

Zoom cancels meetings at several universities on Zoom censorship

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Over the last month, Zoom, the widely-used online conferencing platform, has been facing tremendous backlash against its recent censorship of online meetings at several prominent universities.

In late September, the company shut down an online seminar at San Francisco State University (SFSU) titled “Whose Narratives? Gender, Justice and Resistance: A Conversation with Leila Khaled,” featuring Palestinian rights activist Leila Khaled. This was followed in late October by the company’s termination of three online events, organized in solidarity with SFSU, at New York University (NYU), the University of Hawaii at Manoa (UH), and the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom.

Zoom removed the SFSU seminar from its platform the day before it was scheduled to take place, responding to mounting pressure from various pro-Israel and Zionist groups. The company argued that the meeting was “in violation of Zoom’s Terms of Service” because it may violate federal laws by providing “material support” for terrorism. This is referring to Khaled’s long-time membership in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), which was added to the US Department of State’s list of “Foreign Terrorist Organizations” in 1997.

In an email to The Intercept, Zoom Spokesperson Andy Duberstein made it quite clear that the company can bar anyone from using its services. In his email, Duberstein notes a section of the company’s terms of services that states, “Zoom may investigate any complaints and violations that come to its attention and may take any (or no) action that it believes is appropriate, including, but not limited to issuing warnings, removing the content or terminating accounts and/or User profiles.”

Zoom’s cancellation of SFSU’s seminar was

followed by Facebook’s removal of the event’s livestream link and promotional material from its platform. Facebook also issued threats to shut down the online pages of the event’s sponsors. YouTube shut down the livestream of the seminar on its platform 23 minutes after it had started.

The ludicrous arguments put forward by Zoom, Google and Facebook that the event was providing “material support” for terrorism is invalidated by the fact that not only was Khaled participating in a personal capacity, not as a representative of the PFLP, but she was not getting paid to speak at the event.

Zoom’s blatant act of political censorship was met with widespread denunciations by educators and students around the world, and at least a dozen major universities planned to hold online meetings in solidarity with SFSU on October 23. Zoom, acting on information provided to them by “third parties,” shut down three of these meetings the day that they were scheduled to take place. Numerous organizations, including the NYU chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), have strongly denounced the censorship by Zoom as a flagrant attack on free speech on campuses.

In stark contrast to the protest of faculty, students and organizers, the university administrations of both NYU and SFSU sided with Zoom.

In his response to a letter from the organizers of NYU’s censored October 23 meeting, NYU President Andrew Hamilton defends Zoom’s actions, writing, “While their interpretation might be open to argument, it is not a surprise that businesses will steer away from actions that they believe may leave them open to criminally liability.” He concludes the letter by writing, “I would also note that terrorist violence conflicts with academic freedom.” Hamilton made it quite clear that

the university is not taking any steps to prevent future acts of censorship.

In fact, NYU itself has in the past sought to prevent student clubs, including the IYSSE, from holding meetings on campus by denying them official status. The university maintains close ties to Facebook and the US state apparatus. It is also playing a significant role in the surveillance of political activity on social media.

Most recently, NYU settled the “anti-Semitism” lawsuit filed by a former student at the beginning of the year. This lawsuit was part of the state-led effort to equate criticism of the crimes of the Israeli government and capitalism with violent attacks against Jews. The aim of this campaign is to slander and criminalize left-wing criticism of capitalism and imperialism. Even though the investigation by the U.S. Department of Education cleared NYU of any wrongdoing, the university has agreed to adopt the reactionary definition of anti-Semitism promoted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. This definition was incorporated into Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by an executive order issued by the Trump administration in December 2019.

SFSU President Lynn Mahoney declared that the university “does not believe that the class panel discussion violates Zoom’s terms of service or the law” and emphasized that SFSU “remains steadfast in its support of the right of faculty to conduct their teaching and scholarship free of censorship.” However, SFSU has also made it clear that it has no intention of taking any serious steps to combat future censorship.

Zoom’s dramatic escalation of censorship on its platform has major implications. Over the last 11 months, the company has become one of the primary sources of communication and information distribution for over 300 million people worldwide. Unable to operate in-person, countless academic institutions, schools and businesses have become largely dependent on Zoom to conduct classes, conferences, group meetings, and one-on-one discussions. Moreover, the platform is widely used by political organizations to hold political meetings, conferences and rallies.

Zoom’s actions are part of a much broader attack on free speech by capitalist governments around the world. Working with Google, Facebook and other major tech companies, the bourgeoisie in all countries have sought to crack down on the dissemination of progressive, anti-

war, left-wing, and socialist material online. Social media platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, have, over the last few months, put in place strict regulations that require the “fact checking” of posts and events in order to slow “the spread of misinformation.”

For over two decades, the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) has been one of the primary targets of this broad censorship campaign and has written extensively on the efforts of the ruling classes in every country to block the spread of socialism within the international working class. Over the last year, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has struggled against increasingly aggressive acts of censorship. This includes, most recently, the continued blacklisting of WSWS material on Reddit, Twitter’s suspension of the account of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality in the United States (IYSSE-US), and Facebook’s deletion of event pages for IYSSE online meetings.

All those who seek to fight online censorship and defend the right to freedom of speech must break from all capitalist parties and institutions and turn to the international working class. The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality are the forefront of this struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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