

# Australia: Harassment of anti-Zionist Jews after Bondi Beach terror attack

**Richard Phillips**  
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*Michelle Berkon, a Jewish anti-Zionist and member of Jews Against the Occupation '48 in Sydney, was removed by police from Bondi Beach on December 15 for wearing a keffiyeh the day after the mass shooting during a Hanukkah celebration attended by approximately 1,000 people.*

*In this edited interview with the World Socialist Web Site, Berkon describes how a memorial vigil for an attack on Jews had been transformed by pro-Zionist elements into a pro-Israel event. She also speaks about the role of police and media, the doxxing and threats she later faced, and the wider campaign against anti-Zionist Jews and democratic rights in Australia.*

**Richard Phillips:** Can you describe what happened at the Bondi memorial and why you went there?

**Michelle Berkon:** Why did we go to Bondi? Fifteen Jewish people were murdered and obviously targeted and that was a kick in the guts for all Jewish people. From a Jewish person, particularly of European Jewish background with its collective memory, any massacre of Jews is really tough.

We went because we were affected by a monstrous crime against our community. I would also say that if this had been a targeted attack against Muslims, Arabs, Christians, First Nations people, or the queer community, it would have felt just as devastating.

Even though we knew the Zionists would have a strong presence there—it would be disingenuous to pretend otherwise—we had seen online that there were Israeli flags everywhere and were concerned. We didn't want Zionists to claim this tragedy as they have claimed every other tragedy in Jewish history. But when we arrived, we realised it had become a total Zionist event. It had been completely co-opted. Later, people messaged us saying they would have liked to go but chose not to do so because Zionists had taken it over.

Nevertheless, once you take a moral stand, you cannot back down. Zionists came and stood around us; they were not doing anything unusual, just the usual insults: "You should be ashamed," "Take that keffiyeh off," "You're Nazis" and so on. A police officer then came over and said something like, "Take the item of clothing off or leave, you're distressing people and causing alarm."

He left, and about five minutes later an inspector and a detective inspector arrived and said force would be used if we did not comply. We said that we were not doing anything wrong or being aggressive. While this was happening, the crowd gathered, becoming more vocal and aggressive.

I told the police that they were the ones causing the problem by drawing attention to us because before that people were just looking at us as a curiosity, but as soon as they thought we were going to be removed, they were emboldened and became more aggressive. By then there was a cordon of police around us, and we had already agreed to leave.

We were about to leave when about 40 police arrived, including the riot squad, who surrounded us while the crowd shouted, "Get her out! Get her out." I refused to walk with my back to the crowd because that felt like a

defeat. I wanted to face them because I am not ashamed to be seen or filmed and had done nothing wrong.

Surrounded by police, we moved away from the beach, but media approached and began asking questions. The police closed in to try to stop me speaking to the press, so I raised my voice and did my best to get the message out about why a Jewish person was wearing the keffiyeh to the vigil.

The police banned me and Dominic Wy Kanak, a long-serving Greens councillor for Bondi Ward, from being anywhere in Bondi for six hours, meaning we could not attend a vigil planned for the evening.

**RP:** I understand you were born and raised in Bondi.

**MB:** Until I was six, I lived in South Bondi and went to Emanuel Kindergarten. This was my community. This is a huge sadness for me—most of the adults I grew up with had the blue tattoo on their arms and had lost children, parents, siblings and spouses in the Holocaust. This should be my community. Instead, many Jews like me have walked away because the descendants of these survivors have become, frankly, vile, racist, supremacist and ignorant people, which is heartbreaking.

**RP:** You were not arrested but were any other measures imposed on you?

**MB:** No, nothing else, but the only reason we agreed to leave was because they threatened to arrest me for wearing a keffiyeh, claiming it was inciting violence and could lead to charges of inciting fear and alarm. It was similar when Judith Treanor, Suzie Gold and I, as members of Jews Against the Occupation '48, protested [former Liberal Party] Peter Dutton speaking at Emanuel Synagogue just before the federal election. We were nearly arrested over a "German-looking" font on our placards.

**RP:** Can you talk about the doxxing and the death threats since your appearance at Bondi?

**MB:** I later found out that my address, phone number and full name had been doxxed, so I went to my local police station and reported it as a crime because doxxing is now an offence, but they did not take it seriously at all. Death threats had been sent to me and to Judith, another member, through her online business. When we attended the station together a couple of days later, we discovered there was not even a record that I had previously reported it to police.

Because of all this, and a very nasty anonymous phone call, I had to install CCTV at home. The fallout is exhausting and the police treat you as a criminal or potential criminal. Had they simply said at the outset, "These people are here legitimately, leave them alone; you might not like what they are doing but this is a vigil for slain people," those Zionists would not have been emboldened to behave the way they did, and the situation would not have escalated.

There is a broader pattern in policing. After one rally, a man abused me with genuinely antisemitic slurs, saying all Jews are required by the Talmud to be paedophiles. He was spouting Holocaust denial and similar filth. This is particularly triggering given that around 80 percent of my family were murdered in the Holocaust, yet police standing a few metres

away claimed they did not hear him. Even worse, the inspector in charge said that this was “legitimate free speech” and to be expected at an anti-Israel event.

RP: What other harassment is occurring against Jewish people?

MB: One of our older members, who still interacts with the Jewish community, is pretty much afraid to show her face anywhere near any of us.

For younger people, it’s even worse. I know several young people who have been kicked out of their homes. I know one young man who had to couch surf during his HSC year because his parents had disowned him. I know someone else who was at uni and had zero money; his father was helping him financially, then cut off that financial support and said to him, essentially: “If you agree with me politically, I’ll put you back on, I’ll give you some more help.” That is the level of blackmail.

There are quite a few academics who have been threatened with their jobs. It is not just happening in the Palestinian and Arab and Muslim communities that people are being doxxed and harassed. It is happening within the anti-Zionist Jewish community too, but it is very different for us because we are excluded from our own communities as well.

With Muslim and Arabic people—again, I am not wishing to swap places or to compare suffering—these people are enduring genocide—but at least their own community embraces them. Whereas for us, the only community we have now is each other. Many do not have their extended families. Some do not even have their own nuclear families. They have lost their entire social circle. They have lost an enormous amount by standing up against genocide.

At Bondi, there were people yelling, “We hope Hamas rapes you to death and cuts off your head.” One of the worst, which I’ve heard several times, but it never loses its impact, is: “It’s a pity any of your family survived the Holocaust.”

When a Jew can say that to another Jew, you know there is something astonishingly wrong, something profoundly twisted has happened. That is a level of depravity that is very hard to fathom.

RP: What do you think about the government measures to further restrict the democratic right to protest?

MB: These measures are deeply reactionary and anti-democratic. Jillian Segal [the Albanese government’s special antisemitism envoy], who presents herself as defending Jewish safety, has a history of leadership roles in Zionist organisations. Her husband is a major donor to the far-right group Advance Australia, which should tell you something about her priorities.

Groups like “Lions of Zion” are holding an event to celebrate Israel’s war crimes framed as celebrating “Jewish and Israeli ingenuity.” Yet when Neo-Nazis were openly on the streets, Segal had nothing to say, other than backing laws that will be used against anti-war movements.

NSW Premier Chris Minns has warned that protesters are unleashing forces they will not be able to control, but in fact figures like Segal are empowering far-right forces whose sophistication and power they do not understand. Once the far right has finished attacking left-wing protesters, they are not going to invite Jews to dinner; these laws are part of a broader authoritarian shift.

My public statement to Minns summed up our position: “These laws are not about protecting Jews; they are about protecting weapons industries and crushing the struggle for Indigenous rights, workers’ rights, LGBTQIA rights, environmental protection and all the other issues crucial for an inclusive and sustainable future.”

By hiding behind ‘Jewish safety’ to impose repressive laws, the government is using Jewish people as human shields and endangering us, because we will bear the resentment of the wider community.”

RP: What are the consequences if the new laws are allowed to stand?

MB: Most Australians have no idea of the pressure on Jewish people who stand up against Israel. If they understood the vileness of the insults,

threats and intimidation we endure, then they might better grasp that we are taking a principled stand at significant personal cost.

We refuse to centre on this because we’re dealing with a genocide and Palestinians are the primary victims, but if people knew about the intensity of our commitment, they might better understand what is happening to Palestinians. Australians have been confused and lied to, not only by Israel but by our own governments and media and seeing the price anti-Zionist Jews are willing to pay might help them see through that.

Minns’ new laws are about criminalising dissent—especially anti-war and pro-environment, pro-Palestine dissent—they’re not about protecting Jewish life. By invoking Jewish safety to shield imperial and corporate interests, the government fuels resentment against Jews while enabling future war crimes.

We began as Jews Against the Occupation in 2003, focusing on Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan Heights, but our politics have deepened, which is why we are now Jews Against the Occupation ‘48, opposing the entire Zionist project from 1948 onward.

All of Israel is illegally occupied Palestinian land; Israel is an illegitimate entity that never fulfilled even the requirements for UN membership, and the deeper you go into the history, the clearer that becomes.

RP: The WSWS is a Trotskyist publication. The Fourth International opposed the formation of the state of Israel from the outset in 1948.

MB: You were certainly right on that. Israel was an illegitimate project from the beginning. The whole situation is an outrage, and while Chris Minns is particularly egregious, this is not just about one premier but the Australian Labor Party which is a pro-imperialist party.

I had a massive argument with a friend and comrade in the pro-Palestine movement who is in the Labor Party. He called Labor “the party of the working classes.” I nearly collapsed. How does that work? No pro-imperialist war party can be on the side of the working classes.



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