie Rank-and-File Committee called a meeting last week and 70 people voted

unanimously for a resolution in support of her.

“I think university staff should come together to pass motions of support for her. What has happened to her is driven politically by the Zionists. She is not an antisemite.”

To date, the NTEU has not called any meeting to defend Abdel-Fattah, nor organised any public campaign against the wider Zionist-led witch hunt against university staff members speaking out against the genocidal assault on the Palestinians.

Instead, the NTEU issued a mealy-mouthed media statement last week saying that “recent commentary” about the review of Abdel-Fattah’s research grant “has raised serious concerns.”

The statement said the union was seeking “assurances from ARC Chair Professor Peter Shergold that this process will not be influenced by external forces, including media corporations.” It said the NTEU wanted to “ensure the ARC’s engagement with Macquarie over Dr Abdel-Fattah is subject to the highest levels of integrity, independence and fairness.”

An editorial on Saturday in the Murdoch media’s *Australian*, which has played a central and aggressive role in the witch hunt against Abdel-Fattah, put paid to any pretence of such “assurances.” It urged vice-chancellor Downton to remove her, regardless of the outcome of the ARC grant investigation.

“While this issue is about a legal agreement, Dr Abdel-Fattah’s expressed views indicate how anti-Semitism—often masquerading as opposition to Israel—is embedded in Australia’s universities,” the editorial declared.

The newspaper said Downton should follow the lead of the University of Sydney, which sacked academic Tim Anderson after he compared Israel’s crimes to those committed by the Nazi regime in Germany.

This confirms that the persecution of Abdel-Fattah is a test case. Many other critics of Israel have been tarred as anti-Jewish bigots and persecuted by governments, the corporate media and Zionist organisations. Those known publicly include journalists Mary Kostakidis, Antoinette Lattouf and Peter Lalor; Sarah Schwartz, the executive officer of the Jewish Council of Australia; University of Sydney academics John Keane and Nick Riemer; as well as the same university’s sociology professor Sujatha Fernandes.

As shown by the wall-to-wall media and government persecution, and now criminal prosecution, of two Bankstown Hospital workers in Sydney, who were goaded by an Israeli provocateur into making stupid comments, the so-called antisemitism crusade is designed to intimidate and silence working-class people across the board.

The need for a full-scale campaign by staff and students at Macquarie University and throughout the entire tertiary education sector in defence of Abdel-Fattah and other witch hunt victims was underscored last week when Universities Australia (UA), the universities’ peak employer body, agreed to enforce a new reactionary definition of antisemitism across all university campuses.

Like the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition that some university managements had already imposed, this version conflates antisemitism with anti-Zionism and essentially bans criticism of Israel, which was created in 1948 by the removal of thousands of Palestinians, accompanied by military

violence and terrorism that has continued ever since.

There is widespread opposition to this outright political censorship, drafted in consultation with Jillian Segal, the Albanese Labor government’s “Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism,” which can be used to threaten and dismiss university staff.

The definition states: “Criticism of Israel can be antisemitic when it is grounded in harmful tropes, stereotypes or assumptions and when it calls for the elimination of the State of Israel or all Jews or when it holds Jewish individuals or communities responsible for Israel’s actions.” The definition also asserts that for most Jewish people “Zionism is a core part of their Jewish identity.”

Significantly, among the many voices denouncing the UA’s adoption of this definition is the Jewish Council of Australia, representing more than 1,000 academics, lawyers, writers and teachers. It issued a media statement condemning “the dangerous and politicised definition of antisemitism which threatens academic freedom, will have a chilling effect on legitimate criticism of Israel, and risks institutionalising anti-Palestinian racism.”

The council stated: “The definition’s inclusion of ‘calls for the elimination of the State of Israel’ would mean, for instance, that calls for a single binational democratic state, where Palestinians and Israelis have equal rights, could be labelled antisemitic.”

The statement added: “Zionism is a political ideology of Jewish nationalism, not an intrinsic part of Jewish identity. There is a long history of Jewish opposition to Zionism, from the beginning of its emergence in the late-19th century, to the present day. Many, if not the majority, of people who hold Zionist views today are not Jewish.”

It concluded: “[D]efinitions of racial or religious identity should not include assertions about the political persuasion of group members as an intrinsic part of the group’s identity. Such assertions risk fomenting harmful stereotypes that all Jewish people think in a certain way.”

The defence of basic democratic rights, including free speech and academic freedom, is more important than ever. As the Macquarie University RFC said in its January 21 statement launching the defence campaign said, the suppression of dissent is not confined to the issue of Palestine.

This chilling atmosphere is calculated to stifle opposition to the whole agenda of militarism, job cuts and attacks on working-class conditions now spearheaded globally by the fascistic Trump White House.

To discuss moving resolutions in defence of Abdel-Fattah, send statements of support or join or build a rank-and-file committee, email the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network, at cfpe.aus@gmail.com.



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