

University of Illinois blocks appointment of professor critical of Israeli crimes in Gaza

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The University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana has reportedly blocked the fall appointment of Palestinian-American professor Steven Salaita for his recent comments made on Twitter criticizing Israel's war crimes in Gaza.

Prior to his accepting the associate professor position at the University of Illinois this year in the department of American Indian studies, Salaita left a position in the English department at Virginia Tech. He has authored several books on American and Middle East politics and culture, including *Israel's Dead Soul* and *Anti-Arab Racism in the USA*. Salaita is also a prominent supporter of the boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign against Israel, which encourages academic institutions to participate in boycotts and divestments.

Online magazine *Inside Higher Ed* reported that the University of Illinois "apparently revoked" the offer of a position to Salaita.

Salaita's tweets that attracted attention in the last several weeks include, "By eagerly conflating Jewishness and Israel, Zionists are partly responsible when people say antisemitic s-- in response to Israeli terror," "Zionists, take responsibility: if your dream of an ethnocratic Israel is worth the murder of children, just f-- own it already," and "F-- you, #Israel. And while I'm at it, f-- you, too, PA, Sisi, Arab monarchs, Obama, UK, EU, Canada, US Senate, corporate media, and ISIS."

Salaita's comments, while they may be crude, express widely held feelings of revulsion and anger at the Israeli government's actions, the United States' government's support for it, and the political forces used by US imperialism and its allies to achieve its aims in the Middle East.

Salaita's move to the University of Illinois has drawn criticism from those who seek to conflate

opposition to Israeli foreign policy with anti-Semitism. Nonetheless, as late as July 22, a university spokeswoman wrote to the local *News-Gazette* in defense of the University's decision to hire Salaita, saying "faculty have a wide range of scholarly and political views, and we recognize the freedom-of-speech rights of all of our employees."

What has changed in the university's attitude from that time to the present moment is not clear. The chancellor's office is not commenting on its decision.

The University of Illinois's apparent decision to terminate Salaita was supported by University of Illinois English professor and former president of the American Association of University Professor Cary Nelson. Nelson said the tweets raised legitimate concern over "collegiality" and "civility."

Commenting to *Inside Higher Ed*, Nelson wrote, "I think the chancellor made the right decision. I know of no other senior faculty member tweeting such venomous statements—and certainly not in such an obsessively driven way. There are scores of over-the-top Salaita tweets... I'm glad the chancellor did what had to be done."

Nelson is the best known figure in the AAUP, a prominent "left" academic, and author of *No University is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom* and *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical*. He said he did not believe Salaita's blocked appointment held implications for faculty members' expression of their political views, writing "If Salaita had limited himself to expressing his hostility to Israel in academic publications subjected to peer review, I believe the appointment would have gone through without difficulty."

Professors and educators, who are experiencing a steady erosion of academic freedom along with pay and job cuts, should take Nelson's involvement in the

Salaita case as a warning. They can put no faith in a “union” whose most prominent member publicly boasts of monitoring the statements of a new faculty hire *and* defends that hire's dismissal on grounds of objectionable speech—even when university administrators are not openly making such a claim.

For its part, the Illinois AAUP Committee has issued a statement protesting Salaita's treatment and defending the right of AAUP members to air controversial views. One of the signatories is Loretta Capeheart, a professor in the Criminal Justice department at Northeastern Illinois University, whose 2011 law suit against her employer for victimizing her based on her political views was characterized by the Chronicle of Higher Education as “a major test of the free-speech rights of faculty members at public colleges.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* does not share Salaita's politics. His call for a boycott of Israeli academics and economy only serves to divide Israeli and Palestinian workers who remain trapped in the catastrophic nation-state set-up in the Middle East. We demand the unification of the region's workers across religious and national lines in a common struggle against capitalism.

Nonetheless, the attempt to equate any criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism is intended to silence criticism of Israeli and US foreign policy. In the current environment of inequality and opposition to military violence, no space can be permitted for opposition on college and university campuses. With the expansion of US military intervention, opposition inevitably grows and professors will be targeted for their political views.



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