

# Lessons of the witch-hunt against Australian Senator Fatima Payman: Labor is a party of war and repression

Oscar Grenfell

11 July 2024

The Labor government's witch-hunt of its own 29-year-old Senator, Fatima Payman, has sparked considerable anger and a degree of shock. Payman was effectively forced out of Labor, for taking a limited stand in defence of the Palestinians.

That formed part of a stepped-up campaign by the government in defence of the Israeli genocide in Gaza, and against all opposition. In little over a week, this has included:

- The government compelling Payman to resign from Labor, because she voted for a Greens motion for token recognition of Palestine. That vote was deemed a breach of caucus solidarity, even though it was in line with formal Labor policy, prompting her indefinite suspension from the caucus. Payman was vilified and pressured to quit parliament altogether by the government leadership, before Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced that she would "resign" from Labor, forcing her hand.

- A government frenzy over the prospect of an Islamic political party, even though there is no indication that anyone plans to form such an organisation. Albanese and other Labor leaders have preemptively denounced Muslims for "isolating" themselves from the "Australian community" and purportedly sowing sectarianism, on the basis of this non-existent organisation. This has been a blatant dog whistle to Islamophobic racism, accompanied by assertions that any concerns about the mass deaths in Gaza are religiously motivated.

- Then on Tuesday, the government appointed businesswoman Jillian Segal to the newly-created position of "Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism in Australia." Segal is a Zionist lobbyist who has explicitly defended Israel's bombing of hospitals in Gaza, and has publicly demanded the repression of pro-Palestinian protesters, including university students.

These developments contain important political lessons to take forward the fight against the genocide and imperialist war.

In the first instance, they demonstrate that Labor has not shifted one iota from its full backing of Israel, even as the Zionist regime perpetrated some of the worst war crimes of the past eighty years. Labor's occasional crocodile tears and words of concern over the mass civilian deaths are a public relations exercise, and camouflage for continuing political, diplomatic and material support for Israel, including through active weapons export permits.

## Labor is a party of imperialist war and repression

Among the most critical lessons is that there is nothing accidental or conjunctural about Labor's alignment with the genocide or its intense

hostility to the popular opposition. In their pro-genocide policies, Labor leaders such as Albanese and Foreign Minister Penny Wong are acting in line with the organisation's character as a party of imperialist war.

Even a brief review of its history shows that Labor has supported Australia's participation in every major imperialist war, and has tended to be in office to directly oversee Australia's alignment with major developments in the imperialist war drive.

It was the Labor government of John Curtin that presided over the shift of Australia's primary allegiance from British to American imperialism amid World War II. As a middle-sized imperialist power, Australia has always pursued its own predatory interests, particularly in the South Pacific, under the umbrella of the dominant power of the day.

The Labor administration of Ben Chifley was then among the first in the world to recognise the Israeli state, established through a campaign of terror and dispossession against the Palestinians, in 1948.

In keeping with its complete commitment to the US alliance, Labor supported American imperialism's brutal neo-colonial wars in the Indo-Pacific, including the assault on Korea in the 1950s and the more than decade-long onslaught against Vietnam.

The genocide cannot be understood outside the near 40-year eruption of American militarism. The strategists of US imperialism, confronting its economic decline, viewed the 1991 Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union as an opportunity to establish untrammelled global hegemony. Labor was in office at the time, with its CIA-connected Prime Minister Bob Hawke dispatching Australian troops to the first shot of the war drive: the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq.

Labor, then in opposition, also supported the criminal invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s, repeating all of the lies used to justify these massive war crimes, including the fraud that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. Presaging the current Islamophobic campaign, Labor was integral to the demonisation of Muslims associated with the "war on terror." This included its New South Wales state governments, of Bob Carr and then Morris Iemma, waging a racist campaign against "Lebanese gangs" which helped to instigate the 2005 anti-Muslim Cronulla race riot.

Another key turning point occurred with Labor back in office. Having supported a murderous US "troop surge" in Afghanistan the year before, in 2011, the Labor government of Julia Gillard aligned Australia with the US "pivot to Asia," a vast military build-up directed against China, which Washington views as the chief threat to its global dominance. After setting in motion the pivot, Labor would also back, from opposition, a racist anti-China campaign that included the bipartisan passage in 2017 of "foreign interference" laws that can potentially be used to criminalise opposition to imperialist war.

The current Albanese Labor administration is completing Australia's

transformation into a frontline state for war against China, including through the AUKUS pact and the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines. That is only one component of a vast build-up, including the acquisition of offensive capabilities across all branches of the military, and a huge expansion of US basing arrangements including for nuclear-capable American war planes and submarines.

Labor is supporting the other key plank of American imperialism's global war drive, its proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, which threatens nuclear war in Europe. That has included boosting Australia's contribution to the Ukrainian puppet regime to over \$1 billion, including through the dispatch of offensive weaponry.

Labor's backing of the genocide can only be understood in this context. It is one element of the government's involvement in an eruption of imperialist militarism that threatens world war. The onslaught on opposition to the genocide similarly has a wider purpose. It is aimed at creating the conditions to outlaw hostility to war generally.

### **Labor cannot be pressured to end its support for Israel**

This framework underscores the complete fraud of claims that "pressure" can compel Labor to end its support for the Israeli genocide. That line has been advanced for the past nine months by the Greens and various fake-left organisations, even as Labor has defied the most sustained anti-war protests in Australian history.

Payman is a featured speaker at a Sydney meeting next Tuesday called by one such pseudo-left group, Solidarity. Promotion states that "this forum will discuss the links between unions and the Labor Party and how we can win greater support among Labor members and the labour movement." That is, opposition to the genocide must be directed to Labor and its aligned trade union bureaucracy.

Last month, Solidarity's leader Ian Rintoul wrote an article presenting Labor dissidents as the key to ending the Albanese government's support for the genocide. Rintoul presented a tortured and convoluted chain of pressure. Protests would pressure the union leaders, who would help to pressure Labor MPs, and then, when there were enough "dissident" parliamentarians, the government would change course.

The Payman affair further refutes this bankrupt line.

Payman did not criticise the government's complicity in the genocide for the best part of seven months, and repeated its lies, including the demonstrably false claim that Australia has not exported weapons to Israel in the past five years. Payman made very limited criticisms in May and then voted for the Greens motion earlier this month.

Far from resulting in a flowering of opposition within the federal Labor Party, the exact opposite has been the case. Payman's conditional statements were met with a furious attack. And not one of Payman's 103 federal Labor colleagues has so much as criticised the witch-hunt against her!

Solidarity's line, so clearly contradicted by objective reality, is not the result of a misunderstanding. While occasionally employing socialist phraseology, the pseudo-left represents a privileged layer of the upper middle class, ensconced in the trade union bureaucracy, the upper echelons of the public sector and academia. It is tied by a thousand strings to Labor and the union apparatus, and its role is to prevent any independent political struggle by the working class against these pro-capitalist forces.

Solidarity is particularly close to the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and its Sydney branch. The pseudo-left group has functioned as the political attorney of the MUA bureaucracy. Solidarity has made excuses for the MUA enforcing the loading and unloading of cargo from

the Israeli ZIM shipping line, which in October dedicated its entire fleet to the genocide. Solidarity also covered up and then sought to defuse anger when the MUA invited Albanese, the genocide supporter in chief, as the keynote speaker at the union's annual convention in February.

The pseudo-left, in other words, is not fighting the genocide, but is doing everything it can to defend the political forces that are directly complicit in the mass murder of the Palestinians.

### **Fighting the genocide means building a socialist anti-war movement**

A central mechanism by which the pseudo-left performs this function is by presenting the Gaza genocide as an isolated development, which can be fought through single-issue protest. Many of the pseudo-left groups have actively supported other fronts in the war drive, including through support for the Ukrainian proxy war and depictions of China as an "expansionist" threat to the Indo-Pacific.

The experiences of the past nine months, and the global context of a new eruption of war between the major powers, demonstrate in spades that the genocide can only be fought through a struggle against imperialist war generally. That cannot be taken forward by appealing to the very governments overseeing the militarist frenzy, but through a political struggle against them.

That means connecting the struggle of the working class for its social rights with the fight against war. It is the working class that is and will be made to pay for war, as social programs are slashed and vast funds diverted to the military. There is no brick wall between the attitude of governments, including the Australian Labor administration, to the Palestinians, and their brutal austerity measures targeting workers domestically. This offensive, including the slashing of wages and working conditions, is enforced by the same union bureaucracy that has not taken a single action against the genocide.

The world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties are the only political tendency advancing the fight against war on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program. We explain that the fight against war must be:

- Directed against the capitalist nation-state system, the source of conflict. Imperialist wars are a product of the striving of the major powers to overcome their own crisis through the acquisition of resources, markets and profits at the expense of their rivals. As the 20th century demonstrates, unless halted by a socialist movement of the working class, capitalism leads to world war. That alternative is the reorganisation of society on socialist lines, to meet human needs, not the profit drive of the major corporations and banks.

- International in scope. War can only be fought through the unification of workers internationally in a struggle against their own governments and on the basis of their common class interests.

- Independent from all of the pro-capitalist parties, as well as the pro-imperialist trade union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left. The working class can only advance its independent interests by breaking with these political forces, which are wedded to the capitalist and nation-state systems.

This socialist and revolutionary perspective is viable, because it is necessary. There is mass opposition to the genocide and to war, but to go forward, lessons must be drawn and a new path embarked upon. Opponents of the genocide should join and build the Socialist Equality Party. As one component of this struggle, become an electoral member, to ensure there is a genuine anti-capitalist and socialist party on the ballot at the next federal election.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**