

# Festival censorship of Mary Wallopers over Gaza protest backfires

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Censorship of Irish folk-punk band The Mary Wallopers by Portsmouth's Victorious Festival for displaying a Palestinian flag has backfired. As the festival's false claims and denials about the censorship unravelled, some bands pulled out of the festival. Many more expressed their solidarity, protesting Israel's genocide in Gaza.

The Mary Wallopers took to the stage at Victorious on August 22 with a Palestinian flag, as they have done for the last six years. Midway through their opening song, as they led chants of "Free Palestine," festival staff cut the band's sound and tore down the flag. The crowd booed, chanting "Let them play."

Victorious organisers Superstruct Entertainment issued a statement in which they lied about events and the reasons for their censorship. Victorious wrote that they had advised the band in advance of a "long-standing policy of not allowing flags of any kind at the event," although they claimed to "respect their right to express their views during the show."

When a flag was displayed "contrary to our policy," this was "raised with the artist's crew" but "the show was not ended at this point." Claiming falsely it was the band's own decision to stop playing, Victorious said they cut the sound "only after the band used a chant which is widely understood to have a discriminatory context."

They did not name the content of this alleged chant, but denied it was "the band's call to 'Free Palestine'." They restated their lying claim to "respect the right of artists... to express their views."

The band responded by uploading to Instagram a video of the incident. They demanded the festival retract immediately their "misleading" statement.

"Our video clearly shows a Victorious crew member coming on stage, interfering with our show, removing the flag from the stage and then the sound being cut following a chant of 'Free Palestine'.

"The same crew member is later heard... saying 'You aren't playing until the flag is removed'."

There was an immediate and powerful response from fellow artists at Victorious. Brit Award-winners The Last

Dinner Party condemned the censorship as "outrageous," declaring "we cannot cosign political censorship and will therefore be boycotting the festival to-day."

On Instagram, they noted "as Gazans are deliberately plunged into catastrophic famine after two years of escalating violence it is urgent and obvious that artists use their platform to draw attention to the cause." To "direct attention away from the genocide in order to maintain an apolitical image," was they said, "immensely disappointing".

Likewise, The Academic said they could not "in good conscience" play at "a festival that silences free speech." Another Irish band, Cliffords bluntly vowed to "refuse to play if we are to be censored for showing our support to the people of Palestine." The ongoing genocide and declaration of famine in Gaza were cited by them as the very reasons they could not stay silent.

During the set by headliners Vampire Weekend, frontman Ezra Koenig told his Victorious audience it was "wrong" to punish someone for flying a flag. "The terrible suffering of the Palestinian people deserves all of our sympathy."

With solidarity messages coming in from other artists, Victorious backtracked frantically. In a second statement, they admitted their act of censorship was over the Palestinian flag. They suggested their only fault was of failing to "handle the explanation of our policies sensitively or far enough in advance to allow a sensible conclusion to be reached."

Victorious did accept that the audience were unable to hear any comments after they cut the band's sound. In a desperate attempt to save face, they promised to make a "substantial donation to humanitarian relief efforts for the Palestinian people."

Other artists, like Nell Mescal and Dropkick Murphys, spoke out for the band. Two days after the censorship, Dublin punk band The Murder Capital called on their audience at the All Points East Festival in London to "Make some noise for The Mary Wallopers... I want to hear some... noise for the people of Palestine."

The crowd erupted in solidarity chants of “Free Palestine.”

Irish rap trio Kneecap also issued statements of support. Kneecap are the highest profile victims of artistic censorship over support for Palestine, barred from Hungary and facing repression in Britain under counter-terror laws. They called out the injustice on social media, tweeting “Speak up against genocide in England and you’re treated like a criminal. Up the Mary Wallopers. Free Palestine!”

Two days later, Kneecap faced down ferocious attempts by pro-Israel agitators to silence them at the Rock en Seine festival in Paris. Against a backdrop of whistles and pro-Israel flags meant to disrupt the show, Kneecap took the stage calmly. When they quipped, “We’re not here to cause fights... it’s all love, all support for Palestine,” security removed the troublemakers.

The rest of the concert went off without a hitch, with the crowd chanting “Free, free Palestine.” Kneecap again made clear where they stood. Their performance, cheered by thousands, directly contradicted the idea that singing against genocide was a threat to public order. Rock en Seine’s owner Matthieu Pigasse told critics: “To claim that supporting the Palestinian cause is a threat to public order is deplorable.”

The Victorious incident has also drawn attention to corporate censorship in the arts. British promoter Superstruct Entertainment, which operates Victorious, is a major festival player, controlling over 85 events in Australia and Europe as of March 2023.

In June 2024, Superstruct was bought by New York-based private equity giant KKR. KKR’s portfolio ranges from major venues to boardrooms, and has drawn sharp criticism for its investments in the Israeli military. An open letter signed by artists including Massive Attack and Brian Eno warned that “KKR invests billions of pounds in companies which... develop Israeli underground data centres, and advertise real estate on illegally occupied land in Israeli settlements in the West Bank,” implicating the firm in “apartheid and genocide.”

In other words, Victorious and its sister festivals are now owned by a firm deeply tied to Israel’s war economy. The decision to cut off The Mary Wallopers, just days after the UN declared famine in Gaza, exposed the contempt of these profit-hungry bosses for free speech and solidarity with Palestine.

The stand taken by bands and audiences is part of a worldwide upsurge of opposition to the Israeli assault on Gaza, especially among young people and cultural workers. In Gaza itself, the devastation is horrendous. Over 62,000 people, more than half of them women and children, have been slaughtered by the Israeli military in one of the worst crimes against humanity in history.

This massive humanitarian crisis has galvanised protests and solidarity actions across the globe. Tens of thousands have marched under the slogan “Free Palestine,” and countless artists and intellectuals have signed open letters decrying the war and boycotting institutions seen as complicit.

This must bring them into direct conflict with governments that continue to arm and finance Israel, giving the war criminals, like Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour government in the UK, a free pass. This poses the need for a political response beyond the protests and boycotts, important as they are.

The legal vendetta being pursued against Kneecap in the wake of the proscription of Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation has emboldened the right in the face of this seething discontent. Political censorship of the arts has a long heritage, from McCarthyite blacklisting of folk singers to the defamation of artists opposing the Gulf War. Victorious clearly believed they had a free pass when it came to defending their corporate profits.

The devastation of Gaza is morally repugnant but cannot be addressed purely as a moral question. It requires a political struggle against the very system which has created it, capitalism, a system that also produces and requires the censorship of critical artistic voices.

The fight against censorship is inseparable from the fight against the system that produces it. Defence of The Mary Wallopers and all those targeted for speaking out cannot be separated from the struggle to end the Israeli genocide, the imperialist wars that underpin it, and the capitalist system that drives them all. Artists must turn to the international working class to fight for a socialist programme against imperialist war and capitalist exploitation.



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