

Victimized NYU student Ryna Workman releases powerful statement against US-backed Israeli genocide

Jesse Thomas, Clara Weiss
16 October 2023

The outpouring of protests in defense of the Palestinian people over the past days have dealt a major blow to the massive propaganda campaign surrounding the Israeli government's genocidal retaliation against 1.1 million Palestinians in Gaza. In cities across the world, hundreds of thousands have turned out to protest the genocidal onslaught by the Netanyahu administration, which enjoys the full backing of US imperialism. These mass demonstrations have come in spite of the fact that the actions by the Netanyahu administration have been accompanied by an assault on democratic rights internationally.

In the United States, opposition is mounting among students as universities like Harvard University and, in New York, New York University (NYU), Columbia University and the City University of New York (CUNY) have emerged as a major battle ground in the fight to defend basic democratic rights and oppose the propaganda that is used to legitimize the genocidal policies of the Israeli state against the Palestinian people.

NYU law student Ryna Workman came under vicious attack after releasing a principled statement last Tuesday, October 10, in defense of Palestinians against Israeli oppression.

NYU Law Dean Troy McKenzie and University Spokesman John Beckman immediately issued denunciations of Workman for the statement, invoking "victim blaming" and indirectly endorsing the slanderous accusations of antisemitism made by the right-wing media. Within hours, a prospective employer of Workman's, corporate law firm Winston & Strawn, announced the rescinding of a job offer previously made to Workman in retaliation for their pro-Palestinian statement.

The board of the Student Bar Association (SBA) responded to Workman's letter by issuing a statement announcing the body's decision to initiate hearings to remove Workman as president of the organization, as well as to circulate a "No Confidence" survey among the members. Workman's weeklong removal hearings will begin on Tuesday, October 17.

The role of the NYU administration in this crackdown on democratic rights and the furthering of the crimes of US imperialism and its allies is not a coincidence. The NYU administration has close ties to big business, the Democratic Party, as well as the American military and intelligence apparatus. For years, it has played an important role in the state-backed campaign to falsely equate opposition to Zionism and the crimes of the Israeli state against the Palestinians with "antisemitism."

Significantly, however, this campaign has failed to intimidate opposition and even its main target, Ryna Workman. On Monday, October 16, Workman released a powerful statement, calling for an end to the Israeli genocide of the Palestinians and a stop to all US military aid to the far-right Israeli government. The statement read:

What I wrote was inspired by, and in line with, what many Jewish peace activists and Israelis, including the editorial board of Israel's largest newspaper, have voiced over the past week in response to the violence. I am surprised and disheartened that so many have read malicious intent into my email. The killing of children and other innocent civilians is horrific. When I step back to think about the situation, I cannot reconcile the fact that some of the loudest calls for acknowledgement of Israeli pain are ignoring the loss of Palestinian children in Gaza. And I am frightened that the far-right Israeli government is using this pain to justify their campaign of ethnic cleansing. My intent was to call attention to the lack of coverage about Palestinians and to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza—a crisis that has only escalated exponentially since I sent that email on Tuesday.

Over the past week, I've been removed as student body president, some alumni are campaigning for my expulsion from law school, the firm that I had lined up to work at after graduation revoked my job offer, and I've been getting death threats online. The harassment campaign against me has targeted all facets of my identity—the fact that I am Black, the fact that I am queer, the fact that I am nonbinary. But regardless of how terrible my week has been, this attention on one student's email to their fellow law students is entirely misplaced and a dangerous distraction.

Three days ago, Israel ordered over one million Palestinian civilians to evacuate their homes in Gaza. There is nowhere for people to go on a tiny strip of land blockaded at every turn. This evacuation order is an actual death trap for innocent Palestinian civilians in Gaza, who are being collectively punished. Indeed, convoys of evacuees have been killed by airstrikes while fleeing

Northern Gaza. Horrifyingly, the United States is providing military aid to assist the far-right Israeli government as they escalate their genocide against Palestinians and carry out what the U.N. has condemned as a humanitarian catastrophe.

Already, we've seen entire neighborhoods being leveled by bombs, and Israel has cut off access to water and electricity, disrupted internet and phone signals; many in Gaza have long been going hungry, a situation worsening as the Israeli blockade cuts them off from food and other critical supplies like medicine and medical equipment. Children are dying in the buildings being bombed. Sick and injured people in hospitals are dying without electricity to run medical equipment. Over 2,750 Palestinians have already lost their lives.

We must stay focused on what really matters, and that is doing all we can to prevent furthering the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. We must demand a full ceasefire and the provision of safe,

secure, and timely delivery of humanitarian assistance to the affected population inside the Gaza Strip. Further, we must call on the United States to end all military aid to Israel's far-right government and work to stop—not fund—this catastrophe.

Across the campus, opposition to the victimization of Workman and the attack on the freedom of expression of support for the Palestinians has also been mounting. On Thursday, members of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) wrote a letter, condemning Workman's victimization. Directly addressing NYU President Linda G. Mills and NYU Law School Dean Troy McKenzie, the letter wrote:

We are alarmed and dismayed at the news that Ryna Workman, an NYU Law student and the Student Bar Association President, may be strongly disciplined as a result of their social media posts in regards to the unfolding tragedy in Israel-Palestine. Punishment on the basis of speech of any kind represents a grave and precedent-setting attack on academic freedom in our university community. As educators we have a particular responsibility to protect the academic freedom of students.

An NYU Law School group called NYU Law Jews for a Free Palestine also wrote to the Dean of the Law School and the University Administration to express support for Workman:

Dear Dean McKenzie and NYU Law Administration,

As Jewish students at NYU Law, we write to express our strong, unequivocal support for Ryna Workman in light of the horrific response to their statement. We are deeply troubled that JLSA [Jewish Law Students Association], the administration, and others have condoned the targeting of anti-Zionist students and the calls for academic and other sanctions against them.

We do not feel that our safety was put at risk by Ryna's statement. Rather, we feel unsafe when a classmate is harassed, doxxed, and faces death threats, while the NYU Law administration stands by.

Nor do we feel that their statement was antisemitic. We reject the conflation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism, and we condemn the weaponization of antisemitism to silence criticism of Israel. Antisemitism is a dangerous and pervasive social force, and should be taken seriously. However, support for the Palestinian people in their struggle for agency, political autonomy, and human dignity is not evidence of discrimination against Jewish people.

Ryna Workman's statement and the growing support for the student among faculty and students is testimony to the immense popular opposition to the unfolding genocide and its backing by the imperialist powers at universities in New York, the US and beyond.

At Harvard University, despite the public doxxing and attacks on pro-Palestinian students by state figures such as Larry Summers, the former US Secretary of the Treasury, and billionaire CEO Bill Ackmann, hundreds of students protested in defense of the Palestinian people on Sunday.

At the City University of New York, an organization of Jewish law students (CUNY-JSLA) circulated a statement last Tuesday, expressing its "uncompromising solidarity" with the Palestinian people, documenting the decades-long disenfranchisement of Palestinians at the hands of

Zionism with the backing of its imperialist allies. It denounced CUNY Chancellor Félix V. Mateos Rodríguez's October 10 statement which furtively vilified the Palestinian resistance. The statement denounced the administration for having "made common cause with the U.S. far-right, as the administration capitulates to city councilmembers' demands to repress pro-Palestine speech and echo their characterization of Palestine solidarity as inherently violent."

At Columbia University, also in New York, hundreds of students and faculty signed a letter to express solidarity with Columbia University Professor Joseph Massad, who had authored an op-ed supporting Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation. The letter stated:

We condemn the incendiary and defamatory petition circulated on October 13, 2023 by a Columbia student and former affiliate of the Israeli Defense Forces calling for Professor Massad's removal from the faculty of Columbia University for exercising his right to academic freedom. This petition has been circulated in a context in which mainstream media outlets such as Fox News and the Jerusalem Post have published articles misrepresenting Professor Massad's views as "condoning and supporting terrorism," further fueling attacks against his academic freedom and personal safety. We are further profoundly disturbed by the many threats issued against Professor Massad's life and his freedom of academic expression.

The letter condemned the university administration's response to the conflict and its failure to protect the academic freedom of Massad. It called upon the administration of Columbia University, to

issue a university-wide statement unequivocally supporting Professor Massad's right to academic freedom as outlined in the University's mission statement; guaranteeing untenured Columbia faculty's protection from retaliation for expressing their support for Palestinian liberation and/or their condemnation of Israel's genocidal attacks on Gaza; acknowledging and unequivocally condemning anti-Arab, anti-Palestinian, and Islamophobic violence and rhetoric on campus; and affirming the university's commitment to its Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim students and faculty.

The growing opposition among students to the genocide unfolding in Gaza must be oriented toward the burgeoning international movement of the working class against war and austerity. The struggle for democratic rights, as well as the fight to stop the genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza, is inseparable from the fight against US imperialism and social inequality. The demand for a united struggle between the working class of Israel and Palestine, with the working class in the US and Europe, must be advanced. The IYSSE urges all students, workers and youth who wish to take up this fight to distribute *World Socialist Web Site* material as widely as possible and to contact the IYSSE to get involved.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact