

Rashida Tlaib censure vote sets precedent for criminalizing opposition to Gaza genocide

Patrick Martin
9 November 2023

The vote by the US House of Representatives to censure Representative Rashida Tlaib (Democrat-Michigan) for her opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza is an unprecedented attack on democratic rights. Tlaib, the lone Palestinian-American in the House, is the first representative since the Civil War to be censured for speaking out on her political beliefs. Twenty-two Democrats and nearly all Republicans joined in the censure vote.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party oppose and condemn this censure. Notwithstanding our fundamental differences, as socialists, with the Democratic Party congresswoman, we view this action as part of a systematic effort by the Biden administration, its NATO allies and capitalist governments all over the world to suppress a massive protest movement developing against Israel's genocide of Palestinians. In calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, Tlaib is doing no more than giving expression to the sentiments not only of her constituents, but of the majority of the American population.

The White House is free to send bombs to slaughter Palestinian children—without even reporting how many—and members of Congress like Senator Lindsey Graham are free to advocate a “total war” against what he calls “the most extremist population on Earth.” But verbal criticism of what is clearly a genocide and a massive violation of international law is impermissible.

The vote comes amid mass murder in Gaza, with more than 10,000 Palestinians killed by Israeli bombs, missiles and artillery shells, the vast majority of them women, children and the elderly. This death toll is set to skyrocket as the Israel Defense Forces pushes forward with its ground invasion and tightens its noose around Gaza City, the largest population center in the tiny enclave.

In response, millions of people on every inhabited continent have taken to the streets in simultaneous global mass protests. Just last weekend, 300,000 people marched in Washington D.C., accusing US President Joe Biden of genocide.

The action by the US House is part of a global wave of attacks on democratic rights, as all of the major powers move to prohibit the escalating popular protests against the Israeli military onslaught against a largely defenseless population.

These governments are at war with their own people, among whom opposition to the Gaza genocide is widespread.

In Britain, the Conservative government is seeking to ban demonstrations that have mobilized as many as half a million people, in what Home Secretary (chief police minister) Suella Braverman has vilified as “hate marches.”

In Germany, the display of Palestinian flags and other symbols has been banned, along with photos of Gaza victims and leaflets and placards bearing slogans in support of Palestinian resistance to Israeli oppression. Throughout Europe, mass protests against the bloodbath in Gaza encounter official repression and censorship. In India, with a Muslim population of more than 200 million, the Narendra Modi government has outlawed protests against the Gaza killings in Kashmir, the only state with a Muslim majority.

In all these countries, the same bogus claim is put forward by capitalist governments and the corporate media: that opposition to the Israeli slaughter constitutes antisemitism, that those who demonstrate against genocide are actually motivated by hostility to the Jewish people—even if the protesters are themselves Jewish!

A major weapon in the arsenal of this smear campaign is the claim that the chant taken up by many marchers and displayed on countless placards, “Palestine will be free—from the river to the sea,” is a coded call for the extermination of the Jews who live in Israel. This was the main argument being made during the US House debate on the censure resolution against Rashida Tlaib.

“From the river to the sea” is a longtime slogan of the Palestine resistance movement and is an expression of the perspective of freeing the Palestinian people from Zionist oppression over the entire land area from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, which comprises the West Bank, Gaza and the present-day state of Israel.

The WSWS calls for the end to the reactionary Zionist capitalist state, whose existence is based on the colonialist theft of Palestinian land. It has been sustained for 75 years through brutal oppression, with relentless acts of violence now culminating in outright genocide. The claim that opposition to mass murder by the Israeli state is “antisemitism” is a contemptible lie and a libel against Jewish people.

We advocate the creation of a democratic, secular state over the entire territory of Palestine in which present-day Israelis and Arabs, of whatever religious persuasion or none, have equal rights and live side by side. This is inseparably bound up with the struggle for a United Socialist States of the Middle East, as part of the world socialist revolution.

The censure of Rashida Tlaib is effectively a ban on criticism of the policy of the Israeli government. It is, however, not a measure taken merely in support of Benjamin Netanyahu and his gang of fascists and religious zealots. Israel functions as an instrument of American foreign policy. It is part of a far broader war plan of American imperialism, which includes the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, and now the threat of a direct conflict with Iran using the Gaza invasion as a trigger. Beyond this are the stepped up military preparations for war against China in the Far East.

On Tuesday, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby reiterated the mantra embraced by the Biden White House every day since Israeli bombs and missiles—most supplied by the Pentagon—began striking Gaza. The US government has no “red lines” in terms of what Israel can do to displace, remove or kill Palestinians. Mass murder is the policy, not only of the Israeli regime, but of the Biden administration.

As the US war drive escalates, there will be many more expressions of popular opposition, including industrial actions by sections of the working class to disrupt the production and distribution of American-made weapons and war materiel. The censuring of Rashida Tlaib is a preemptive strike against such “interference” from below.

There is a historical parallel to this policy of seeking to ban speech in fear of its appealing to a political movement that has growing mass support. While Rashida Tlaib is the first US House member to be censured solely for political speech, there is one other representative who was censured for his political actions. Representative Joshua Giddings of Ohio was censured in 1842 for violation of what was known as the “Gag Rule,” imposed by the pro-slavery Democratic Party majority in 1836, after a flood of anti-slavery petitions and resolutions had been submitted to the House. This rule, in effect until 1844, barred any discussion or proposal in the House on the subject of emancipation.

Giddings introduced a series of resolutions in support of 128 slaves who had rebelled and seized control of the American slave ship *Creole* in 1841. They diverted it from its course, from Virginia to the slave market in New Orleans, and forced the crew to sail them to the Bahamas, then a British territory, where slavery had been abolished. The colonial authorities declared the slaves free, but the US government, under President John Tyler, sued for their return to the slave owners.

As historian James Oakes writes:

Giddings’s fellow congressmen immediately voted by

more than a two-to-one margin to table his nine resolutions and then censured him for introducing such scandalous ideas into the House of Representatives. But the fifty-three votes cast in favor of the resolutions was another indication that abolitionist precepts were penetrating into the political mainstream ... Giddings resigned from Congress and went back to Ohio, where he ran for reelection and was returned to the House of Representatives by a landslide vote (*Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865*, pp 25-26).

The members of the House of Representatives who voted to censure Rashida Tlaib, the Biden administration officials who seek to criminalize pro-Palestinian protests, whether on college campuses or in the streets, and all the governments around the world seeking to suppress these mass protests against genocide, thus walk in the footsteps of the pre-Civil War defenders of the slavocracy. They are terrified that any comment, even by a member of Congress, could serve as a lighted match in the tinder of social opposition.

It is, however, too late. Despite the efforts of governments to bully and intimidate opponents of the Israeli-imperialist genocide in Gaza and to criminalize protests, a powerful mass movement against imperialist war has emerged and is gaining strength.

But the censure of Tlaib must be taken as a warning: The ruling class, desperate in the face of a growing mass movement, will employ any and all means to suppress popular opposition. It is urgently necessary to deepen and expand the global movement against the genocide in Gaza by fusing it with the growing strike movement of the working class and arming it with a socialist perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact