Toronto police pursue criminal charges of “hate-motivated” mischief against 11 anti-genocide, pro-Palestinian protesters

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Eleven anti-genocide, pro-Palestinian protesters in Toronto, Ontario, face charges of “hate-motivated” mischief in relation to a protest in early November against Indigo Books and Music founder Heather Reisman over her financial support for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) amid Israel’s genocidal onslaught in Gaza.

Reisman and her husband, billionaire investment fund founder Gerry Schwartz, who are both Jewish, established the HESEG Foundation in 2005 to provide financial support and free tuition for “lone soldiers” in the IDF—those who serve without being Israeli citizens or having family in Israel—who want to remain in the country after their service. The foundation provided approximately $12 million in financial support between 2021 and 2022.

Due to Reisman’s support for the IDF through HESEG, Indigo has been a target of protest for more than 15 years by supporters of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which aims to pressure the Israeli government through boycotts and other protests to end its decades-long repression and dispossession of the Palestinian people. The posters which were placed on the Indigo bookstore included Reisman’s headshot and text which accused her of funding genocide.

Reisman’s funding of the IDF has gained renewed attention amid the genocidal onslaught by the Netanyahu government in the Gaza strip, which has seen nearly 15,000 civilians killed, including 6,000 children. More than 1.7 million people have been displaced out of a total population in Gaza of 2.3 million, and most homes have been damaged or destroyed.

While fully backed by the US, Canada and the other imperialist powers, the attack has sparked mass global outrage, with millions protesting around the globe. In Canada, more than 50,000 people participated in a protest outside parliament in Ottawa last Saturday, demanding the New Democratic Party-backed Liberal Trudeau government support a permanent ceasefire, something which Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has steadfastly refused.

According to the Toronto Police Service (TPS) Hate Crime Unit, the protest in the early hours of November 10 involved the placing of posters on the windows and doors of an Indigo bookstore in downtown Toronto and the pouring of washable red paint on the store and sidewalk.

One person was arrested on November 14 in connection with the protest, while the remaining 10 were arrested in early morning police raids on seven homes across the city on November 22. According to *The Breach*, police broke down front doors, ransacked the protesters’ homes and handcuffed everyone present. The police also seized phones and computers.

All 11 face charges of mischief over $5,500, while 10 face an additional charge of conspiracy to commit an indictable offense. If convicted, the protesters face up to 10 years in prison. While a police press release declared the protest was “treated as a suspected hate-motivated offence,” no official hate crimes charges have been brought.

Among those charged and arrested are three York University employees, including associate professor Lesley Wood, post-doctoral researcher Nisha Toomey and staff member Sharmeen Khan. All three have been suspended by the university administration.

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Wood, a sociologist whose work has focused on police repression of protests and social movements, told the *Globe and Mail* the charges targeted "those who work for a peaceful, freer and more just future for both the Palestinians and the Israelis." She accused the Toronto police of "dragging our names through the mud," adding that "hate crime charges used to stop those speaking out against hate" are "grotesque" and "Orwellian."

A walkout by several dozen York students, faculty and staff on Tuesday called for the reinstatement of Wood, Toomey and Khan.

"Many faculty members are outraged that the administration has suspended these individuals rather than defending them publicly," York University associate professor Anna Zalik told the *Canadian Press*. "We feel that the administration should be standing up for rights to free expression and should be ensuring that there is proper due process followed in all cases."

The right-wing gutter press, including the *Toronto Sun*, has seized on the charges and police raids to vilify the protesters as "antisemitic vandals." Around the world, governments and police forces are equating opposition to the genocide in Gaza and the Zionist foundations of the state of Israel to antisemitism, banning demonstrations and arresting peaceful protesters, including in the UK and Germany. This slander has been extended to Jewish groups and individuals protesting the attack on Gaza and demanding an end to the occupation.

The Jewish Faculty Network, a group representing Jewish faculty from universities and colleges across Canada, released a letter Monday denouncing the effort to smear the Indigo protesters as "hate motivated" or antisemitic.

They wrote: "The TPS' labeling of the offences as 'hate motivated' and the brutality with which they carried out the arrests are an attempt to suppress and criminalize dissent. These actions serve a political agenda: to maintain public support for a genocidal war. It also dangerously narrows the possibilities for civic engagement and freedom of expression, which restricts the rights of all Canadians.

"We insist that real antisemitism must be confronted. But to label the protests against Indigo 'hateful' or 'antisemitic' is to misunderstand the politics of peaceful civil disobedience and right to dissent. It distracts and confuses efforts to challenge genuine antisemitic actions, which overwhelmingly arise from far-right movements in Canada and internationally."

The *World Socialist Web Site* defends the right of all to freely protest the imperialist-backed genocide in Gaza and rejects the slander that those who oppose the Zionist regime in Israel and support a ceasefire are antisemitic. All charges must be dropped against the Indigo 11 and the three York University employees among them reinstated immediately.

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