

Ouster of University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill represents new stage in witch-hunt against opposition to Gaza genocide

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On Saturday, in a post shared on the official news website of the University of Pennsylvania (UPenn), Scott L. Bok, chairman of the Board of Trustees, announced that the university President Liz Magill had “voluntarily tendered her resignation.” Shortly thereafter, Bok announced that he himself would also be resigning from the UPenn administration in a similar fashion.

These resignations followed a McCarthy-style hearing by the US House Committee on Education & the Workforce on Tuesday, which involved three university presidents including Magill, as well as Harvard University President Claudine Gay and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) President Sally Kornbluth.

The hearing was ostensibly to review an ongoing federal investigation by the Biden administration of over 70 American universities for alleged incidents involving the violation of Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prevents discrimination based on “shared ancestry.” According to the US Department of Education (DOE), the purpose of the investigation was “to take aggressive action to address the alarming nationwide rise in reports of antisemitism, anti-Muslim, anti-Arab, and other forms of discrimination and harassment on college campuses and in K-12 schools since the October 7 Israel-Hamas conflict.” But the committee hearing was interested only in witch-hunting the university presidents for failing to defend Jewish students against supposedly rampant antisemitism.

Magill had already been targeted by high-profile donors to the university after what they deemed was her insufficiently aggressive stance toward pro-Palestinian speech and assembly earlier this fall. In mid-October, billionaire Marc Rowan, who sits on the board of

UPenn’s Wharton Business School, denounced Magill for not cancelling a Palestinian literature conference and called for university donors to withdraw their funding to the institution. Billionaire Ronald S. Lauder and multibillion-dollar hedge fund manager Ross L. Stevens have similarly endorsed such calls.

The basis upon which the political pressure was mounted against Magill in Tuesday’s hearings, entitled “Holding Campus Leaders Accountable and Confronting Antisemitism,” can only be described as a travesty. The hearing was led by Elise Stefanik, the fascistic, Trump-supporting Republican congresswoman from New York’s 21st congressional district. During the proceedings, Stefanik centered her arguments around the false equation of the term “intifada” with “calling for the genocide of Jews.” She repeatedly demanded that the university presidents answer categorically whether calls for genocide violated their institutions’ policies.

The claim that using the word “intifada” is equivalent to calling for the extermination of Jews is no less bogus than the equation of opposition to Zionism with antisemitism. “Intifada” is an Arabic word translated literally as “uprising” or “shaking off” in English. It has been associated with popular opposition to the imperialist-supported domination of Palestine by Israel, the primary strategic ally of the United States in the Middle East.

The claims by capitalist politicians in Washington and the corporate media that there is a wave of antisemitism sweeping American college campuses is entirely false. It is a smear manufactured out of the fear and shock in the ruling elite that they now confront mass opposition to the genocide being perpetrated by Israel with US support and participation.

It is Palestinians in America who have been the targets of violence in the two months since the war on Gaza began. Last month, three Palestinian college students were shot in Burlington, Vermont, as they walked down the street. The gunman held far-right views and had made allusions on social media to anti-vaccination and anti-LGBTQ tropes generally promoted by the fascist right. In mid-October, a six-year-old Palestinian boy was stabbed to death in a suburb of Chicago by his landlord in a racially motivated slaying.

The false claim that hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in the US, Britain and around the world are expressing antisemitism because they oppose Israeli genocide has been the main mechanism by which the capitalist ruling class has attempted to smother all opposition to the assault on the Palestinian population of Gaza, who have now lost nearly 20,000 lives in the past two months.

Following Magill's resignation on Saturday, the House Republicans and their Democratic allies pressed ahead with the witch-hunt. Elise Stefanik gloated, "One down. Two to go. This is only the very beginning of addressing the pervasive rot of antisemitism that has destroyed the most 'prestigious' higher education institutions in America. This forced resignation of the president of [UPenn] is the bare minimum of what is required."

A letter authored and signed by 74 Republican members of Congress and addressed to the governing boards of Harvard, UPenn and MIT echoed Stefanik's line. "When pushed on whether calling for the genocide of Jews violates university policies on bullying or harassment, Presidents Gay (Harvard), Kornbluth (MIT), and Magill (Penn) were evasive and dismissive, failing to simply condemn such action. This should have been an easy and resounding 'yes'," the letter read. It continued to condemn Gay and Kornbluth and called for their removals.

Powerful elements of the Democratic Party establishment have lined up behind the Republican-led witch-hunt against the university presidents. On Saturday, Democratic New York Governor Kathy Hochul effectively backed the resignations in her published response to Tuesday's hearing. Hochul's letter threatened all of the state's academic institutions with "aggressive enforcement action," as well as ineligibility for funding if they failed to comply with Title VI laws.

Commenting on Tuesday's proceedings, New Jersey Democratic Representative Donald Norcross, a member of the House Committee on Education & the Workforce,

posted on X/Twitter on Magill's resignation, writing, "[a]fter our recent Education and Workforce hearing, it was a clear that a change in leadership was needed."

Stefanik's political record makes a complete mockery of her posture as a tribune against antisemitism at Tuesday's hearing. In her recent career, she has espoused vitriolic rhetoric against immigrants and is a fervent 2020 election denier. She incorporated themes of the racist, xenophobic and antisemitic "Great Replacement" theory into her 2022 reelection campaign. This came only six months after the racist mass shooting in Buffalo, New York, by neo-Nazi Peyton Gendron, who killed 10 people in a supermarket in a predominantly African American neighborhood. Gendron had published a long document based on the "Great Replacement" theory before he went on his rampage.

The December 8 letter signed by 74 Republicans cites the Anti-Defamation League (ADL)'s report that there were 1,481 antisemitic incidents over the last 12 months, a 300 percent increase, with 292 of those occurring on university campuses. What the letter neglects to mention, however, is that the ADL's own report from earlier this year found that all of the extremist violence occurring in 2022 was linked to far-right, anti-immigrant, white supremacist and neo-Nazi ideology. While the ADL is discreetly silent on this connection, such sentiments were and are directly stoked by the Republican Party, and particularly its fascist leader, Donald Trump.



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