

Greens-led Bristol City Council censors art against genocide

Laura Tiernan, Amelia Lopez
26 March 2026

An exhibition by Art Against War Club (AAWC) in Bristol, England, has been censored by the Greens-led Bristol City Council (BCC).

Just one day after “Anatomy of Solidarity” opened at Bristol’s M Shed, artists arrived to find the venue roped off and their artworks taken down.

The artists explained, “M Shed requested that we remove the names of specific arms companies, as well as any representations of individuals associated with them. In response, we literally took a knife to our art and cut out the ‘offending’ material.”

References to Israeli weapons manufacturer Elbit Systems (which operates a factory in nearby Filton) and British-owned BAE Systems, embedded in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) programs in local schools, were cut from the artwork, leaving gaping holes.

A collage depicting Bristol’s statue of 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston, his head rendered as a quadcopter killer drone (of the type manufactured by Elbit Systems), was removed in its entirety but later reinstated.

“How can we effectively call out the local companies whose weaponry is being used to commit the ultimate crime of genocide when our public spaces actively prevent us from doing so?”, the artists challenged in a statement issued March 17.

Seeta Patel Dance, which invited AAWC to exhibit alongside local collectives Latinas in Bristol and Creative Shift, has also opposed BCC’s censorship: “Bristol is a City of Sanctuary. Yet it is also entangled with companies that profit from manufacturing the weapons that drive people to seek sanctuary. This is an issue we can no longer ignore.”

AAWC said they had maintained good communication with M Shed since accepting the invitation to exhibit six months ago. They supplied the museum “with everything they requested, and the exhibition was signed off at every

stage”. (How closely art is vetted and controlled!)

M Shed’s staff had been supportive: “On the 9th March we installed the exhibition with the Public Programmes Manager present, who informed us that all pieces had been ‘flagged and cleared’ both verbally and by email with the creative team, and that they were proud to be supporting such ‘Important work’.”

But the exhibition was closed on March 11. “A member of staff told us she had been told not to speak to us and that this issue was with the ‘Bristol City Council’s legal’ department,” the artists explained.

The political erasure of Bristol’s exhibition is part of international efforts to suppress opposition to the Gaza genocide and anti-war politics more broadly. Guidelines falsely conflating opposition to the Israeli state with antisemitism have been adopted by arts bodies, universities and government agencies to stifle critical thought, protest and artistic expression.

This latest attack is especially significant. It sees the Green Party assuming repressive ground long occupied by Labour and the Tories, and in Bristol, a city internationally renowned for its street art, graffiti and murals of a generally left-wing character (it is the birthplace of Banksy).

The Greens-led council released a statement supporting its censorship of the exhibition. It spoke hypocritically of the importance of museums as “shared spaces where people can encounter new ideas, share experiences, and explore the world from different perspectives”, while insisting on BCC’s “obligation to ensure we balance freedom of speech and a duty to prevent harm to people and property. With this in mind, a decision was taken to refuse permission to display certain items that depict Bristol businesses and people associated with them.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* contacted Green Party Councillor Tony Dyer, leader of Bristol City Council, asking him, “Do you as council leader support this

statement, and if so, how did the relevant artwork pose ‘harm to people and property’, and how does censoring artwork contribute to upholding freedom of speech?”

Dyer refused to answer, assigning a PR manager from BCC’s Policy, Strategy and Communications team to reply to our email, repasting the council’s original statement.

The Greens’ role as overseers of political censorship should give its supporters pause for thought. The party has gathered significant backing, with membership rising from 68,000 last September to more than 200,000 today, and UK-wide voter support at 18 percent. Among 18–24-year-olds, 51 per cent back the Greens, according to March 23 polling by YouGov.

But the Greens are a capitalist party. In Bristol, its councillors have a rotten record. In 2013, Green Party councillor Guy Hoyt joined Bristol’s “rainbow cabinet” under Mayor George Ferguson, working with the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats to identify cuts of £35 million. Hoyt hit back at opponents, declaring there was “no alternative but to accept the financial situation which has been imposed upon us”, adding pompously, “with power comes responsibility”.

In Brighton and Hove, where the Greens became the largest party in 2011 and 2020, they presided over swingeing cuts. Jason Kitcat, Greens councillor responsible for Finance & Central Services, declared of their 2012 budget, “some services will be reduced, fees will go up, efficiencies will be found.” He boasted to the *Argus* that this proved that “Greens deliver.”

In Bristol, under Dyer and deputy leader Helen Mack, the Greens are pushing £43 million in cuts this financial year.

In February 2025, Dyer claimed he was shocked by the council’s funding shortfall, telling the *Guardian*: “It was a bit like when you buy a car, but you don’t look under the bonnet ... and then you think, ‘Oh, my God, what have I got into?’” He added, “They won’t be painless cuts. You can’t make those changes without someone losing out. It feels bloody awful.”

If the Greens win power in Westminster, they will play a similarly treacherous role, following in the footsteps of their counterparts in Germany and elsewhere.

Green Party leader Zack Polanski has won a following for his left-populist condemnations of war, poverty, and environmental destruction. However, his party supports NATO and proposes various reforms to capitalism rather than its abolition. This includes a modest wealth tax of 1 per cent for those earning £10m to £1bn, and 2 per cent on

wealth exceeding £1bn, which leaves the wealth and power of the oligarchy intact.

At M Shed this week, visitors to the exhibition expressed shock over the vandalism and censoring of artworks. Theo said, “I understand Bristol’s long-term connections to the arms industry is a big part of its history, but it’s also notoriously quite a liberal city”, adding that the exhibition “shows people are politically engaged within the city.”

Libby (not her real name), a local teacher, said, “It was quite interesting because I think by censoring the artist, they’ve actually created another dimension to the art, which has actually made the social commentary... even more impactful, because I’m questioning, ‘Who is that person with the cutaway face?’, and I’m questioning, ‘Where is the logo of that business?’”

“I think censorship in general is absolutely horrific, and it’s happening more and more in this country, as we’ve seen this week with the censorship of certain books in Manchester schools, *1984* and *Heartstopper* being two of them. It just smacks of fascism, doesn’t it? It just reminds me of awful issues with World War II, basically.”

Visitors expressed disbelief that Green Party councillors were complicit in the censorship of artwork, saying they planned to investigate. Libby asked whether they had intervened to request changes so that the exhibition could proceed. But she concluded, “Aesthetically, it’s censored the artists’ right to freedom of speech, which is a massive problem.

“If we start censoring art and music and culture, then we really are living in a different world.”

The WSWS asked Greens MP for Bristol Central, Carla Denyer, to comment on BCC’s censorship of local artists, but she has refused to answer.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact