

Harvard University escalating anti-democratic attack on opponents of Israel's genocide in Gaza

Julian James
13 November 2023

In the United States, university campuses have become the epicenter of the state-led campaign to intimidate, smear and outright ban opposition to Israel's genocide in Gaza.

At Harvard University, the month-long campaign against pro-Palestinian students has intensified following a protest organized by the Palestine Solidarity Committee (PSC) on October 18.

After Israel's bombing of the Al-Ahli Baptist Hospital, which killed 500 people, hundreds of students marched from Harvard's Cambridge campus to its Business School in Boston, where they staged a "die-in," lying down in a symbolic act of solidarity with the two million Palestinians trapped in the Gaza strip.

The students demanded that the university disclose investments in companies "complicit in genocide and human rights abuses toward Palestinians" and for university president Claudine Gay to "explicitly name, condemn, and reject the anti-Palestinian racism, doxxing, and harassment Harvard students and alumni are facing."

During the "die-in" portion of the protest, a Zionist student began walking over students as they lay on the ground, getting close to their faces to film them and, according to protesters, stepping on them. Footage aired on national news showed student protest "marshals" intervening to protect the safety of the protesters. They formed a circle around the Zionist student, holding up Keffiyehs (Middle Eastern scarves) and attempting to guide him away from the protesters while chanting "shame."

This non-violent action was seized upon by right-wing figures both inside and outside the college, who cynically portrayed the actions of the student marshals as an antisemitic assault.

Harvard Business School Dean Srikant Datar issued a letter days after the protest, condemning the supposedly

antisemitic atmosphere on campus, and pledging that the school would undertake efforts to "understand the experience of antisemitism at Harvard Business School" while making assurances that "reports have been filed with HUPD and the FBI" about the events at the protest, implicitly threatening the pro-Palestinian protesters with arrest.

Billionaire hedge fund manager and Harvard alum Bill Ackman, a central figure in the campaign against students, seized upon the encounter to demand that the university suspend students involved in the protest.

In a public letter to university president Gay posted on X (formerly Twitter), he accused the college of being insufficiently aggressive in repressing protests and punishing those involved. Referring to the chant, "From the River to the Sea, Palestine Shall Be Free," he accused protesters of using "eliminationist language seeking the destruction of the State of Israel and the Jewish people."

Ackman demanded that "students involved in harassing and allegedly physically assaulting the HBS student on October 18th should be immediately suspended," arguing that waiting for the police department to review the die-in incident "makes no sense."

Following the public letter issued by the PSC and other student groups on October 7, correctly holding "the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence," Ackman was a leading instigator in the blacklisting and far-right doxxing of students, calling for the university to release the names of students associated with the statement. Shortly afterwards, a billboard truck sent by the far-right Accuracy in Media (AIM) group drove around Harvard Square displaying the names and photos of students supposedly associated with the PSC statement, under the header "Harvard's Leading Antisemites."

Additional pressure came from a letter authored by

Joseph C. Shenker, senior chair of the law firm Sullivan & Cromwell, on November 1 that was signed by two dozen top US law firms and addressed to deans of the top 14 law schools in the US. The letter slandered protesters as antisemitic and demanded that the universities take an “unequivocal stance” against pro-Palestinian students. The letter implicitly threatened to cease recruiting graduates unless dissent was stamped out on campuses nationwide.

President Gay followed-up on the right-wing backlash by sending a campus-wide email on November 9 that amounted to an endorsement of calls to repress student opposition. In her message, Gay portrayed Harvard campus as a hotbed of antisemitism and honed in on the “river to the sea” slogan used by protesters, writing that such phrases “...bear specific historical meanings that to a great many people imply the eradication of Jews from Israel and engender both pain and existential fears within our Jewish community”.

As the WSWS recently noted in its reporting on the unprecedented censure in the House of Representatives of Rashida Tlaib (D-Michigan) for her opposition to the Israeli genocide on November 8:

A major weapon in the arsenal of this smear campaign is the claim that the chant ... “Palestine will be free—from the river to the sea,” is a coded call for the extermination of the Jews who live in Israel... “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.

After repeating this tired slander, Gay made clear that the college would crack down on further dissent, ominously warning that anonymous hotlines have been set up for “reporting bias” and that police were monitoring “threats made against any members of our community.”

While initially falling short of Ackman’s demand to suspend those involved in protests, she made reference to the FBI investigation of the video taken at the die-in, stating, “...once law enforcement’s inquiry is complete, the University will address the incident through its student disciplinary procedures to determine if University policies

or codes of conduct have been violated and, if so, take appropriate action...”

One day later, without referencing the results of any supposed police “inquiry,” Gay appears to have made good on her threat, as the local Harvard Graduate Students Union posted on X that one student who had served as a safety marshal during the die-in was being evicted from campus housing.

The far-right campaign against students has created a chilling atmosphere in which students are faced with threats to their physical safety as well as their future careers. Describing the effects of the doxxing against her, one Arab Muslim Harvard student told *Teen Vogue*, “My mother has been reached out to numerous times because of this... The high school where my brother goes is listed online publicly, which obviously puts him in danger too. This has, I think, very much gone far beyond backlash.”

At campuses across the United States, similar confrontations are taking place between right-wing forces representing the ruling class and organized groups of students who are rallying to oppose their administrations’ complicity in the genocide of the Palestinian people at the hands of the Biden Administration and its Israeli client state.

Last Monday, Brandeis University banned the campus chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine, claiming the group “openly supports Hamas, a terrorist organization.” The university followed up the next day by sending police to violently shut down and arrest pro-Palestine protesters.

On Friday, Columbia University in New York suspended not only the SJP but also the anti-Zionist Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) through the end of the fall term. Countless other actions have resulted in arrests of peaceful student protesters, including at UMass Amherst and Brown University.

The escalating attacks against the democratic rights of students by the state, media and academic institutions reflects the recognition and fear on the part of the capitalist class that the movement of the working class and young people against the slaughter of Gaza is part of a developing movement against capitalism itself.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact