

Australian educator reinstated, but democratic rights in schools are under attack

Martin Scott
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On Monday, a staff member at a Western Sydney high school was ordered to work from home after he posted a video on social media denouncing the witch hunt against two Bankstown nurses recently goaded into making reactionary comments online by an Israeli provocateur.

Sheikh Wesam Charkawi, a student support officer at Granville Boys High School for 13 years, was barred from working on the premises, for allegedly breaching the New South Wales (NSW) Department of Education's social media policy over his February 16 Instagram post.

Charkawi was reinstated yesterday afternoon and allowed to return to the school this morning, after meetings involving his lawyer, Majed Kheir, and department officials. Kheir argued that the videos did not violate the department's social media policy and questioned the "validity" and "legal basis" of the order that he take them down, according to the *Guardian*.

Notably, the department backdown only came after a protest at the school, involving more than 100 students, teachers, parents and others, demanding that Charkawi be allowed to come back.

Charkawi's return is welcome news. But educators, students and other workers should not believe for a second that they will not be subjected to similar attacks.

In addition to his role at Granville Boys, Charkawi is a founder of The Muslim Vote, which exposes the complicity of Labor in Israel's genocide and is promoting several independent candidates to run, in electorates with substantial Muslim populations, against Labor in the coming federal election.

While Charkawi's prominence likely contributed to the campaign against him, it also made it more difficult politically for the NSW Labor government to follow through with his standing down.

The episode is a stark warning of the deepening crackdown on any criticism of genocide and war, and the broader evisceration of democratic rights. The hysterical media and government response to the protest highlights that high school students, as well as teachers and other workers, are being targeted by these repressive measures.

In the video, Charkawi said that the vicious media-government campaign against the Bankstown nurses, one of

whom has since been arrested and charged, was an example of the "deliberate weaponisation of outrage, deployed selectively to shield the powerful and vilify the marginalised."

He noted, "the most revealing aspect of the political outrage is the speed, intensity and coordination of the response from figures who have been otherwise largely indifferent, weak or outright complicit and enabling in the face of mass atrocities."

He referred to statements by Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese that the nurses' comments were "disgusting, sickening and shameful," and that they did not deserve sympathy.

Charkawi said: "The Prime Minister weighed in, the New South Wales Health Minister, Ryan Park, declared it was the most vile thing he'd ever seen. Really?"

He noted that, in Gaza, doctors and other health workers "have been deliberately targeted, bombed [and] executed while treating the wounded," but Park and other ministers had not said a word.

He continued: "This isn't just hypocrisy and it isn't just a double standard. It's something far more calculated. It's an orchestrated moral framework where outrage is not dictated by the severity of an action, but by the one who commits it."

These incisive and well-articulated comments, made on Charkawi's personal social media account, were deemed unacceptable by the Department of Education, acting on behalf of the NSW Labor government and the whole political establishment.

Charkawi was asked to remove the posts from his TikTok and Instagram accounts on February 18, but initially refused, leading the department to "ask him to work from home until the matter was resolved," according to the *Guardian*.

The Department of Education then issued a formal directive ordering him to take down the posts by Wednesday, with which Charkawi complied, although the videos remained visible on his Facebook and LinkedIn accounts.

The *Guardian* asserts that this directive was partly prompted by denunciations of Charkawi's comments in the media. A February 18 article in the *Australian* said he and others criticising the attack on the Bankstown nurses were "normalising one of the worst examples of antisemitism we've seen here."

The orders had clearly come from the top, however. The day after Charkawi's video was posted, a letter was issued to all NSW public sector staff, jointly signed by the Premier's Department and the Public Service Commissioner.

The letter told workers, "You have a duty to uphold the reputation of your department and the government sector as apolitical, impartial and professional," including when acting in a "private capacity in public forums, on social media, or when engaging in political or social issues."

This is deliberately broad and all-encompassing, as are public sector social media policies and codes of ethics. As Kheir told the *Guardian*, "The ambiguity here is extremely concerning because there is more scope within that to silence certain views."

The letter was more explicit, however, in its declaration that, "You have a right to express your views and support causes, but always with a mind to how it might impact on your role as a public servant."

This is a barely veiled threat against every one of the more than 450,000 public sector workers in NSW: Any "public" comment, including those made outside working hours on personal social media accounts with no connection to your workplace, or even the act of attending a protest rally, could cost you your job.

The government threats were stepped up, including against children, following Wednesday's protest at the school, which included students chanting "Free Palestine," as well as calling for Charkawi's reinstatement.

NSW Education Minister and Deputy Premier Prue Car declared, "Schools are places of learning, not places of protest.... That was not the case here and that is not acceptable."

Car said there would be a full school assembly Thursday morning "where those expectations will be reinforced to the entire student body," and that any student who failed to comply would be subjected to "disciplinary action."

This assembly was addressed by senior Department of Education officials, who said they would be combing through video footage of the protest to find evidence of students disobeying staff directions, the *Australian* reported this morning.

The intimidation of high-schoolers highlights that the suppression of teachers' democratic rights is intertwined with ruling class fears of an independent mobilisation of students against the official program of war, genocide and austerity.

The same concern is behind the deepening crackdown on protests and democratic rights on university campuses, which has included students being arrested. Just this week, 30 Australian universities adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of "antisemitism," under which students and staff could be sanctioned for virtually any criticism of Zionism or the state of Israel.

Also this week, Macquarie University academic Dr Randa Abdel-Fattah, who has been branded as "antisemitic" for

opposing the US-backed Israeli genocide, had her Australian Research Council funding suspended. The campaign against Abdel-Fattah and other anti-genocide academics has been carried out without a shred of opposition from the National Tertiary Education Union.

Charkawi's video comments were directed towards the state and federal Labor governments, but he could equally have been referring to the unions, whose response to the persecution of two young health workers was not to defend them, but to promote and join the attack.

The NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association (NSWNMA), which has put out just three mealy mouthed statements about Israel's genocide in Gaza since October 7, 2023, immediately issued a statement denouncing the Bankstown nurses.

That is, ahead of any police investigation or charges, let alone a fair trial, the union joined in the condemnation of its accused members. The NSWNMA then held a "protest" outside state parliament against "hate speech," effectively endorsing the state and federal Labor governments' draconian new laws targeting opposition to genocide and war.

Similarly, the NSW Teachers Federation did not say a word or lift a finger in response to the media-government-department attack against Charkawi and the students at Granville Boys.

Educators, students, nurses, and all other workers, cannot afford to place their democratic rights in the hands of the unions, which are tied by a thousand threads to Labor and the political establishment, and are fully on board with the deepening attacks on protest and any form of criticism of the ruling elite's program of war and austerity.

To defend freedom of speech, rank-and-file committees must be built in schools across the country, including educators and other staff, as well as students and parents. Through a network of these committees, throughout education and the broader working class, a political struggle must be taken up against the capitalist system and all of its organs, including Labor and the union apparatus.

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