

Australia: Writers' festival director Louise Adler resigns in protest over Randa Abdel?Fattah ban

Richard Phillips
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Shortly after this article was published, it was announced that the entire Adelaide Writers' Week for 2026 has been cancelled as a result of the mass boycott by writers protesting censorship. The WSWS will write further on this.

The future of Adelaide Writers' Week (AWW) is in serious doubt after its director, Louise Adler, and four members of the Adelaide Festival board, resigned over the decision to remove Palestinian?Australian author Randa Abdel?Fattah from this year's program.

The board's decision—taken under mounting political pressure from the South Australian Labor government and Zionist lobbyists—has triggered a mass boycott not only by authors, 180 at the time of writing, but also by scores of musicians scheduled to appear at *Tryp*, the festival's three?day music program.?

Musicians who have withdrawn include New York producer DJ Haram and Australia?based artists SOVBLKPSSY, Skorpion King, Mr. John and H34VEN0N34RTH. Their departure has already forced organisers to cut *Tryp* from three days to two, underscoring the scale of the crisis engulfing the entire Adelaide Festival.?

On Sunday, an open letter signed by previous AWW directors and senior Adelaide Festival officials, including Rob Brookman, Robyn Archer, Peter Sellars and Neil Armfield, demanded Abdel?Fattah's immediate reinstatement. Their intervention reflected deep concern across artistic circles that the festival is being transformed into an instrument of state?sanctioned political censorship.?

In a powerful comment announcing her resignation, published by *Guardian Australia*, Adler condemned the disinvitation of Abdel?Fattah, declaring that it "weakens freedom of speech and is the harbinger of a less free nation, where lobbying and political pressure determine who gets to speak and who doesn't."

She warned that in the wake of the Bondi attack "protests are being outlawed, free speech is being constrained and politicians are rushing through processes to ban phrases and slogans," while religious leaders are to be policed, universities monitored, the public broadcaster scrutinised and the arts

starved.

Adler drew a direct and powerful historical analogy, asking, "Are you or have you ever been a critic of Israel? Joe McCarthy would be cheering on the inheritors of his tactics."

She went on to expose the fraudulent character of the board's invocation of "community cohesion," describing it as "a managerialist term intended to stop thinking."

The "raison d'être of art and literature," she wrote, is to disrupt the status quo, and "art in the service of 'social cohesion' is propaganda." She noted that the supposed concern for "safety" is in reality code for "I don't want to hear your opinion," applied in this case to a single Palestinian invitee.

Denouncing the "increasingly extreme and repressive efforts of pro?Israel lobbyists to stifle even the mildest criticism," Adler explained that the mantra "Bondi changed everything" has given these forces, their media stenographers and a "spineless political class" yet another coercive weapon. She concluded that she could not "be party to silencing writers" and warned that AWW is "the canary in the coalmine," telling writers and other colleagues in the arts: "They are coming for you."

While the Adelaide Festival board and state and federal Labor governments mouth platitudes about "fighting antisemitism," their actions constitute a direct, anti?democratic attack not only on Abdel?Fattah—the only Palestinian writer in the program—but also on Adler, a non?Zionist Jew and leading member of the Jewish Council of Australia whose relatives were murdered in the Holocaust. So much for their hypocritical claims about "cultural sensitivity."?

The Adelaide Festival board held a crisis meeting on Saturday. Confronted with potential revenue losses from the likely collapse of Writers' Week—which in 2025 attracted more than 160,000 attendees, almost half the total festival audience—some board members reportedly considered reinstating Abdel?Fattah.

Under intense political pressure from South Australian Labor Premier Peter Malinauskas, almost certainly in close consultation with the Albanese federal Labor government, the board rejected reinstatement and reaffirmed the ban on the

Palestinian?Australian academic.?

Three board members resigned after the meeting, followed by board chair Tracey Whiting, whose departure took immediate effect. Their resignations leave the board unable to meet quorum requirements under the Adelaide Festival Corporation Act 1998, including gender?composition rules, unless the state government rapidly appoints replacements—under conditions where the 2026 event is already teetering on the brink. The remaining board members are Adelaide Airport managing director Brenton Cox, Adelaide City Council member Mary Couros, former Labor minister Leesa Chesson and senior Treasury and Finance analyst Dr Jennifer Fuller, described as a “government observer.”?

Premier Malinauskas has publicly declared his “wholehearted” support for the decision to exclude Abdel?Fattah, boasting that he gave the board his “clear and plain” opinion before it acted, even as he cynically insists that he did not formally “instruct” it. He has framed the disinvitation as a matter of “cultural safety,” claiming Abdel?Fattah’s statements “crossed a line” and endangered “community cohesion,” parroting the language of official national?security and “social cohesion” doctrine.?

More revealing still, the board has created a special subcommittee to conduct an “ongoing board?led review” of Writers’ Week, with “ongoing engagement with relevant government agencies and external experts.” This body stands above existing Writers’ Week structures and is clearly intended to vet future programming according to government?defined standards of “safety” and “cohesion.” In practice, it means Palestinian authors, opponents of Zionism and critics of the Gaza genocide can be filtered out in advance under the guise of risk management and “cultural sensitivity.”?

This mechanism, which vindicates Adler’s warnings about the future, conforms entirely to the censorship framework advanced by Jillian Segal, the Albanese government’s Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism, which has already been adopted by Labor at the federal level.

Segal’s recommendations call for external oversight and “community safety” criteria over cultural and academic institutions; funding conditionalities and “hate speech” clauses allowing grants to be terminated when recipients are deemed “antisemitic” or otherwise “hateful”; and broad, politicised definitions that equate anti?Zionism and criticism of Israeli policy with antisemitism.?

Albanese government Resources Minister Madeleine King yesterday welcomed the festival’s ban on Abdel?Fattah, confirming that the disinvitation is fully in line with Labor’s broader response to the Gaza genocide and its alignment with US and Israeli interests. State and federal Labor alike are sending a clear message: writers who oppose Zionism and denounce the mass killing in Gaza can be barred from public platforms with the explicit blessing of government.?

The censorship of Abdel?Fattah and the forcing out of festival curators and administrators who defend free speech and refuse to comply with Labor’s pro?Zionist dictates are not isolated incidents. They form part of an escalating, global pattern of government interference in the arts, through which the ruling class seeks to police cultural institutions and crush mounting opposition to imperialist war and domestic authoritarianism.?

In the United States, Donald Trump has used the presidency to remake cultural bodies—stacking boards, threatening funding and issuing executive orders. His administration has targeted museums, universities and public broadcasters that host anti?war or progressive voices, using accusations of “un?American” or “anti?Israel” bias to justify cuts and purges.

In Australia, the same basic instruments of class rule—political vetting, blacklisting, funding threats, smear campaigns, the creation of supervisory bodies and codes of conduct to police “acceptable” ideas—are being implemented by federal and state Labor governments.?

Labor’s unwavering support for the cancellation of Abdel?Fattah from Adelaide Writers’ Week is a deliberate provocation aimed at setting a precedent: if a Palestinian?Australian writer can be removed under government pressure and a new censorship subcommittee imposed over a flagship literary festival, similar mechanisms can and will be extended across the entire cultural and educational sphere.?

The powerful boycott of the writers’ festival and the support of tens of thousands of people on social media demanding Abdel?Fattah’s reinstatement demonstrate deep?seated opposition among writers, artists and ordinary people to this authoritarian campaign. This resistance, however, must be consciously developed into an independent political movement of the working class against war, racism and the capitalist system that is generating these anti?democratic attacks.?

The attempt to silence opponents of the Gaza genocide at Adelaide Writers’ Week is a stark warning that the ruling class is preparing far broader assaults on free expression and political dissent. These attacks must be met with organised, collective resistance, oriented to mobilising the working class in Australia and internationally on a socialist program against the entire imperialist order.?



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