

Open letter from Harvard employee opposing persecution of students protesting Israel's assault on Gaza

A Harvard employee
13 October 2023

The following letter was sent to the World Socialist Web Site from a Harvard employee.

Dear colleagues,

The statement by the Harvard Undergraduate Palestine Solidarity Committee (PSC) and the extraordinary backlash to it has become an international news story.

The short statement by student activists, which legitimately held “the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence,” has been denounced by university administrators, national media personalities and billionaire CEOs. It has outrageously been equated to support for Hamas, terrorism and anti-Semitism.

This has created an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship on campus. The PSC had to “postpone a solidarity vigil acknowledging all civilian victims” following “credible death threats,” according to a PSC statement to the *Harvard Crimson*, the student newspaper.

Due to the threats, only Harvard ID holders are allowed on campus during certain time periods, and the Harvard University Police Department (HUPD) has increased their presence on campus. A young Muslim student was reportedly advised by HUPD to stay in her dorm rather than attend an in-person meeting because her headscarf could make her a target for violence; loved ones are checking in to encourage distance from Harvard Yard.

The far-right Accuracy in Media (AIM) group has swiftly descended onto the scene, driving around Harvard Square with a billboard truck showing the names and photos of students supposedly associated with the PSC statement under the header “Harvard’s

Leading Antisemites.” Despite its nominal dedication to “accuracy,” the truck has reportedly included photos of students who are no longer at Harvard, students no longer affiliated with the organizations, and Jewish students, all lumped together as anti-Semites.

The pile-on against these student activists has provided grist for the mill for far-right groups like AIM, which has promoted Tucker Carlson and defended torture under the Bush administration. It should be noted that this milieu is full of genuine anti-Semites, that Israelis have protested in record numbers against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s slow-motion coup, that Israeli and Jewish organizations and activists are among those calling Israel an apartheid regime and opposing the slaughter in Gaza, and that equating the Jewish people and the actions of the State of Israel provides fertile ground for anti-Semitism.

It is clear at this point that business executives and other right-wingers have decided to make an example of Harvard student activists. Earlier this week, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported:

On Tuesday, billionaire hedge fund manager and longtime Democratic Party donor Bill Ackman, founder and CEO of Pershing Square Capital Management, called on Harvard to release the names of students who are members of the organizations that signed the PSC’s joint statement. Ackman menacingly wrote, “I have been asked by a number of CEOs if Harvard would release a list of the members of each of the Harvard organizations that have issued the letter assigning sole responsibility for Hamas’

heinous acts to Israel, so as to insure [sic] that none of us inadvertently hire any of their members. If, in fact, their members support the letter they have released, the names of the signatories should be made public so their views are publicly known.”

On Friday, CNN reported that Idan Ofer—who, with a net worth of approximately \$20 billion according to Bloomberg, is the wealthiest person in Israel and the 80th most wealthy person on Earth—and his wife Batia have left the Harvard Kennedy School Dean’s Executive Board. The school’s website describes the board as “a small group of business and philanthropic leaders who serve as trusted advisors to the Dean and are among the most committed financial supporters of the School.” This board is only one of the many mechanisms by which wealthy donors influence university administration and, ultimately, the trajectory of academic life at Harvard and other universities.

The administration has clearly come under enormous pressure in the past week. Harvard President Claudine Gay has issued multiple statements denouncing Hamas and terrorism (and implicitly denouncing the PSC), while noting that academic freedom and free speech still, for now, exist. In a video posted Thursday evening, Gay said: “That commitment [to free expression] extends even to views that many of us find objectionable, even outrageous. We do not punish or sanction people for expressing such views.”

To be honest, the fact that the president of what is arguably the most prominent university on the planet had to say that, no, the university does not expel students for “objectionable” views—as demanded by a Harvard professor, among others—is degrading. My colleagues are evidently explaining, in conversations with angry donors and alumni, the ABCs of academic freedom. You would think that Harvard graduates would know better!

The PSC, by daring to note that the dispossession of Palestinians during the founding of Israel and ongoing repression by the Israeli government in Gaza created the context for this latest violence, cut through the one-sided narrative promoted in the media and by governments from Tel Aviv to Washington.

Harvard is an international institution. Its students,

faculty and staff come from many backgrounds and from all over the world, including Israel and Palestine. Indeed, the exchange of ideas and perspectives that this enables has historically been held up as an essential aspect, even duty, of higher education.

I know that many of my colleagues—and the students we, directly and indirectly, serve—are reeling from the events of the last week. Many of us have personal, national or religious connections to innocent people caught up in the conflict. I know that with this comes intense, understandable emotions. I hope that, among everything that is going on, we can also try to understand the origins and significance of the conflict, acknowledge that criticism of the Israeli government is legitimate, and oppose this disgusting, McCarthyite campaign against students for expressing their views.

Lastly, to students, staff and faculty at Harvard and beyond: I have found the articles and statements published on the WSWs to be unparalleled in their political analysis and clarity. I urge you to consider the WSWs’s socialist perspective of uniting Jewish and Arab workers, and workers everywhere, against the capitalist nation-state system that has ultimately wrought this conflict. The following would be an excellent start:

Oppose the outlawing of solidarity protests in defense of Gaza!

Who is responsible for the violence in Israel and Gaza?

Down with Netanyahu’s government! Stop the imperialist-backed Zionist onslaught against Gaza!



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)