

Pro-Israel forces attempt to silence University of California Santa Barbara professor

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On January 19 University of California Santa Barbara sociology Professor William Robinson sent an email to students on the roster of his Global Affairs course in which he compared the Israeli occupation of Gaza to the Warsaw Ghetto. He was subsequently brought up on disciplinary charges by the Academic Senate of the university, as well as subjected to harassment and persecution by pro-Israeli elements.

The charges against Robinson pose a serious threat to academic freedom. They are an effort to intimidate critics of Israeli policy at a time when that regime's actions have produced widespread revulsion. Ultimately, the aim of such witch-hunts is to silence those opposed to the policies of one of the US government's key allies.

Robinson's January 19 email began with a strong denunciation of the Israeli assault on Gaza. The professor, who is Jewish, wrote: "Gaza is Israel's Warsaw—a vast concentration camp that confined and blockaded Palestinians, subjecting them to the slow death of malnutrition, disease and despair, nearly two years before their subjection to the quick death of Israeli bombs. We are witness to a slow-motion process of genocide (Websters: 'the systematic killing of, or a program of action intended to destroy, a whole national or ethnic group'), a process whose objective is not so much to physically eliminate each and every Palestinian than to eliminate the Palestinians as a people in any meaningful sense of the notion of peoplehood."

Robinson then displayed a graphic set of photographs that had been circulating the Internet through email

forwards. At the time Robinson was unaware of the identity of the originator of the email, although he subsequently learned that it was a Jewish-American professor at another university. The series juxtaposed photographs of Nazi operations and atrocities with images of Israeli crimes in Gaza.

The photo series is arranged such that each image from one time period is displayed next to a corresponding image from the other. Pictures of the Warsaw Ghetto are on the left, Gaza on the right. The photographs are disturbing, as is the often-uncanny similarity apparent in the side-by-side images.

The full original course material can be viewed at the Committee to Defend Academic Freedom at UCSB, a blog created in defense of Professor Robinson, and the principle of academic freedom by a group of UCSB students (<http://sb4af.wordpress.com/>).

On February 9 Robinson received a copy of a letter that the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) sent, in addition to Robinson himself, to the president of the University of California system based in Oakland, the chancellor of UCSB, his dean and the chair of his department. The ADL, a prominent defender of Israeli policy, accuses Robinson of anti-Semitism and of abusing his access to university resources by using the student mailing list to disseminate personal views unrelated to course material.

On February 19 these same accusations appeared in two official grievances filed with the university by two of Robinson's former students. The pair had withdrawn from the course, unbeknownst to Robinson, because they claimed the content of the email was intimidating

and, according to one student, made her “nauseous.” The claims of misconduct put forth by the two students are nearly identical and are very similar to those cited in the ADL’s February 9 letter.

The accusations against Robinson are baseless and politically motivated. In an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*, he discussed the issues involved.

“The essence of the charges,” Professor Robinson said, “is that the course material I submitted was anti-Semitic, and according to these letters [from the ADL and the two students], it was anti-Semitic because it was critical of the state of Israel. That is absurd, that the condemnation of the policies of the state of Israel is equivalent to anti-Semitism. One, anti-Semitism, is the discrimination against and oppression of a religious/ethnic group, and the other, criticism of Israel, is a condemnation of the policies of a nation-state.”

As to the charges that the material contained in the email was unrelated to the course, Robinson responded: “How in the world the invasion of Gaza in January is unrelated to a course on global affairs in the same month is absolutely beyond my comprehension!”

The UCSB catalogue describes the course as a “[s]urvey of the principal theories and debates in globalization studies, with a focus on economic, political and cultural transnational processes.” According to this description, the military occupation of one sovereign territory by another is clearly highly relevant to such a course.

“On March 9,” Robinson pointed out, “Abraham Foxman, the president of the ADL convenes a meeting on the campus of the University of California Santa Barbara with about ten faculty members and two deans. Some people at the meeting assume the purpose of the meeting was to search for a chair of the Jewish Studies program, but when the meeting starts, Foxman announces that the only thing on his agenda is the demand that I be prosecuted.

“On March 25 the university announces it is opening up a formal inquiry, a formal investigation of me and bringing me up on charges of possible violation of the

faculty code of conduct. What is going on here is a tremendous assault on academic freedom; an assault in which the community has been complicit, and an assault which has been orchestrated from outside the university by the Israel lobby.

“What became clear is that the entire grievance process had been orchestrated from the outside by the Israel lobby. This is part of a more systematic campaign. The Israel lobby goes after anyone and everyone that criticizes the state of Israel.

“What is particularly egregious in this case,” says Robinson, “is that the University of California Santa Barbara is undermining academic freedom, bringing shame to the university. Some university officials have been complicit with this attack against me and this attack against academic freedom. We have documented a whole series of procedural irregularities.”

Professor Robinson has received strong support from students and professors on the campus, as well as concerned members of the local community. A group of students created the Committee To Defend Academic Freedom at UCSB and launched a Web site documenting up-to-date details of the Robinson case and mobilizing resources to counter the pro-Israeli forces. “Students on the campus, graduates and undergraduates, when they heard of this, became enraged,” says Robinson. “They feel that the integrity of their own education is under threat.”

A forum to discuss academic freedom originally scheduled to take place on the campus of UCSB on May 7 was put off until May 21 to make arrangements to accommodate a larger audience due to the amount of popular interest over the Robinson case within the Santa Barbara community.



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