

Australia: Writers boycott Bendigo Writers Festival over pro-Zionist “code of conduct”

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Scores of writers scheduled to appear at the Bendigo Writers Festival boycotted the annual literary event last weekend in a powerful protest against the last-minute imposition of a “code of conduct” on all speakers at the festival.

The unprecedented directive, sent to speakers two days before the popular gathering in the regional city northwest of Melbourne, aimed to stifle all discussion of Israel’s war crimes in Gaza at the festival.

La Trobe University, using its role as principal sponsor and program curator, ordered all writers to “avoid language and topics that could be considered inflammatory, divisive or disrespectful.”

Participants were told they had to commit to La Trobe University’s “Anti-Racism Plan,” a 17-page document that adopts Universities Australia’s definition of antisemitism—one that deliberately conflates Jewish people, a historically oppressed minority, with the reactionary exclusivist state of Israel, an imperialist outpost of US-NATO strategy in the Middle East.

That definition, which asserts that most Jewish Australians regard Zionism as “a core part of their Jewish identity,” was crafted to brand all criticism or exposure of Israeli war crimes as racism.

The censorship of last weekend’s festival followed a backroom campaign by the Australian Academic Alliance Against Antisemitism (5A), a group of Zionist academics from 31 universities.

In a letter sent to the La Trobe University vice-chancellor and deputy vice-chancellor, as well as the Bendigo Writers Festival organisers, the 5A group denounced the festival for featuring Palestinian-Australian academic Randa Abdel-Fattah as a keynote speaker. It branded Abdel-Fattah as “an extremist anti-Israel and antisemitic activist” and slanderously accused her of being “a direct threat to the Jewish community.”

Confronted with the festival’s anti-democratic directive,

Abdel-Fattah withdrew, followed by dozens of other writers and La Trobe history professor Claire Wright, who had curated the university’s program at the event. They were joined by Evelyn Araluen, Jess Hill, Claire G. Coleman, Paul Daley, Melanie Cheng, Jock Serong, Thomas Mayo, Cher Tan, Madison Griffiths, Kelly Gardiner, and scores of others, along with the event’s principal book supplier.

Writers published scathing withdrawal letters: Claire G. Coleman said she could not “appear at a festival that is attempting to compel or censor my speech.” Kelly Gardiner called attempts to prevent discussion of the genocide in Gaza “outrageous,” while Paul Daley described it as “a shameful episode in Australian literary life.”

More than 200 Australian authors signed a statement by Readers and Writers Against the Genocide, expressing solidarity with the boycott and condemning the code as “a blueprint for self-censorship and silencing dissent.”

Twenty-one of the 71 scheduled events, including the opening and closing galas, were formally cancelled and eight of La Trobe’s nine sessions dropped. Even as sessions collapsed, the festival’s website continued to display names and images of writers who had withdrawn, while disabling all comments and automatically processing refunds.

Faced with the festival’s collapse, officials responded with lies and doublespeak, refusing to acknowledge the coordinated pro-Zionist lobbying that led to the censorship of participating writers and the resulting crisis.

Festival manager Julie Amos attempted to dismiss the boycott as “a small number of authors withdrawing,” while claiming the gag order was “intended to emphasise the importance of safety and wellbeing for all participants.”

Bogus claims of “safety” were echoed by La Trobe University, which declared that it expected the festival to

have “measures in place to ensure respectful exchange of views as well as community safety.” The Greater Bendigo City Council backed the censorship as its flagship event disintegrated, refusing to acknowledge that its capitulation to lobby pressure had destroyed the festival.

The rapid and determined decision by writers, academics and other participants to withdraw from last weekend’s festival is an important expression of the deep-seated popular opposition to the Gaza genocide and the government’s attacks on those opposing Israel’s war crimes. It powerfully demonstrates that writers and other creative workers will not be silenced and follows a forthright appeal in June by prize-winning author Michelle de Kretser.

Kretser used her Sydney Writers’ Festival address to condemn Israel’s war crimes after winning the Stella Prize for her novel *Theory & Practice*.

The two-time Miles Franklin winner said government support for Israel’s crimes “had serious consequences for democracy in Australia,” with “scholars, creatives, and journalists silenced, their funding revoked, and their contracts cancelled for expressing anti-genocide views.” She warned that “precious rights” were being “eroded” and “authoritarian laws rushed in on the flimsiest of pretexts.”

Earlier this year, Creative Australia removed Lebanese-Australian artist Khaled Sabsabi—an outspoken supporter of Palestine—from representing Australia at the 2026 Venice Biennale after a right-wing media campaign supported by federal arts minister Tony Burke. More than 4,300 artists signed protest statements, and the five other shortlisted artists refused to serve as replacements, threatening to leave Australia without representation at the exhibition. Creative Australia was forced to reinstate Sabsabi in July following the backlash.

The weaponisation of antisemitism accusations is being challenged by Jewish voices.

Max Kaiser of the Jewish Council of Australia dismissed 5A’s characterisation of Abdel-Fattah, stating that she “in no way poses a threat to Jews and has been a long-standing ally of ours.” Kaiser described 5A as “a right-wing pro-Israel lobby group” that “institutions should ignore,” noting that “a growing number of Jewish people are moving away from Zionism.”

The attempt to silence artists and writers is part of a broader assault on cultural life. Palestinian academics and supporters have been systematically targeted, using false antisemitism allegations to remove voices from academic and cultural discourse.

Zionist lobby groups are only the immediate spearhead of these attacks. The censorship could not take place without the unwavering political support of Australia’s ruling elite—including the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and its state counterparts.

In February, the Albanese Labor government, with bipartisan support from the Liberal-National Coalition, pushed through new “hate speech” offences carrying mandatory minimum six-year prison terms, expanding police and prosecutorial powers against dissent. The vague laws are intended to criminalise strident condemnations of Zionism.

The Victorian and New South Wales state Labor governments have passed anti-democratic measures aimed at pro-Palestine protesters.

At the same time, the Albanese government maintains dozens of export permits to Israel, keeps Australia in the F-35 supply chain used to bomb Gaza, and upholds a \$917 million contract with Israeli arms maker Elbit Systems. Labor’s claim that Australia “does not supply weapons to Israel” is a patent lie.

The methods used against Palestine supporters—surveillance, court actions, cultural blacklists and coordinated lobby pressure campaigns—will be unleashed against striking workers and protesters opposing war in the Middle East, and the broader eruption of imperialist militarism, including Australia’s frontline role in the US-led preparations for a conflict with China.

The Bendigo boycott shows the readiness of artists, workers, and youth to fight against war and political repression. That struggle cannot go forward if it is restricted to appeals to Labor and parliament.

Writers, artists, and creative workers must take their place in the fight to build an independent socialist movement of the working class against the Gaza genocide, the ever-growing danger of a third imperialist war, authoritarianism and their source, the bankrupt capitalist order.



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