

Canada: Concordia University witch-hunts anti-Zionist protesters

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Egged on by the corporate media, the administration of Montreal's Concordia University is witch-hunting leaders of a protest against former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Ten students have been charged under the university's Code of Rights and Responsibilities with various offences arising out of a demonstration last September that forced the cancellation of a pro-Israel rally at which Netanyahu was the featured speaker. The offences include participating in a riot and harassment.

Thus far one student—Amer Elatrash, a vice-president of the Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights group—has been effectively expelled. (He was given a three-year suspension.) Yves Engler, an official of the Concordia Student Union (CSU), has been suspended for one semester for his role in the demonstration and fined \$500 for having affixed stickers to university property during an anti-globalization protest.

Another of the accused, Leila Mouammar, recently explained to an Islamic community newspaper how the administration is trying to frame the protesters as violent. "I'm charged with Harassing, Threatening & Intimidating Conduct. They can't point to one specific harassing or violent thing I did—because I didn't. So they're saying that violence happened, I can be placed at the events—which I was—therefore I'm guilty."

On September 9, 2002, more than 1,000 students and their supporters joined a protest organized by the CSU and various pro-Palestinian groups that was aimed at preventing Netanyahu from speaking at the university. The protesters asserted that "a war criminal has no place on campus." They also objected to the administration's collusion with conference organizers to ensure that only pro-Zionists attended what was billed as a public event. The entire first floor of the university's main building was given over to Netanyahu's conference and only those who had previously been given tickets by conference

organizers were permitted entry by university personnel.

After the protesters penetrated a security cordon and entered the first floor area, police ran amuck, attacking them with batons and pepper spray. Caught up in the melee were many students and instructors who were vacating the building at the end of their classes.

Canada's political establishment was unanimous in deploring the disruption of Netanyahu's speech. Prime Minister Jean Chrétien apologized at a meeting with Netanyahu the next day. And the corporate media was quick to label the anti-Netanyahu protest a grave attack on the right of free speech. Leading the pack was the country's biggest media empire, CanWest Global, which had helped finance Netanyahu's Canadian speaking tour and was thus involved in the choice of Concordia as the site for his only public address in Montreal.

To claim that the Concordia demonstration threatened free speech is to turn reality on its head. Netanyahu's visit was a provocation, something like staging an Orange parade in a Catholic district of Northern Ireland. He was brought to Concordia—a campus with a large Arab student population and a reputation for anti-establishment student activism—to strut the Zionist flag and show that the defenders of Israel's subjugation of the Palestinians have powerful political support, if not at Concordia, then at least off-campus. The organizers of Netanyahu's visit rejected a university request that they hold their rally elsewhere on the campus, insisting that only the most public, i.e., provocative, venue would do.

It is ridiculous to pretend that Netanyahu had any need of a platform at Concordia to make his reactionary views known—and not just because he has access to the pages and airwaves of Canwest and other sections of the corporate media. After completing his Canadian tour, Netanyahu flew to Washington where he addressed US legislators and met with top-level officials in the Bush administration.

Netanyahu's North American tour had a double purpose: to rally support for the Zionist state's ever-widening campaign of repression against the Palestinians and help lay the basis for his own ultimately unsuccessful attempt to wrest the Likud leadership from Ariel Sharon. Much to Sharon's annoyance, in the spring of 2002, Netanyahu won Likud's support for a resolution committing it to never allow the establishment of a Palestinian state, no matter how small and devoid of genuine sovereignty. Then in the autumn he tried to unseat Sharon by portraying the current Israeli Prime Minister as too conciliatory with the Palestinians because he has not yet ordered the complete dismantling of the Palestinian Authority.

The significance of the witch-hunt mounted by the Concordia administration goes far beyond that university. Not only are the Zionists becoming more aggressive, labeling virtually any criticism of Israel's militarist and colonialist policies as anti-Semitic. Big business is alarmed by the signs of growing dissent on university campuses and is demanding that university administrations act to ensure that their institutions do not become politicized and radicalized like they were during the 1960s.

The Concordia University administration was severely criticized in the press for having allowed students who wanted to participate in the April 2001 protests against the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City to postpone exams that conflicted with the summit.

University Rector Frederick Lowy and the Concordia administration have been anxious to signal that they have got the message. Within hours of the September 9 protest they imposed a ban—that ultimately lasted three months—on any non-classroom activities pertaining to the Middle East. Lowy has also moved to amend the university's rules so as to give himself the power to unilaterally expel students whom he deems unruly.

The disciplinary process to which the anti-Netanyahu protesters are being subjected is biased and tilted against them. The hearings are behind closed doors. The accused are not provided with the evidence against them in advance. The administration has repeatedly made use of clips from video recordings that university security personnel made of the September 9 protest. But it has denied the accused students the right to review the tapes. Thus they have been denied access to evidence that could substantiate their claims they did nothing more than participate in a demonstration, as well as evidence that could shed light on the role the police played in initiating

the riot. On the other hand, the university has offered a complete copy of the recordings to the police, in the hopes the tapes will bolster the prosecution's case against the five persons that the police have charged.

Under the university's disciplinary code, students are tried by their peers. But the administration has gone to considerable lengths to manipulate the process. Students nominated to preside over the hearings were sent a letter by the administration asking them to explain their views on the Middle East. Two of the student judges have publicly attacked the administration for having pressured them to impose harsher penalties. Stephen Herman and Anas Sibaii say a university official derided community service as "a joke" and pressed the student judges to impose much harsher penalties on the grounds that Concordia's reputation was at stake.

Administration officials have not tried to hide the fact that they have targeted prominent student activists—including leaders of the CSU, the official representative of all Concordia undergraduates. According to university counsel Bram Freedman, when reviewing the tapes, university administrators and security personnel zeroed in on "familiar faces." Says Freeman: "This is the same thing that happens in any similar situation. People who are well known are the ones who are picked out."

In addition to the two aforementioned students who have been suspended, two protesters have been ordered to perform 50 hours of community service each. Three others, including CSU Vice-President (Campaigns) Aaron Maté, were acquitted. No judgment has been made in the cases of the remaining three accused.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges all those opposed to the attempt of the state and big business to criminalize dissent to join with it in opposing the witch-hunt of the anti-Netanyahu protesters and in demanding that all charges against them be dropped and any penalties revoked.



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