

An attack on academic freedom

Critic of Zionism denied tenure at US university

Joe Kay
18 June 2007

Earlier this month, DePaul University in Chicago denied tenure to Norman Finkelstein, a professor of political science who has written numerous works criticizing the policies of Israel and the misuse of the charge of anti-Semitism against opponents of Zionism. The denial of Finkelstein's tenure, and with it the termination of his position at DePaul, is a clear attack on academic freedom and the victimization of a professor because of his political views.

The denial of Finkelstein's tenure at DePaul, a Catholic university that is one of the largest private universities in the country, was confirmed in a June 8 letter from DePaul's president, Dennis Holtschneider. Holtschneider affirmed a 4-3 vote by the University Board on Promotion and Tenure. In a highly unusual step, the board overruled both the department of political science faculty and a university-wide faculty committee, both of which supported Finkelstein's tenure bid. Finkelstein's tenure was opposed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Charles Suchar.

"I met the standards of tenure DePaul required, but it wasn't enough to overcome the political opposition to my speaking out on the Israel-Palestine conflict," Finkelstein said. He called the decision an "egregious violation" of academic freedom.

Also denied tenure at the same time was Professor Mehrene Larudee, who works in an unrelated field but who had helped organize support for Finkelstein. Larudee had received the unanimous backing of the college faculty and Dean Suchar.

In the months leading up to the June vote, opposition to Finkelstein's tenure had become a national campaign, spearheaded by Harvard University

Professor Alan Dershowitz. Dershowitz, who has most recently achieved notoriety for his arguments in favor of torture, has been one of the targets of many of Finkelstein's writings.

Finkelstein, a Jewish son of Holocaust survivors, has been a professor at DePaul since 2001. He is best known for his 2000 book *The Holocaust Industry*, the central thesis of which is that the Holocaust has been exploited for ends that had nothing to do with historical truth or the victims of the Nazi genocide—including support for Israel and calls for reparations. Finkelstein has also written critical studies of Daniel Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, which argued that the cause of the Holocaust could be located in the inherent anti-Semitism of the German people as a whole.

Finkelstein's most recent book, *Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History*, continues on these themes, as well as documenting in detail the human rights violations of the state of Israel. Among the targets of the book, published by the University of California press, are Dershowitz and others who have used the charge of anti-Semitism to suppress criticism of Israeli policies.

The campaign to suppress Finkelstein's views did not begin with the attempt to deny him tenure. When *The Holocaust Industry* first came out, it was the subject of vicious attack in the American media. A review in the *New York Times* by professor Omer Bartov slandered it as "a novel variation of the anti-Semitic forgery, 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.'" Other reviews were no less biased, seeking to create a false amalgam between Finkelstein and anti-Semitic Holocaust deniers.

As Finkelstein sought to publish *Beyond* Dershowitz organized a campaign to try to prevent its publication, threatening expensive libel lawsuits against anyone who decided to print it. He even wrote to Arnold Schwarzenegger in a failed attempt to get the California governor to intervene and stop UC from publishing the book.

When Finkelstein's tenure came up for review, Dershowitz produced a memo attacking him, which he sent to DePaul faculty and administration. Nevertheless, Finkelstein received strong support from fellow faculty members and prominent scholars in the field, including Raul Hilberg, considered one of the fathers of Holocaust studies.

Given this support, the quality of Finkelstein's scholarship could not be the rationale given by the university in denying him tenure. Instead, the members of the University Board on Promotion and Tenure, along with Dean Suchar and President Holtschneider, focused on the alleged "hurtful" character of Finkelstein's writings and their supposed failure to follow strictures of "collegiality."

In its statement rejecting tenure, the board acknowledged that Finkelstein is "a nationally known scholar and public intellectual, considered provocative, challenging and intellectually interesting." It also wrote, "By all accounts, he is an excellent teacher, popular with his students and effective in the classroom."

However, the board went on to declare without providing any examples, "some might interpret parts of his scholarship as 'deliberately hurtful' as well as provocative more for inflammatory effect than to carefully critique or challenge accepted assumptions." Carefully using the passive voice to avoid attribution, it declared, "Criticism has been expressed for his inflammatory style and personal attacks in his writings and intellectual debates ... It was questioned by some whether Dr. Finkelstein effectively contributes to the public discourse on sensitive societal issues."

While not indicating who fell under the category of "some" people, and while denying that the board was subject to the pressure of the campaign against Finkelstein, it is evident that the board and top university administrators were reacting to the pressure of Dershowitz and his backers, no doubt including some prominent donors to DePaul.

The concern of ~~the board~~ ^{those speaking} to deny Finkelstein tenure had nothing to do with "collegiality." If there were any group best able to evaluate Finkelstein's performance in this regard, it would certainly be his colleagues at DePaul, who the university was forced to overrule in making its decision. In any case, such reasons are generally considered to be insufficient for denying tenure to a professor, especially one who has the backing of his fellow faculty members and students.

President Holtschneider ended his letter to Finkelstein explaining the decision with the incredible statement, "Some will consider this decision in the context of academic freedom. In fact academic freedom is alive and well at DePaul."

If the decision stands, as appears likely, Finkelstein will serve one more year at DePaul before being dismissed. Faculty at DePaul are considering advancing a vote of no confidence against Dean Suchar and President Holtschneider. Students staged a sit-in of the President's office, but were driven off by campus police and threatened with expulsion last week.

The attack on Finkelstein is by no means unique. Other academics in the US have been victimized for their views on the Israel-Palestinian conflict, including Joseph Massad of Columbia University and Sami al-Arian of the University of South Florida. Al-Arian was imprisoned and is to be deported on the basis of trumped up conspiracy charges.

Students on college campuses who have campaigned for divestment from Israel have been smeared as anti-Semitic, and organizations have been set up, including Daniel Pipes' Campus Watch web site, to monitor and intimidate professors critical of Israeli and US policy. These campaigns have been part of a growing attempt to suppress debate and intimidate oppositional sentiment at universities in the US.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact