

State-orchestrated anti-Semitism witch-hunt extended to UK university campuses

Thomas Scripps
19 October 2020

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson has sent a letter to UK university vice-chancellors calling it “frankly disturbing” that most universities have not adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)’s definition of anti-Semitism.

He warned that if he did not see “the overwhelming majority of institutions adopting the definition by Christmas” then he would ask the Office for Students (OfS) to take regulatory action, possibly including suspending “funding streams”.

Williamson’s letter is preparing for the censorship of hundreds of thousands of students and higher education staff. It is the latest move in a five-year conspiracy of the Conservative government, the Labour Party and Zionist organisations aimed at criminalising vast swathes of the political left.

The IHRA definition is a mechanism for outlawing political criticism of the Israeli state, its criminal oppression of the Palestinians and the right-wing religious nationalism on which it is founded. Under its examples of “anti-Semitic” behaviour are listed opinions “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavour”, “Applying double standards by requiring of it behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation” and “Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.”

In 2017, the Campaign Against Anti-Semitism (CAA) prompted a letter of protest from 250 academics when it tried to disrupt Israeli Apartheid Week events on campus, urging its supporters to “record, film, photograph and get witness evidence,” telling them it would “help you to take it up with the university, students’ union or even the police.” The CAA cited the IHRA definition as the basis for prosecutions.

In 2019, Labour-controlled London council Tower Hamlets cancelled a Palestinian charity event, previously attended by hundreds of people, because it was deemed to conflict with the principles of the IHRA. Now the Tory government intends to roll out the same censorship and repression across all UK universities.

That such a reactionary campaign has reached this stage is devastating proof of the blows dealt to the working class and youth due to the lack of principle and political cowardice displayed by Jeremy Corbyn during his five year leadership of the Labour Party. The IHRA definition came to prominence in the UK in the context of the anti-Semitism witch-hunt carried out by the Blairite majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party with the sponsorship of the Israeli state and Tory MPs.

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) immediately raised the alarm over the significance of this right-wing campaign, writing in 2016:

“A political amalgam has been established that equates any criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism, with the aim of charging the entire ‘left’ with this crime—on the basis that all Jews identify with the state of Israel. Any criticism of the historical actions of the Zionist movement, and, above all, any equation of Israel’s brutal treatment of Palestinians with that suffered

by Jews under fascism, is outlawed.”

In subsequent articles, the WSWS warned that the “strident accusations of anti-Semitism are aimed at shifting the domestic and foreign policy not just of Labour, but of the entire British political establishment sharply to the right.” A definition of “anti-Semitism that includes criticism of Israel provides a legal mechanism for censoring, silencing and criminalising left-wing views and organisations, while whipping up and legitimising anti-Muslim sentiment.”

The WSWS explained that this right-wing offensive had no historical legitimacy or popular support. It was the spearhead for a state-orchestrated conspiracy, led by the Blairites “acting with the Conservative Party, the media, the military and intelligence establishment and the Israel lobby”.

Leading organisations in the witch-hunt, and proponents of the IHRA, include the pro-Zionist Jewish Labour Movement, staffed by party right-wingers; Labour Friends of Israel, involved in framing fellow Labour members for alleged anti-Semitism; the Community and Security Trust, funded by the Conservative government to the tune of £65.2 million since 2015; the British Israel Communications and Research Centre, an Israeli advocacy group; and the Board of Deputies of British Jews, a right-wing, conservative organisation.

The Israeli and American states were deeply involved. A staffer at the Israeli embassy in the UK, Shai Masot, was shown by *Al Jazeera* to be involved in plans to “take down” UK MPs perceived as hostile to Israel. *Al Jazeera*’s reporting also revealed that the Israeli embassy helped to establish, and in some cases directly funded, several “independent” organisations, including the Union of Jewish Students. In June 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told a conference of American Jewish organisations that the American state would organise “push back” against a prospective Corbyn government.

If Russia or China had interfered in British politics to a fraction of the level of the US and Israel, the howls from parliament and the media would be deafening!

By winning a victory over Corbyn, these forces planned to lay the foundations for a broader assault on left-wing workers and youth. By his refusal to oppose the Blairites, his constant political retreats on fundamental questions including NATO membership, the Trident nuclear missile system and war with Syria, and insistence that party unity must be maintained at all costs, Corbyn handed them this victory on a plate. Not only did he suppress all opposition to the right-wing in the party and the working class more broadly, but he became a co-conspirator in the witch-hunt of his own supporters, including long-time allies.

Prominent Labour “left” and former Mayor of London Ken Livingstone was hounded out of the party on bogus charges of anti-Semitism in 2018, taking Corbyn’s advice to retire quietly. The claiming of “such a high-profile scalp,” the WSWS warned, “will be felt internationally. The witch hunt and expulsions within Labour will be held up by right-wing forces all over the world—above all in Israel and the United States—as proof of the left’s supposed rampant anti-Semitism and used as a justification for

systematic political censorship and persecution.”

Other Corbyn supporters followed, including Jackie Walker and Marc Wadsworth, and many, many more lesser known Labour members.

Under Corbyn, the Labour Party then adopted the IHRA definition in full in 2018 and acquiesced to a politically motivated investigation into anti-Semitism in the Labour Party by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission in 2019.

That year, Corbyn and his team actively participated in the expulsion of another prominent ally, Labour MP Chris Williamson, whose treatment made clear the intentions the witch-hunters had for the universities. Based on false anti-Semitism charges, Labour and Zionist student societies worked to ban Williamson from speaking on their campuses. In 2018, the WSWS wrote that Corbyn was “facilitate[ing] the efforts of the UK’s political establishment, together with the state of Israel and the United States, to proscribe left-wing opposition to Zionism as ‘extremism’ to justify its political suppression.”

Corbyn’s betrayals ended in Labour’s decisive defeat in the December 2019 general election and the coming to power of Boris Johnson. In April he tamely handed the party back to the Blairites, led by Sir Keir Starmer.

One of Starmer’s first actions was to step up the McCarthyite witch-hunt in the Labour Party. Starmer dismissed Corbyn ally Rebecca Long-Bailey as Shadow Education Secretary for retweeting comments by actress Maxine Peake that were critical of Israel—pointing out that Israeli security forces trained US police in the restraint techniques that led to the May 25 death of George Floyd. Lloyd Russell-Moyle, a shadow environment minister, resigned after the Jewish Labour Movement demanded his resignation for an old Facebook message describing Zionism as a “dangerous nationalist idea.”

Long-Bailey had herself put the finishing touches to Corbyn’s legacy during her failed campaign in the Labour leadership election, signing up to a list of 10 pledges mandated by the Board of Deputies of British Jews guaranteeing her obedience on the question of Israel and denouncing her former colleagues’ record on anti-Semitism. She became a victim of her own rotten politics.

On Wednesday, July 22, Labour then apologised in the High Court to seven former staffers from Labour’s governance and legal unit, involved in investigating accusations of anti-Semitism. The seven became whistleblowers in a July 2019 BBC Panorama documentary, *Is Labour Anti-Semitic?* A letter of apology was sent to BBC journalist and Panorama presenter John Ware. Undisclosed financial compensation was made to the whistleblowers and to Ware, reported to be worth around £500,000.

Corbyn and the former party leadership had rejected the accusations made in the Panorama programme that they had shown a “lack of commitment” to investigating charges of anti-Semitism levelled against Labour members and called them “disaffected former officials,” who had “worked actively to undermine” Corbyn and had “both personal and political axes to grind.” A report was commissioned by Labour’s former General Secretary Jennie Formby to be submitted as evidence to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) into its handling of anti-Semitism allegations under Corbyn, detailing what it described as a “hyper factional atmosphere” of hostility towards Corbyn in Labour’s head office. The submission was blocked by the party’s lawyers.

A fresh round of legal action against the Corbynites was swiftly announced, amid demands for Corbyn’s expulsion from the party and threats to take out cases “against those who repeat the libels... in future.”

Only through this long and tortured birth of the myth of “institutional” left-wing anti-Semitism, with Corbyn acting as midwife, have Williamson and the Tory government been able to deliver their ultimatum to the universities.

Williamson’s letter to vice-chancellors followed a freedom of information request logged by the Union of Jewish Students (UJS) which

found that just 29 of 133 universities have adopted the IHRA definition, and that 80 had no plans to do so—including Oxford and Cambridge. The UJS and Tory government have been pushing for its unanimous acceptance since May 2019, when communities minister Robert Jenrick demanded universities “show moral leadership and adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism.”

In January 2020, Jenrick upped the ante and declared, “I have been clear that all universities and local councils that have not already done so must adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism. It is shocking that some still haven’t, demonstrating a serious lack of respect for this issue.” He warned, “Organisations like these should not expect to receive public money if they cannot demonstrate that they are fighting antisemitism.”

Responding to the recent UJS freedom of information request, Jenrick said he was “extremely disappointed” and that it was “simply unacceptable that universities accept public money but refuse to take this step.” The UJS, in its statement, accused universities of “defying” their own lobbying efforts and the interventions of the government.

Labour’s support is assured. In her response to the UJS, Labour’s new Shadow Education Secretary Kate Green, appointed after the removal of Long-Bailey, said that while it was “welcome that a number of universities have adopted the IHRA definition or are considering it... many more are yet to act, and must do so.

“Freedom of speech and thought are important but can never be an excuse for antisemitism. Labour urges those universities which are yet to adopt the definition to do so as soon as possible.”

The full extent of the line-up between the two main parties on campus censorship was revealed this August when former Labour MP Ruth Smeeth provided the foreword to a report from the Policy Exchange, the house think-tank of the Conservative Party. Smeeth was a key player in the anti-Semitism witch-hunt against the Corbynite “left.” Between 2005 and 2007, she served as director of public affairs and campaigns for the Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre (BICOM), a pro-Israel lobby group. She was exposed by WikiLeaks in July 2016 as a “strictly protect” US asset in leaked diplomatic cables.

“Academic freedom in the UK: Protecting viewpoint diversity” alleges a “structural discriminatory effect” against academics who “identify as on the right” and called for the Office for Students (OfS) to use its powers to fine higher education providers and student groups who infringed on their “academic free speech.” It was authored by individuals connected with the far-right libertarian milieu around web publication *Spiked* and the social Darwinist network in academia, which are both closely linked with the Tory party.

Theresa May’s Tory government founded the OfS in January 2018 amid claims in the right-wing media that universities had become bastions of left-wing intolerance and censorship. The right utilised the policy of “no platforming” of figures such as WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and feminists such as Germaine Greer by various purveyors of reactionary petty bourgeois identity politics to portray opposition to their own views among students, which has seen popular protests against the presence on campus of prominent fascists such as Nick Griffin and Marine Le Pen, and the employing of eugenicist Noah Carl by Cambridge University, as part of a spectrum of intolerance by the “left” towards academic freedoms.

Originally under the leadership of arch-reactionary Toby Young, the OfS was given a mandate supposedly to restore free speech on campus. The only “freedom” being defended was that of far-right figures to agitate and produce pseudo-science uncontested, with student protests repressed and uncooperative institutions fined. This agenda was escalated in July and August this year, when Williamson announced that financial support for struggling universities would be dependent on their “fully complying with their legal duties to secure freedom of speech.”

Smeeth wrote the foreword to Policy Exchange’s manifesto for state

intervention against left-wing students in her capacity as CEO of the Index on Censorship, chaired by another former Labour MP, Trevor Phillips, who heads the Policy Exchange’s “History Matters” project. As the WSWS commented at the time, “the forces marshalled behind the Index on Censorship intend to use government intervention on the campuses to suppress criticism of Israel and its criminal abuse of the Palestinians—a touchstone issue for British imperialism.”

This state-orchestrated conspiracy has already seen pro-Palestinian students barred from a university campus. Williamson’s letter to vice-chancellors is a warning that the whole of the student and academic body will now be subjected to the same threats. Faced with a rising trend of international class struggle before the pandemic, which can only be intensified by its devastating impact, the ruling class are preparing a campaign of slander and outright censorship to demonise and outlaw left-wing thought.

In September 2019, the UK revised its counter extremism strategy to include a focus on “Violent extremist tactics and the ideology of the sectarian far left”. The authors of this report, British academics Daniel Allington, Siobhan McAndrew, and David Hirsh, were deeply involved in advancing allegations of widespread anti-Semitism in the Labour Party.

According to them, the “sectarian far left”—defined, in their terms, by its vanguardism, anti-imperialism, anti-fascism, and “revolutionary workerist ideology”—is inherently “extremist” and “violent”. Examples of “revolutionary workerist” statements included the views that “The greatest threat to democracy has always come from the far right” and “We should always support striking workers.”

These arguments provided the justification for last month’s directive from the Department for Education that banned schools from using anti-capitalist material. Anti-capitalism is defined as an “extreme political stance”, equivalent to anti-Semitism and terrorism.

Students must draw far-reaching conclusions and organise now to defend their democratic rights. The ruling class has so far relied on the demobilisation of all opposition by the official “left” represented by Corbyn, a caste of professional anti-communists in academia, and the political disorientation sown on campus by the identity politics of the pseudo-left. To defeat the conspiracy requires a determined struggle against these forces and for the revolutionary socialist theory of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Trotsky—based fundamentally on an orientation to the working class—amongst students and young people. We call on those who agree with this programme to contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality today.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact