

Billionaire CEOs continue campaign to blacklist students for opposition to Israel's war crimes

Emma Arceneaux
17 October 2023

Mass opposition to the Israeli government's genocidal war against Palestinians in Gaza continues to mount across the United States and internationally. Despite the combined pressures of relentless propaganda and anti-democratic attacks against expressions of solidarity with the Palestinian people, millions of workers and youth throughout the world continue to pour into the streets to protest Israel's war crimes.

In the United States, where the Biden administration has fully backed the Israeli government, university campuses have emerged as a major battleground in the fight to defend democratic rights and expose the lies used to justify Israel's policies. As the scale of Israel's war becomes increasingly clear—including through the mass bombing campaign and the deliberate deprivation of food, water and fuel to the 2.2 million inhabitants of Gaza, half of whom are children—the class lines are being clearly drawn.

On the one side are tens of thousands of students who are fighting to stop Israel's historic crimes against Gaza; on the other hand are the billionaire CEOs, members of the capitalist ruling class who populate university board rooms and whose checkbooks secure the allegiance of the university administrations.

The recent statements by these figures highlights the right-wing, anti-democratic character of this social layer which exercises vast influence over academia.

At Harvard University, the CEO campaign to blacklist pro-Palestinian students has continued to mount following the events last week, when students were publicly doxxed and threatened with retaliation for signing a statement correctly blaming Israel's decades-long oppression of the Palestinians for the current conflict.

After public denunciations of the students by Larry Summers, former Harvard president and former US Treasury Secretary, along with calls by Bill Ackman, Harvard alumnus and billionaire hedge fund manager, for the university to release the names of students associated with

the statement, a van rode around campus plastered with the pictures and names of protesting students.

Since then, more billionaire donors, aligned with both the Democrats and Republicans, have come forward to slander the students as "antisemitic" and demand that they be "held accountable" for their opposition to Israel's crimes.

After denouncing the student letter, Ken Griffin, founder and CEO of the hedge fund Citadel, demanded that the university take a harder stance in defense of Israel. According to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index, Griffin is the world's 33rd wealthiest person with an estimated wealth of \$36 billion. He has donated more than half a billion dollars to Harvard, including \$300 million this year alone.

The *New York Times* reported a private call between Griffin and Penny Pritzker, billionaire senior fellow of the Harvard Corporation and sister to Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker, after which the university issued a second, more forceful statement on the conflict, condemning "the terrorist atrocities perpetrated by Hamas."

Griffin has also joined Ackman's call for students to be blacklisted, declaring that students associated with the letter would never be hired by Citadel for their "unforgivable" digression.

Students across the US are facing intense retribution for voicing their opposition to the war. At New York University, Ryna Workman, president of the Student Bar Association (SBA), came under vicious attack by the university administration after issuing a principled statement defending Palestinians against Israeli oppression. They were publicly denounced by university administrators; their job offer from the corporate law firm Winston & Strawn was immediately revoked; and the SBA announced that it would remove Workman from their elected position.

At the University of Pennsylvania (Penn), President Liz Magill was forced to issue a second statement on the Israel war, in which she denounced Hamas's "terrorist assault." She also capitulated to demands that the administration

denounce a Palestinian literature festival held at the university in September, slandering speakers for their opposition to Zionism and the state of Israel, stating they had “a public history of speaking out viciously against the Jewish people.” Among the panelists was Pink Floyd founder Roger Waters, who was banned from campus by the university and had to participate remotely.

Magill’s latest statements followed a concerted campaign by the university’s wealthiest donors and state figures to demand the school align itself with the state of Israel.

Billionaire Jon Huntsman Jr., former governor of Utah who served in the administrations of every president from Ronald Reagan through Donald Trump, announced that his family foundation would “close its checkbook” to Penn for its supposed “moral relativism” in response to what he called the “reprehensible and historic Hamas evil.”

Vahan Gureghian, CEO of CSMI, a for-profit charter school operator, resigned from the Penn Board of Trustees last Friday, describing the Palestine literature festival as an “embrace of antisemitism.”

Another billionaire donor, Marc Rowan, CEO of Apollo Global Management and chair of the Wharton School, Penn’s business school, called for both Magill and the university’s Board of Trustees Chair Scott Bok to be fired and for donors to discontinue funding to the university.

While Griffin, Ackman, Rowan and others have been public in their statements, the *Times* reported that in its interviews with donors, “the most intense demands have come behind the scenes” from Wall Street financiers who feel they “had a right... to weigh in” but who do “not want to speak publicly on a rapidly evolving issue that has elicited death threats on both sides.”

While students are publicly doxxed, removed from elected academic positions and physically threatened, the financial elite have self-declared their right to dictate university policy and suppress academic freedom in backroom dealings without the threat of public scrutiny.

In addition to blacklisting by major corporations and the American state, students are also confronted with similar attacks against their democratic rights by right-wing professors.

At the University of California, Berkeley, Zionist law Professor Steven Davidoff Soloman published an opinion piece in the *Wall Street Journal* on Sunday titled, “Don’t Hire My Anti-Semitic Law Students,” in which he equated criticism of Zionism with “anti-Semitism and dehumanizing Jews.”

He menacingly stated that it was “time for the adults to take over” and that students need to “face consequences,” such as being blacklisted by law firms, in order to “straighten up.” In the context of violent police repression

against pro-Palestinian protesters internationally, such statements have sinister implications.

Solomon chairs the Board of Directors of the Israel Institute, a Zionist organization which promotes the state of Israel on university campuses and has high level connections to both the US and Israeli governments. It was founded in 2012 by Itamar Rabinovich, former Israeli ambassador to the US, and its funding comes from the Schusterman Family Foundation, which declares on its website that its work “is rooted in a proud embrace of the vision of Zionism embedded in Israel’s founding Declaration of Independence.”

The intensity of the campaign to discredit political opposition to the policies of Israel and its imperialist backers is indicative of a deep-seated fear within these ruling layers that their slanderous propaganda and warmongering is being rejected by millions of people worldwide.

Indeed, despite significant personal victimization, Ryna Workman has issued a second statement, redoubling their demands for an immediate end to Israel’s genocidal war. At Harvard, hundreds of students held a demonstration on Sunday in support of the Palestinians. Internationally, protesters are courageously defying bans against Palestine solidarity protests in the so-called “democratic” countries.

As the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in the US explained in its recent statement condemning the censorship of anti-war opposition on campuses, the ferocious attacks against students are part of a broader effort by the ruling class to suppress all democratic rights and preempt the growing radicalization of the working class amid the development of the largest strike movement in decades.

Mass opposition to the unfolding genocide against Gaza must be connected to this growing movement of the working class against inequality. The struggle to stop war, to defend democratic rights and to end social inequality are all bound up with the fight to abolish capitalism. The IYSSE calls for the building of a unified movement of the working class and youth in Israel, Palestine, the US, Europe and internationally as the basis for waging such a struggle. We encourage all those who agree with this call to get involved today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact