

Crucial questions posed by Labor's censorship and destruction of Australian writers' festival

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The exclusion of Randa Abdel-Fattah from the Adelaide Writers' Week (AWW), and the destruction of this year's event—Australia's most popular and longest-running literary festival—raises decisive questions about how writers, artists and other creative workers can fight government interference and political censorship.

In 2025, Abdel-Fattah, a Palestinian-Australian novelist, academic and well-known opponent of the Gaza genocide, was invited to speak at this year's AWW about *Discipline*, her latest novel—a fictional account of the silencing of Palestinian and Muslim voices in Australia during the May 2021 Israel–Gaza conflict.

On January 8, the Adelaide Festival Board, following demands by South Australian Labor Premier Peter Malinauskas and the Zionist lobby, cancelled her scheduled appearance. Citing the December 14 terror attack on Jews at Bondi Beach, the board claimed that the Palestinian-Australian author's attendance would be culturally insensitive.

The blatantly racist ban sparked a boycott involving around 180 writers, leading to the resignation of four board members, including its chair, as well as Louise Adler, the AWW director. Adler denounced the ban, saying she would not be part of “silencing writers,” and warned that such anti-democratic attacks would intensify.

The following day, a newly appointed festival board issued an “unreserved apology” to Abdel-Fattah but, instead of reinstating her, cancelled AWW and issued a vague promise to invite her to next year's event.

The mass boycott expressed enormous opposition, not only to the gratuitous attack on Abdel-Fattah, but to Israel's genocide on the Palestinians and the broader assault on artistic freedom and democratic rights that have accompanied the war crimes.

But it would be a grave mistake to conclude from the belated apology to Abdel-Fattah that this specific attack is over, or that the turn towards censorship can be defeated through occasional boycotts and pressure.

In the first instance, the apology had the character of a cynical exercise in damage control, motivated in no small measure by the prospect of damages stemming from any legal action over

the slanderous statement that was issued to justify Abdel-Fattah's exclusion.

Moreover, rather than proceed with this year's writers' week, free of censorship, the new board maintained the cancellation. It was clear enough that for the South Australian Labor government, the Zionist lobby and other right-wing forces, blowing up the entire event was a preferable outcome to it proceeding with a Palestinian author present.

South Australian Labor Premier Malinauskas has refused to retract his own vicious attacks on Abdel-Fattah. There is every prospect that next year's event will be subjected to a similar campaign of censorship.

But above all, artists and other creatives need to draw broader political lessons from the experience through which they have passed and from the broader context within which the controversy in Adelaide erupted.

At times, the Labor Party has postured as a supporter of the arts, as against the Liberal-National Coalition. But in Malinauskas, writers have been confronted with a figure no less authoritarian than the fascist US President Donald Trump. And it is not him alone. In NSW, Premier Chris Minns has declared his intent to illegalise political protest. Federally, the Labor government is supporting a modern-day Holocaust and persecuting its opponents.

Artists and other supporters of democratic rights, in other words, must face up to the reality that Labor is a ruthless party of authoritarianism and imperialist war. The issue is not appealing to Labor, but conducting the most determined political struggle against it.

Such a struggle will not come from the unions, corporatised entities that have more in common with big business and the governments than with the workers they falsely claim to represent. The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance has not lifted a finger to defend Abdel-Fattah or any other cultural figure that has come under attack. And more broadly, the unions have suppressed any action by workers against the genocide, preventing even a single industrial action against the war crimes. Senior union leaders have joined with Minns and others in demanding an end to all pro-Palestinian

demonstrations in the wake of Bondi.

Nor can artists seek defence in official arts institutions and organisations. As the Adelaide Festival has so graphically demonstrated, such bodies are beholden to governments, corporate interests and the wealthiest donors. To them, art is a commodity, to be profited from when convenient and acceptable to the powers-that-be, and to be suppressed when not.

The defence of artistic freedom and of democratic rights more broadly requires a new perspective. Such a perspective cannot be based on immediate or superficial impressions or on pragmatic calculations. It has to be derived from the lessons of history.

Leon Trotsky's 1938 essay *Art and Politics in Our Epoch*, written one year before the outbreak of World War II and amid the systematic destruction of democratic rights and the subordination of all culture to state power in fascist-ruled Germany and Italy, is highly relevant for writers, artists and creative workers fighting government censorship today.

Trotsky wrote: "Art, which is the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time the least protected, suffers most from the decline and decay of bourgeois society. To find a solution to this impasse through art itself is impossible. It is a crisis which concerns all culture, beginning at its economic base and ending in the highest spheres of ideology.

"Art can neither escape the crisis nor partition itself off. Art cannot save itself. It will rot away inevitably... unless present-day society is able to rebuild itself. This task is essentially revolutionary in character. For these reasons the function of art in our epoch is determined by its relation to the revolution."

Trotsky could have been speaking of the situation today. Who can argue that serious art can coexist with a capitalist system that is hurtling towards the abyss and spewing up all of the horrors of the 1930s? In America, US President Donald Trump is carrying out a Hitler-inspired war on culture, as he seeks to erect a dictatorship in the centre of world capitalism.

In every country, governments are turning to authoritarianism, as the political form that corresponds to a program of war abroad and a social order nakedly dominated by the interests of billionaire profit, at the expense of the vast majority.

The basic reality that serious culture and capitalism cannot coexist, which found such often horrific and tragic expression in the first half of the 20th century, is clear again today.

Culture and artistic freedom must find a new social base of support. Serious artists will only find that in the working class.

The events of the genocide have underscored a gulf that exists, between the official political and corporate establishments in every country and working people. While the former have signalled there are no lines they will not cross, including supporting the mass slaughter of innocent civilians, among ordinary people a vast well of anti-war, humane and

democratic sentiment has found expression.

That is only an anticipation of an explosion of class struggle that is developing and that will erupt over the coming period. In the US, it is the working class that is coming forward in the fight against ICE persecution of immigrants, the domestic deployment of the military and Trump's dictatorial assault, not the Democrats, the corporate media or any other official institution.

Just as the horrors of the 20th century are reemerging, so too will the basic reality that mobilising the working class is the basis of any fight against inequality, war and authoritarianism. While the ruling elites, presiding over a decaying social order, depend upon lies and falsification, the working class can only take forward its struggle through a scientific and true appraisal of contemporary society. Serious art can contribute to that understanding, which is why it is attacked during all periods of reaction.

Writers, artists, musicians, actors, and other creative workers cannot defeat government censorship and state repression through individual protests or moral appeals to governments and state-funded cultural institutions.

When creative workers link up with fellow workers in their own industries—audio, video and other technical workers, venue and gallery employees, administrative staff—and coordinate with workers in transport, logistics, and key areas of industrial production, they will constitute a powerful political and industrial force.

This requires the creation of democratically controlled rank-and-file committees of writers and artists of all genres, independent of the trade union bureaucracies. Such committees must take up the defence of all those targeted and victimised for their political views, exposing and combating the lies used to justify repression.

The struggle for artistic freedom must be linked to the concrete issues facing workers across cultural industries, including opposition to cost-cutting and job destruction, demands for safe working conditions, and job security for contract artists and casual cultural labour. United campaigns must be developed to demand dramatic increases in funding for cultural institutions, as well as for public health and education.

We urge writers, artists and all creative workers to consider these critical questions and contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party to discuss how to take forward the fight for this perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact