

University of Pennsylvania threatens Jewish students for showing anti-Zionist film

Landon Gourov, Tom Eley
5 December 2023

A group of students at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia face disciplinary repercussions after showing a documentary film critical of Israel on Tuesday, November 28.

The student organization, Chavurah, a Jewish student club, showed the film *Israelism*, a film by Jewish filmmakers Erin Axelman and Sam Eilertsen. The duo's first feature film, it follows the story of two American-born Jews who are taught to defend Israel at all costs. The two youth, Simone and Eitan Zimmerman, then travel to Israel where they see the horrors that Palestinians living there go through and, ultimately, change their ways, fighting for the rights of Palestinians.

A member of Chavurah, Jack Starobin, said that the group applied over the summer to screen the film on October 24. The group then delayed the showing, asking for it to be screened on November 28. University authorities did not respond to the group until they were asked a second time, at which point the university denied the students the right to show the movie on campus, citing the political atmosphere.

Starobin said that the group decided to ignore the decision, in light of the support they were receiving from both students and faculty. Chavurah screened the movie on November 28 before 100 students and faculty during a three-hour event at Penn's Middle East Center in Myerson Hall. Both Jewish and Palestinian students were present for the showing. The showing was followed by a Q&A with the filmmaker, Erin Axelman.

The screening took place under what can only be called an atmosphere of intimidation.

The university locked the doors to Myerson Hall, so that students could only enter if someone already inside held the door for them. Inside the building, police demanded to see student ID cards. A second

identification check took place near the reserved room, and police remained present throughout the showing.

The director of the Middle East Center, Harun Küçük, resigned from his position the Tuesday before the film was to be shown. Küçük did not explain the reasoning for his resignation. However, the American Association of University Professors said his resignation came, as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* put it, "in response to pressure from administrators who allegedly directed the center to cancel the screening."

The university, both prior to the film showing and after it, responded with threats of disciplinary action for students who participated.

The university said it would not "allow" students to screen *Israelism* because it could cause a "potential negative response," as summarized in the words of one student. The university said the students could screen the film in February, nearly 3 months after the requested screening date. An administrator, the Vice Provost for University Life, warned the undergraduate students that there "may be disciplinary consequences if [they] continue the screening." After the showing, another administrator told the student newspaper, the *Daily Pennsylvanian*, that "the student organizers will be referred to the Office of Community Standards and Accountability to determine whether a violation of the Code of Student Conduct occurred."

Axelman, the filmmaker, commented, "It is a profound lack of intellectual discipline to be censoring films and academic material without interacting with it."

The Jewish students, to their credit, have not backed down. Before the screening, Chavurah organized a protest against the threats, attended by some 50 students, featuring a banner that read "American Jews say: Stop genocide in Gaza. Not in our Name!"

Billionaire and multi-millionaire donors to Penn, Harvard, and other elite colleges have led the charge in attempting to muzzle public sympathy for the Palestinians, as Israel carries on its genocidal campaign in Gaza with the full backing of the Biden administration. The rich donors and university administrators claim any such protests are “antisemitic,” as is, by implication, merely showing a film critical of the Israeli government or discussing its criminal war in class.

This smear, of course, was exposed as a lie by the fact the film showing was organized by a Jewish group and made by Jewish filmmakers.

“Penn has released at least eight statements in the past several weeks talking about its supposedly earnest concern with antisemitism, and yet it just censored a Jewish student organization from hosting a film made by Jewish filmmakers talking about Jewish people,” Starobin said.

Addressing the November 21 rally, Starobin summarized the right-wing character of Penn’s actions:

By censoring us, the University is giving in to the extortion of far-right donors and politicians who insist on silencing all critics of Israel, even at the expense of our safety and free speech, even as Israel commits what more and more of the international community is calling a genocide against Palestinians. Censoring progressive Jews is only the latest example of Penn caving to the far-right.

Earlier this year, in September, rock music artist Roger Waters, an outspoken opponent of Israel’s oppression of the Palestinian people, was banned from participating in person at a Palestinian literature and cultural festival on campus. Waters has been slandered by defenders of the Israeli government as antisemitic for his political criticisms, which have reached a global audience through his “This Is Not a Drill” concert tour.

Penn is not the only college trying to stop showings of the film *Israelism*. Students of Hunter College in New York City had a November 14 screening canceled by administrators. A cinema in Hamilton, Ontario,

Canada initially canceled its showing under pressure from pro-Israeli elements, before reversing course amid protests and putting the film back on its schedule this week.

The effort to silence all opposition to the genocide, spearheaded by some of the wealthiest universities in the country—including Harvard, Brandeis, and Penn—continues. Other schools have also tried to silence or intimidate protests and support for Palestinians. Recently, a student-run high school newspaper in San Diego was pressured to cut a political cartoon which criticized the Gaza genocide.

On Tuesday, Penn’s president Liz Magill testified before a Congressional committee hearing entitled, “Holding Campus Leaders Accountable and Confronting Antisemitism.” Joined by Massachusetts Institute of Technology President Dr. Sally Kornbluth and Harvard University President Dr. Claudine Gay, the college presidents were badgered by reactionary politicians of both parties to censor student groups and quash free speech on the campuses, based on the amalgam that opposition to the genocide in Gaza is the same as antisemitism.

Magill accepted the amalgam, assuring the members of Congress that the university “has made clear antisemitism is vile and pernicious and has no place at Penn... The university will continue to vigilantly combat antisemitism and all forms of hate.”

Magill did not make reference to Chavurah, the Jewish student group her administration is threatening.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact