

Islamophobic provocations on California campuses

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Towards the end of March the University of California (UC) board of regents unanimously adopted a resolution on intolerance that claimed a growing connection between anti-Zionism, opposition to the policies of Israel, and anti-Semitism. The move was hailed by pro-Israeli groups and anti-Muslim organizations. In mid-April, the far right David Horowitz Freedom Center launched a campaign of intimidation on five campuses, publicizing the names of students and teachers that they called “genocidal” and allied with “terrorists.”

Worldwide, the allegation of “anti-Semitism” is being used to silence critics of militarism and imperialism in the Middle East. The events in California are occurring in the middle of a purge of the British Labour Party of officials who have publicly criticized Israel. Although the UC regents presented their resolution as a tactful compromise that defends free speech and academic freedom, it consciously laid the framework for punishing opposition to Israel.

The resolution as adopted stated “Anti-Semitism, Anti-Semitic forms of Anti-Zionism, and other forms of discrimination have no place at the University of California.” This was a revision to a draft from January that called Anti-Zionism discriminatory without qualification. The adopted formulation was left intentionally vague to allow almost any opposition to the Israeli occupation of Palestine to be called anti-Semitic. In the comment period a letter signed by 130 UC faculty members described it as anti-Semitic when “legitimate criticism of Israel devolves into denying Israel’s right to exist.”

The Israel advocacy group StandWithUs hailed the regent’s resolution. Their CEO Roz Rothstein praised the regent’s decision claiming that “denying Israel’s right to exist and opposing the rights of the Jewish

people to self-determination in their homeland is racism, pure and simple.” The main target of the allegations of anti-Semitism is the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement led by the student organization Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). The SJP acts as a pressure group on the Israeli government, asking universities and businesses to avoid investing in Israel or selling Israeli products until Israel recognizes the right of Palestinian refugees to return, the end of the occupation of Palestine, and the equal rights of Arabs within Israel.

Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, a lecturer at UC Santa Cruz and co-founder of the Amcha Initiative, said that “BDS is in virtually all of its aspects anti-Semitic.” The Amcha Initiative follows the US State Department definition of anti-Semitism, which includes “drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis,” and “denying Israel the right to exist.”

Rossman-Benjamin told the *New York Times* that “classic anti-Semitism merged with a new anti-Zionism,” on campuses and praised the regents for being the first to specifically recognize “that there are forms of anti-Zionism that are anti-Semitic.”

Within a few weeks of the UC Regents laying out the welcome mat for allegations of anti-Semitism, the David Horowitz Freedom Center (DHFC) staged a right-wing provocation against the SJP and the Muslim Student Association. The DHFC put up posters at five different campuses denouncing the BDS as “a Hamas-inspired genocidal campaign,” and listed the names of students and professors that they said “have allied themselves with Palestinian terrorists to perpetrate BDS and Jew Hatred.” The posters were a clear call for reprisals against specific critics of Israel.

The campuses targeted were UC Berkeley, San Diego State University (SDSU), UC Santa Barbara, UC Santa

Cruz and UC Los Angeles. The DHFC had used this tactic in isolation before, but hit all five campuses in mid-April. At SDSU a hundred students protested on April 27 after the university president, Elliot Hirshman issued a statement claiming that the posters were acceptable criticism of the SJP.

Hirshman wrote in part: “First, we recognize and fully support the rights of all parties to voice their positions on political issues, whether supportive or critical. We also understand that when parties adopt a specific political position they become responsible for their actions and these actions may produce criticism.”

In short, Hirshman felt that if the students did not want to be called terrorists, they should not voice political opinions. In a country whose government claims the right to indefinitely detain or kill without trial anyone who supports terrorism, that allegation can have particularly severe consequences.

On May 6, David Horowitz gave a speech at SDSU at the invitation of the College Republicans. He has been a regular speaker at California’s public universities over the years, usually at the request of campus Republican clubs. In his speeches are a combination of complaining that universities are dominated by leftists and denouncing student groups like the SJP as supporting terrorism and “Jew Hatred.”

Horowitz’s extreme positions are well within the norms of US politics. The presumptive Republican candidate for president, Donald Trump, has called for a “total shutdown of Muslims” entering the United States. Within the Republican Party debates candidates sought to outdo themselves in their support for any outrage Israel might perpetrate against the Palestinians in the name of “Fighting terrorism.”

These positions are also found between both contenders for the Democratic nomination. In a speech to the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) on March 21, Hillary Clinton said: “Many of the young people here today are on the front lines of the battle to oppose the alarming Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement known as BDS. Particularly at a time when anti-Semitism is on the rise across the world, especially in Europe, we must repudiate all efforts to malign, isolate, and undermine Israel and the Jewish people.”

The same day Bernie Sanders agreed that “Israel has got to be defended, has a right to exist,” and that “there

is some level of anti-Semitism” in BDS.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has irreconcilable class differences with BDS, which appeals to the Israeli government for a capitalist two-state solution, but to call opposition to Israel “anti-Semitic” is a fundamentally dishonest provocation. These slanderous accusations are being used in country after country to silence any criticism of imperialist policy in the Middle East.

Since Jeremy Corbyn became leader of the British Labour Party, he has suspended 18 party members following allegations of racism and anti-Semitism. The media frenzy and witch hunt following criticisms of Israel by some high-ranking members of the Labour Party are directed at the hundreds of thousands who voted for Corbyn imagining that as a self-described socialist he would oppose war and austerity. Instead, the pseudo-left Corbyn, like SYRIZA in Greece and Podemos in Spain, has willingly accepted every right-wing measure asked of him.



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