

# Sheffield Labour Students cancels anti-war meeting, citing police investigation of anti-Semitism allegations

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The vote by Sheffield Labour Students (SLS) to “indefinitely postpone” a Stop the War Coalition (STWC) event at the University of Sheffield is a major attack on freedom of speech on university campuses.

Labour Party MP for Derby, Chris Williamson, a key backer of party leader Jeremy Corbyn, was due to address a November 8 meeting titled, “Stop bombing Yemen. Stop Arming Saudi Arabia.” But the SLS executive effectively banned the event after the London Metropolitan Police announced the opening of an investigation into 42 allegations of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party.

The SLS’s decision followed complaints from the Sheffield Jewish Society (JSoc), which falsely accused Williamson of “encouraging a culture of anti-Semitism.” In a statement issued on October 30, JSoc (comprising students from Sheffield Hallam and University of Sheffield) claimed, “Williamson has repeatedly defended, and shared platforms with, anti-Semites expelled from the Labour Party and he has called anti-Semitism allegations in the Labour Party ‘proxy wars and bullshit.’ As such, any society inviting him onto campus, for any reason, is a betrayal of Jewish students in Sheffield and the Jewish community as a whole.”

Initially, the SLS executive rejected JSoc’s demands, voting to uphold their invitation to Williamson (six voted in favour, three against, and one abstained). Meeting on October 30, members of the executive said there was “no evidence that Chris Williamson is anti-Semitic” and that the accusations were based on “hearsay.” It would be “unprofessional and unfair” to rescind the invitation simply because the speaker was controversial, argued another. A Jewish member of the executive said Williamson had “relevant and important information on Yemen.”

The campaign against Williamson’s appearance intensified. On November 1, JSoc’s co-chair Gabe Milne announced he was quitting the Labour Party in protest at the SLS vote, tweeting, “I’m horrified that Chris Williamson has been invited onto my campus.” SLS Events Officer Caelan Reid resigned his own executive position.

The next morning, the London Metropolitan Police announced its investigation into allegations of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. This was immediately seized on to demand the SLS executive reverse its earlier vote. Opposition within the SLS duly collapsed.

At 1:02 p.m., it tweeted, “Sheffield Labour students committee has today (2/11/18) voted to indefinitely postpone the event ‘Why We Need An Anti-War Government,’ involving a panel with Chris Williamson MP and Steven Bell (Stop the War) until the current Scotland Yard police investigation into allegations of anti-Semitism within the Labour Party has been resolved. Although Chris Williamson MP is not personally implicated by these allegations, Sheffield Labour Students believes that due to the nature of the investigation calling into question efficiency of the disciplinary procedures within the party, and the current climate within the wider movement, we do not feel that the event should take place at this moment in time. Another vote will be held after the conclusion of the investigation to determine if the event should take place.”

According to one source, members of the pro-Corbyn Momentum group—whose leadership have played a key role in facilitating the anti-Semitism campaign—were among those who now voted to endorse the motion.

The ban is profoundly anti-democratic and has serious consequences for freedom of speech. A meeting to oppose the war on Yemen that has killed an estimated 56,000 people and plunged millions into famine, with tacit backing from the UK and the US, was cancelled based on hearsay and politically motivated accusations. As the SLS admits, Chris Williamson “is not personally implicated” by the current police investigation into allegations of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. Indeed, no charges have been laid against anyone. If the Crown Prosecution Service decides there is sufficient evidence to support charges, the accused will be entitled to the presumption of innocence.

By its actions, the SLS has become an accomplice in the politically motivated anti-Semitism witch-hunt led by the Blairites, the Zionist lobby, establishment media and intelligence agencies against Corbyn. Based on the precedent set by its decision, meetings involving Corbyn and his supporters can now be “indefinitely postponed” on university campuses—and beyond—until Scotland Yard gives the go ahead! The implications are extraordinary and attest to the collapse of basic democratic norms. On November 2, strengthened by the indefinite cancellation, Swansea Labour Students, which is dominated by Blairites, retweeted their own May resolution no-platforming Williamson.

While Corbyn and Williamson are the immediate targets, the witch-hunt against them has a broader political purpose—aimed at suppressing the growing anti-war sentiment among students, young people and the entire working class, including to Israel's brutal subjugation of the Palestinians. The SLS had initially invited Williamson to speak on campus after an event held at the Momentum conference in September, "Why We Need an Anti-war Government," attended by hundreds of students.

On November 2, the Stop the War Coalition issued a brief statement on their website opposing the meeting's indefinite postponement as "a completely unwarranted silencing of voices critical of government foreign policy" and calling for the decision to be "reversed immediately". No further action was taken, including by the many pseudo-left groups on campus (including the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party) to mobilise students against the anti-democratic actions of the SLS executive.

On November 8, the cancelled meeting went ahead off-campus organised by Sheffield Labour Left (SLL) whose members are drawn from local Constituency Labour Party branches. The group launched a petition, calling on Sheffield Labour Students to reverse its decision. "At a time of heightened militarism across the world," they noted, "this event was too important to cancel." The petition called on the SLS to reverse its decision and invite Williamson to speak. It has so far gathered around 100 signatures.

The action taken by local CLP members stands in stark contrast to the silence of Williamson and Corbyn. Had either of them issued a public statement calling on students to overturn the ban, this would have become a major issue on campus. The meeting was eventually held at the Sheffield Trades and Labour Club, after an earlier booking at the Jury's Inn Hotel was cancelled due to "anonymous threats." With no publicity from Williamson (who has over 40,000 Twitter followers), Momentum, the Sheffield Trades Union Council or Stop the War, the meeting went ahead in semi-clandestine conditions. The Sheffield Star announced the event online, just three hours before it took place. Around 35 attended. Williamson only tweeted about the event after it was held. #

The response of Williamson et al. to the ban motion and their refusal to wage any public campaign against the Blairite witch-hunters, points to the fundamental role of Corbyn and his supporters in the Labour leadership. While professing opposition to war and austerity, they are hostile to a genuine fight against the right-wing, preaching "unity" at all costs in order to suppress and contain the opposition of workers and young people to war, austerity and the destruction of democratic rights. Last week Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell responded by welcoming the police investigation by stating that he wanted Labour's own investigation to be "much more ruthless and Jeremy was the same."

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) call on members of the SLS to demand the overturn of their executive's anti-democratic motion. We urge all University of Sheffield students to send letters of protest to the SLS, the student newspaper and to the University of Sheffield Students Union defending freedom of speech on campus and rejecting the growing calls for censorship.

If the SLS de facto ban is not overturned, what is to stop anyone—government MPs, Trump supporters, fascists—from manufacturing allegations against speakers to demand the banning of future Labour Party or socialist events? Indeed, the University of Sheffield Student Union previously attempted to "no-platform" WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange based on manufactured accusations of rape—a decision that was opposed by students and subsequently overturned.

The IYSSE spoke to Sheffield students about the ban on Chris Williamson.

Amy said, "I think the anti-Semitism campaign against Corbyn is quite propaganda filled, especially when the BBC has strong ties to the Conservative Party. I think it's just a way to try to bring him down. There is just no evidence that I have seen so far on this. If there was any evidence, I would change my mind. What is being mixed up is that you can be against the State of Israel and not against the religion, not against Jews. They are separate things."

Amy opposed the actions of Sheffield Labour Students because Williamson wasn't "coming here to speak about anti-Semitism or whatever. He was coming here to speak about important topical issues like war and Yemen. It just seems very strange that the Labour Party Students are doing this, as it suggests they believe the claims are true."

Asked if she saw a connection between the escalation of the crimes being carried out by the Israeli government against the Palestinians and the moves to accuse Corbyn and his backers of anti-Semitism, Amy said, "I think part of it is the Conservative government trying to cover their own backs. So if Labour say to them, 'Why aren't you doing anything about this? You are in power,' they can turn around and say, well, you are anti-Semitic if you are attacking Israel. This talk should have gone ahead as there should be freedom of information."

Stephen is from the United States. He said, "I think that people should not be prevented from speaking at the meeting when they have not been charged with anything. This is an issue of democratic rights. In a free society you should not judge people based on false accusations and things that are unsubstantiated."



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