

Australian university staff meetings defend Randa Abdel-Fattah against Zionist witch hunt

Mike Head
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Despite determined opposition by union representatives, crucial resolutions were passed at two National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch meetings on Wednesday to defend free speech, academic freedom and Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah.

In what has become a wider political test case, Abdel-Fattah, a Macquarie University (MQ) research fellow, has been branded and demonised as antisemitic for opposing the US-backed Israeli genocide in Palestine and threatened with being sacked and stripped of her Australian Research Council (ARC) grant.

Abdel-Fattah is a high-profile target because she holds a four-year ARC Future Fellowship grant for a study of “Arab/Muslim Australian Social Movements since the 1970s: a hidden history” and is an award-winning author of books for children and young adults.

Yesterday, the ARC suspended Abdel-Fattah’s fellowship after federal Education Minister Jason Clare ordered the ARC to investigate it “urgently” on cooked-up allegations that she broke ARC rules by holding an online workshop instead of a formal academic conference as part of the grant.

At Wednesday’s lunchtime NTEU meetings at the University of Sydney and Western Sydney University, members and supporters of rank-and-file committees won majority support for parallel resolutions that state:

The latest attacks on Abdel-Fattah are aimed at rescinding her research grant and sacking her from MQ university. The harassment is being led by the Murdoch media, Zionist lobby groups and is fully endorsed by the Albanese government. Abdel-Fattah, like others who oppose the genocide in Gaza, is being bullied and slandered as being antisemitic for speaking out in defence of the Palestinian people.

The attack on Abdel-Fattah is not confined to one academic but aimed at silencing any opposition to the US-Israeli mass killings now to be intensified under the Trump administration’s criminal plan to ethnically

cleanse the entire area.

Both resolutions concluded:

We call on educators and workers at universities and schools to pass resolutions of support, defending Abdel-Fattah, the right to free speech, democratic rights, including academic freedom—all of which is under sustained attack.

Abdel-Fattah is not alone. Other critics of Israel are being tarred as anti-Jewish bigots and persecuted by governments, the corporate media and Zionist organisations. They include journalists Mary Kostakidis, Antoinette Lattouf and Peter Lalor; Sarah Schwartz, the executive officer of the Jewish Council of Australia; University of Sydney academics John Keane and Nick Riemer; as well as the same university’s sociology professor Sujatha Fernandes and sacked academic Tim Anderson.

And, as the wall-to-wall media and government persecution, and now criminal prosecution, of two Bankstown Hospital workers in Sydney shows, the so-called antisemitism crusade is designed to intimidate and silence working-class people across the board.

Similar resolutions have been adopted over the past fortnight by a well-attended lunchtime meeting called by the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee and by teachers and support staff at Footscray High School in Melbourne, voting as the school’s Australian Education Union (AEU) sub-branch.

At the University of Sydney meeting, the staff member who moved the resolution was blocked from putting a procedural motion to bring it to the top of the agenda, and then given only one minute to speak on it near the end of the meeting.

Before being cut off, he said it was critical to pass the resolution because similar attacks were being made on academics elsewhere, including at the University of Sydney

itself.

“The media and political establishment has accused all of them of antisemitism, when they condemned and criticised the Israeli state.”

NTEU branch committee member Alan Fekete spoke against the resolution, but it was passed overwhelmingly.

Likewise, at Western Sydney University (WSU), the resolution was not initially placed on the agenda—despite being sent to the branch committee a week earlier—and then relegated to the very end of the meeting.

In moving the resolution on behalf of the WSU Rank-and-File Committee, Mike Head emphasised:

All of us are threatened by this assault on academic freedom... And now Universities Australia is imposing a new definition of antisemitism on all the universities, basically banning denunciation of the Zionist state and its decades-long and mounting atrocities.

All this is supported by the Labor government. Education Minister Jason Clare made an extraordinary political intervention against Abdel-Fattah, calling for her ARC research grant to be investigated ‘urgently’ on trumped-up allegations of breaking grant rules.

The NTEU has not launched any campaign in the defence of any of the witch-hunted academics. No meetings, information campaigns, or resolutions have been organised. Instead, union representatives have sought to block our defence campaign, as seen here today.

WSU NTEU branch president David Burchill spoke against the resolution, claiming that he had no idea what it was meant to achieve and that people in the meeting had no information about the issue.

Burchell then immediately tried to shut down discussion on the resolution, but another academic asked to speak in favour of it. She said university staff had to defend and uphold academic freedom. “This is not just about Randa Abdel-Fattah or Palestine,” she said.

Explaining that she taught and researched about international law, she said: “We must have the capacity to critique what states do. Our ability to teach and research is being made difficult in these circumstances.”

Such resolutions need to be moved everywhere. There is widespread opposition to the targeted victimisation of Abdel-Fattah and the forced adoption by university managements of a definition of antisemitism that essentially bans criticism of Israel.

This resistance is primarily taking the form of petitions and open letters, but appeals to the Albanese government and authorities such as the ARC will not defeat this offensive. That

requires a broader political fight throughout the universities and the working class as a whole against all those pursuing the witch hunt, and that includes the Labor government.

Clare’s reactionary political intervention against Abdel-Fattah’s ARC grant is not a mistake or an aberration. The moves against her are part of a wider attack on anti-war and other political dissent in Australia and internationally.

In Australia, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and state Labor leaders have repeatedly and falsely equated anti-genocide dissent with antisemitism and called for the shutting down of student encampments and other anti-genocide protests.

Most recently, the Albanese government joined hands with the Liberal-National Coalition to rush sweeping supposed “hate speech laws” through parliament that are being used against the Bankstown hospital workers and could be used to prosecute Abdel-Fattah and others.

Moreover, the repressive measures against criticism of the US-Israeli genocide are a warning of the methods that will be used to try to whip up hysterical denunciations and prosecutions of opponents of any US-led wars.

The Labor government, now working closely with the fascist Donald Trump, is totally committed to US militarism, including the AUKUS pact preparations for war against China.

As the Macquarie University Rank-and-File Committee said in its January 21 statement launching this campaign:

The defence of basic democratic rights, including academic freedom, is essential. As universities become increasingly enmeshed into serving the research needs of both Australian and US militarism via the Labor government’s Universities Accord, the rights of academics to speak out against imperialist war is more important than ever.

To discuss moving resolutions, send statements of support or join or build a rank-and-file committee, email the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators’ network, at cfpe.aus@gmail.com.



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