AP journalist fired after right-wing campaign over Palestinian activism

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Last week, in a chilling act of political censorship, the Associated Press (AP) fired new staffer Emily Wilder over her pro-Palestinian positions while a student at Stanford University, and for posts on social media critical of the government of Israel.

The decision to fire Wilder came after the Stanford chapter of the College Republicans launched an online campaign to discredit the newly hired journalist. The campaign garnered support from a slew of right-wing figures like Ben Shapiro, Robert Spencer, and Senator Tom Cotton, who all called for her removal.

Wilder had started working for the AP on May 3. Just two weeks later, the Stanford College Republicans posted on Facebook and Twitter claiming to have "exposed" a supposed anti-Israel bias on the part of the AP by hiring Wilder. The posts denounced Wilder as an "anti-Israel agitator" for her participation in demonstrations by the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and the Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), a Jewish activist group that is opposed to Zionism.

The so-called "exposure" by the College Republicans was merely sharing photos of Wilder's own social media account where she expressed excitement to start in her position at the AP, images of her at a JVP demonstration, and a handful of social media posts where Wilder, who is Jewish, criticized the "Birthright" Israeli citizenship afforded to people of Jewish descent while Palestinians have been forcibly removed from their homes.

In one such post, Wilder explained why she would be attending a protest of a Birthright fundraiser where billionaire Sheldon Adelson, Donald Trump's largest single donor, was a participant. Wilder wrote, "Why do I #ReturnTheBirthright? Because Millions of Palestinian Refugees and their descendants cannot visit or return to their parents or grandparents' homes while Israel, funded by bigots like Adelson, spends millions to bring and indoctrinate hundreds of thousands of young Jews on lands from which Palestinians were ethnically cleansed and displaced less than a lifetime ago." In the same post, Wilder went on to say that she rejects ethnic nationalism and dreams of an end to national borders.

The post by the College Republicans was subsequently shared by Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas, the right-wing editor of *The Daily Wire* Ben Shapiro, and the anti-Muslim racist Robert Spencer. Senator Cotton went so far as to insinuate that the AP was linked to Hamas. In a post that linked to an article on Wilder's hire by the far-right *Free Beacon*, Cotton commented: "Not a surprise from a media organization that shared office space with Hamas."

Earlier this month, the Israel Defense Forces launched airstrikes and destroyed the AP offices, among others, in Gaza, claiming that the building was housing Hamas. Both the AP and the owner of the destroyed building deny that Hamas ever had any operations in the building. Israel has provided no evidence to support the claim that Hamas was using the site.

Spencer posted his attacks on Wilder to his sickening *Jihad Watch* blog, where he accused the recent college grad of "engaging in numerous activities in support of the genocidal 'Palestinian' jihad" and also promoted the lie that the AP has links to Hamas.

In a statement posted to her Twitter after she had been fired, Wilder addressed the right-wing campaign against her and AP's decision to terminate her on political grounds. Wilder writes:

> ...the Stanford College Republicans launched a smear campaign against me, attempting to 'expose' my already-public history of activism for Palestinian human rights at Stanford University. I was transparent with my editors, and they reassured me I would not face punishment. I was told my editors were only hoping to support me as I received an onslaught of sexist, antisemitic, racist, and violent comments and messages. Less than 48 hours later, the AP fired me.

The AP has been mostly silent on Wilder's firing. The official reason given for her firing was Wilder's supposed violation of their social media policy. No example of the alleged violation was given. Wilder commented in her statement, "it appears they took it as an opportunity to make me a scapegoat."

Wilder concludes her statement saying that the experience has

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been “heartbreaking.” She added, “I have to ask what kind of message this sends to young people who are hoping to channel righteous indignation or passion for justice into impactful storytelling. What future does it promise to aspiring reporters that an institution like the Associated Press would sacrifice those with the least power to the cruel trolling of anonymous bullies? What does it mean for this industry that even sharing the painful experiences of Palestinians or interrogating the language we use to describe them can be seen as irredeemably ‘biased?’”

Finally, she writes, “While the last few days have been overwhelming, I will not be intimidated into silence. I will be back soon.”

The firing of Wilder and the silence on behalf of the Associated Press has provoked a firestorm of opposition from the public, as well as Wilder’s former colleagues. On Monday, employees of the Associated Press wrote an open letter denouncing Wilders’ firing and demanding an explanation.

The open letter states, in part:

> Wilder was a young journalist, unnecessarily harmed by the AP’s handling and announcement of its firing of her. We need to know that the AP would stand behind and provide resources to journalists who are the subject of smear campaigns and online harassment. As journalists who cover contentious subjects, we are often the target of people unhappy with scrutiny. What happens when they orchestrate a smear campaign targeting another one of us? Interest groups are celebrating their victory and turning their sights on more AP journalists. They have routinely made journalists’ identities subject to attack. Once we decide to play this game on the terms of those acting in bad faith, we can’t win.

The AP journalists go on to defend Wilder and explain that the firing calls into question basic rights and protection for journalists, writing: “The lack of communication since then about Wilder’s firing and the circumstances surrounding it gives us no confidence that any one of us couldn’t be next, sacrificed without explanation. It has left our colleagues—particularly emerging journalists—wondering how we treat our own, what culture we embrace and what values we truly espouse as a company.”

They conclude calling for clarity into the disciplinary process used to fire Wilder, a forum to explain exactly what violates the social media policy, a commitment to defending staff that come under attacks from harassment campaigns, and for the creation of a committee to develop a new social media policy.

At the time of this writing, over 140 AP journalists around the world have signed the letter. Signers include correspondents in Washington D.C., New York, Chicago, Austin, Beijing, Boston, Cairo, Los Angeles, Moscow, New Delhi, and several other cities. More signatures continue to be added every hour.

While the AP has yet to publicly address the letter, on Monday evening *The Intercept* published a leaked memo from the executive staff of the AP to the editorial staff which was clearly an attempt at damage control. The memo states that the executive staff “will listen closely to concerns, and, of course, consider them,” and that “the decision to dismiss a member of the staff was a difficult one; we did not make it lightly.”

The Intercept report notes that outgoing Associated Press Executive Editor Sally Buzbee, who is taking a position as the executive editor of the Washington Post starting June 1, did not sign the memo. According to *The Intercept’s* AP staffer sources, Buzbee is attempting to distance herself from the controversy.

The firing of Wilder comes at a time of immense opposition to the one-sided war being waged against the population of Palestine. Over the past month, there have been major international demonstrations protesting the bombing of Gaza by Israel and the financing of the attacks by the United States.

The AP has cowardly conceded to the most right-wing and reactionary elements in the ruling class who hope to squash the outpouring of international support for Palestinians by means of censorship and intimidation. The attacks on Wilder must also be seen in the context of the ongoing persecution of anti-war journalists such as Julian Assange and whistleblowers Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning. Julian Assange remains imprisoned in Belmarsh prison for exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and Snowden remains exiled in Russia with the threat of execution over his head should he return to the US.

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