

Australia: Macquarie University RFC calls for rally to defend Randa Abdel-Fattah

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The Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee today called on the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) to hold an urgent campus meeting and rally of staff and students to fight moves to sack Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah. The widely respected academic is being targeted because of her high-profile opposition to the ongoing Israeli genocide and ethnic cleansing in Palestine.

The rank-and-file committee issued its call under conditions where the campaign against Abdel-Fattah is rapidly escalating. Her employment is directly threatened by the decision of the Australian Research Council (ARC), acting at the behest of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's federal Labor government, to freeze her research grant.

Members of the rank-and-file committee raised the call for such an urgent meeting and rally on February 28 during a vice-chancellor's "town hall" staff meeting, and in a NTEU zoom gathering to observe the town hall meeting. But the NTEU has remained silent.

Today, the committee's letter, addressed to the Macquarie University NTEU branch committee, stated:

The attacks on Randa Abdel-Fattah are deepening, with the suspension of her ARC grant, directly threatening her employment by the university. The so-called breaches of her research grant are a cover for a serious attack on academic freedom of speech and democratic rights.

As a matter of urgency, the NTEU at Macquarie University must call an all staff and student meeting and rally to defend Abdel-Fattah, and insist that her employment be continued and that the ARC and university reinstate her research grant.

The letter, sent by maths educator Chris Gordon on behalf of the committee, proposed the following resolution for the meeting, similar to the one passed by the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee lunchtime public meeting on February 20:

This meeting opposes the victimisation and witch hunt of anti-genocide activist Randa Abdel-Fattah and calls for a campaign throughout the universities and the working class against it.

The latest attacks on Abdel-Fattah are aimed at rescinding her research grant and sacking her from Macquarie University and we demand that no such action be taken. The harassment is being led by the Murdoch media and Zionist lobby groups, fully endorsed by the Albanese government. Abdel-Fattah, like others who oppose the genocide in Gaza, is being bullied and slandered as being antisemitic for speaking out in defence of the Palestinian people.

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.

We call on educators, students and workers to pass similar resolutions defending Abdel-Fattah, the right to free speech and democratic rights, including academic freedom.

The ARC's suspension of Abdel-Fattah's ARC Future Fellowship grant for a study of "the hidden history of Arab/Muslim social movements" in Australia is a step toward terminating her employment because her job, as a fixed-term appointment, depends on the continuation of the research grant. This is a test case for trampling over both employment and democratic rights, including academic freedom and free speech.

The ARC froze Abdel-Fattah's fellowship just a month after federal Education Minister Jason Clare ordered the ARC to investigate her grant. The supposed reason is that she allegedly bent ARC rules by holding an online workshop as part of the grant, instead of a formal academic conference.

The ARC decision also followed a demand by Labor MP Josh Burns, the chair of the Labor government's witch-hunting "antisemitism" parliamentary committee, to know why Macquarie University had not already sacked her.

Clearly, Abdel-Fattah has been targeted because she, like other academics and journalists, has been falsely branded as antisemitic for denouncing the criminal atrocities being committed by Israel in the Gaza Strip and the occupied West Bank.

These mass killings—already officially up to 50,000—and illegal aid, electricity and water cutoffs are intensifying behind the façade of a supposed Gaza ceasefire. Israel's Netanyahu regime is openly backed by the Trump administration, which has supplied it with

fresh multi-billion dollar arms supplies as part of a plan to wipe out or forcibly remove the Palestinian population.

Beside Abdel-Fattah, numerous other anti-genocide academics have been targeted, but the NTEU has not made a single public statement in their defence. Those known to have been victimised include University of Sydney academics John Keane and Nick Riemer and the same university's sociology professor Sujatha Fernandes.

Many other critics of Israel's barbaric crimes have been tarred as anti-Jewish bigots and persecuted by governments, the corporate media and Zionist organisations. They include journalists Mary Kostakidis, Antoinette Lattouf and Peter Lalor and Sarah Schwartz, the executive officer of the Jewish Council of Australia.

Despite determined opposition by NTEU branch officials, rank-and-file committee members and supporters successfully moved at NTEU branch meetings last month at the University of Sydney and Western Sydney University similar resolutions to that proposed at Macquarie University, as they had earlier done at Footscray High School in Melbourne.

As shown by the wall-to-wall media and government persecution, and 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.

In a further escalation of the suppression of opposition to the genocide, pro-Palestinian activist Hash Tayeh was last week served with unprecedented criminal charges for having publicly condemned Zionism as terrorism. This is a direct attack on political free speech.

In recent days, NTEU branch committees at La Trobe and Monash universities have adopted resolutions condemning the actions of the ARC and Clare, while appealing to the NTEU's national leadership to take a stand.

These resolutions urged the national NTEU to "reaffirm its commitment" to defending the ARC's independence from "political interference," to provide Abdel-Fattah with support during the ARC "investigation," including industrial and legal support, and to organise a public campaign to defend her and academic freedom.

The truth is that the NTEU bureaucrats have refused to conduct any campaign in defence of Abdel-Fattah and other targeted educators. Instead, the NTEU issued a mealy-mouthed media statement in late February saying the union was seeking "assurances from ARC Chair Professor Peter Shergold that this process will not be influenced by external forces, including media corporations."

That was in line with an October 2023 NTEU National Council resolution, which claimed to commit the union to "active solidarity with Palestine" but proposed no action by workers against the genocide. Collectively, Australia's union bureaucracies have not called a single strike in defence of the Palestinians, or against the witch hunt of genocide opponents.

As the Macquarie Rank-and-File Committee warned on January 21 in its statement calling for the mobilisation of university staff and students at Macquarie and across the country to defend Abdel-

Fattah:

The National Tertiary Education Union cannot be relied on to conduct a principled defence. It has not issued a single statement in defence of anti-genocide academics. While it has acted for some academics individually, these processes have been kept confidential and isolated. There has been no concerted campaign to defeat the assault on free speech.

This reality underscores the need for educators and students across the entire tertiary education sector to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatuses, to discuss and organise in defence of Abdel-Fattah and other Zionist witch hunt victims.

That necessity was further demonstrated this month when Universities Australia, the universities' peak employer body, agreed to enforce a new reactionary definition of antisemitism. This definition conflates antisemitism with anti-Zionism and essentially bans criticism of Israel, which was created in 1948 by the removal of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, accompanied by military violence and terrorism that has continued ever since.

The defence of basic democratic rights, including free speech and academic freedom, is more important than ever. The suppression of dissent is not confined to the issue of Palestine. It 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.

In its opening year statement on the universities on February 13, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network, warned that "despite outrage and opposition, university managements were pushing ahead with over 2,000 job cuts, especially in the humanities and arts, as a direct result of the Albanese government's reactionary cuts to international student enrolments on top of Labor's deepening of the decades-long chronic under-funding of tertiary education."

We appeal to educators, students and workers to make statements or pass resolutions in defence of Abdel-Fattah and all the other targets of the Zionist-led witch hunt. To discuss moving resolutions, send statements of support or join or build a rank-and-file committee, email the CFPE at cfpe.aus@gmail.com.



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