Federal charges dismissed against MIT professor Gang Chen

Kevin Reed
21 January 2022

The federal charges against Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Gang Chen were dropped by the Justice Department on Thursday, after the US government admitted that it could “no longer meet its burden of proof” at trial.

US District Judge Patti Saris dismissed the case against Chen, a naturalized US citizen since 2000 and highly respected professor of nanoscience at MIT, after federal prosecutors dropped charges that he failed to disclose Chinese affiliations in grant proposals to US funding agencies and failed to report the existence of a foreign bank account.

Dr. Chen had been one of the most high-profile scientists in the US charged under the China Initiative program, an anti-China witch-hunting operation that was launched by the Justice Department in 2018 during the Trump administration with the professed aim of stopping Chinese economic and scientific espionage.

In a statement to the press, Chen said, “While I am relieved that my ordeal is over, I am mindful that this terribly misguided China Initiative continues to bring unwarranted fear to the academic community and other scientists still face charges.”

Without apologizing to Dr. Chen or acknowledging the prosecution as a travesty of justice, the new US attorney in Boston, Rachael S. Rollins, said, “We understand that our charging decisions deeply impact people’s lives. As United States attorney, I will always encourage the prosecutors in our office to engage in this type of rigorous and continued review at every stage of a proceeding. Today’s dismissal is a result of that process and is in the interests of justice.”

There are approximately 20 academics and researchers who have been charged under the China Initiative over the past three years. Several convictions have been rendered by US courts on trumped-up charges such as the guilty verdict of Harvard University chemistry and biology professor Charles Lieber on December 21, 2021. The court did not convict the 62-year-old Lieber on any charges related to “aiding the People’s Republic of China” but on two counts of making false statements to federal authorities and four other counts related to tax and bank filings.

Additionally, the China Initiative is in a shambles with many of the cases dismissed for lack of evidence and, instead, the program is increasingly seen as an anti-China campaign against scientists based on their ethnic origin. As the *New York Times* reported on Thursday, “The prosecutions have come under criticism for singling out scientists based on their ethnicity, and for overreach, blurring the line between disclosure violations and more serious crimes like espionage. Critics in academia say it has instilled a pervasive atmosphere of fear among scientists of Chinese descent.”

Last September, the first of these cases to go to trial, against University of Tennessee professor of engineering Anming Hu, resulted in an acquittal when the judge ruled that the government had not proven intentional fraud. According to the *Times*, seven other cases against researchers have also been dismissed.

Professor Chen was arrested on January 14, 2021, during the final week of the Trump White House. At that time, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported that the Justice Department falsely claimed he was in direct collaboration with the People’s Republic of China “in exchange for financial compensation.” The charges also stated that he functioned as an “overseas expert” for the government in Beijing and received approximately $29 million in funding from the Chinese Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech).

© World Socialist Web Site

As was pointed out in a letter from MIT faculty members who were outraged by the charges against Dr. Chen, the claims made by the US government were completely bogus since the activity that he was being criminally charged for were part of the routine practice of academic researchers. Meanwhile, the $29 million that the professor supposedly received from China was in fact funding that was awarded to MIT. The letter said, “Singling him and his research group out as the ‘sole’ recipient is simply wrong. The partnership with SUSTech was approved and overseen by MIT at the highest levels.”

Dr. Chen had pleaded not guilty to the charges, was released on bond and remained on paid leave at MIT. Even though he faced up to 25 years in prison and a half-million dollars in fines, the professor had said he was looking forward to vigorously defending himself. At the time of his arrest, he was 56 years old and was considered one of the most accomplished and published researchers in the fields of physics and materials science.

The fact that it has taken the Biden administration’s Justice Department more than a year to dismiss the case against Dr. Chen is an outrage, given the preposterous nature of the charges against him. This fact speaks to the correspondence between the politics of the Democrats and Republicans on US government policy toward China. Within the political establishment and ruling elite there is a broad-based constituency for using anti-Chinese hysteria within the US as part of its international political strategy. This is proven by the fact that the Biden White House has not shut down the China Initiative.

It is a fact that the Trump administration did not have to do very much to move forward with its prosecutorial offensive based on extreme American nationalism and xenophobia given that the Obama White House had initiated a “pivot to Asia” policy within which economic and military aggression was directed toward China.

The delay in dropping the charges against Dr. Chen indicates that there are some within the Biden Justice Department who wanted to press forward with his prosecution. While the anti-Chinese campaign has been whipped up over the past two years with false claims regarding the origin of the coronavirus—the “Wuhan Lab” lie has supporters from the far-right to the nominally liberal wings of American politics—the Biden administration has been weighing its options for utilizing the Chinese Initiative prosecutions for its own international political objectives.

However, as indicated by the opposition within the MIT faculty to the treatment of Gang Chen, the US public will not be so easily manipulated. Dr. Chen’s lawyer, Robert Fisher, said that witnesses “came forward and told the government how badly they misunderstood the details surrounding scientific and academic collaboration,” and “without them this case would likely still be ongoing.”

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site