

Harvard president's forced resignation: The working class must be mobilized to fight the new McCarthyism

A Harvard employee
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The following was sent to the WSWS by a Harvard employee.

Today, January 2, as most Harvard University staff returned to work after the holidays, Harvard President Claudine Gay announced her resignation, effective immediately. Her six-month tenure, the shortest in the university's history, was cut short by a vicious McCarthyite campaign spearheaded by fascistic politicians and billionaires.

I use "McCarthyite" here advisedly and not simply as an epithet. What has happened here? After the October 7 military attack by Hamas and the beginning of Israel's genocidal campaign against the people of Gaza, Harvard issued a boilerplate statement offering resources to affected students and condemning hate. Concurrently, dozens of student organizations co-signed a Harvard Undergraduate Solidarity Committee statement that held "the Israeli regime entirely responsible for all unfolding violence."

Even as US-supplied Israeli munitions incinerated hundreds of men, women and children daily in attacks on hospitals, refugee camps and houses of worship and while Israeli politicians began openly proclaiming their genocidal intentions, the students associated with the statement and President Gay were attacked by right-wing donors, politicians and media organizations: the students for puncturing the ahistorical, propagandistic portrayal of the events unfolding, and Gay for not condemning them quickly enough and, presumably, expelling them.

Subsequent statements, in which Gay needlessly and repeatedly stated that Harvard opposes terrorism and antisemitism and Islamophobia, and that student organizations' statements do not represent Harvard's institutional views, would never have been enough for this crowd.

Instead, she, along with University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) President Sally Kornbluth, were "invited" to testify before the US House Committee on Education & the Workforce on December 5, during which they were treated to an hours-long grilling by such vaunted experts on academia, free speech and antisemitism as Representative Elise Stefanik, the fascistic Republican from New York who has trafficked in the so-called

Great Replacement Theory, which posits that Jews are importing non-white immigrants to "replace" whites in Europe and America.

During said hearing, the university presidents walked into a trap, with Stefanik demanding to know if "calling for the genocide of Jews" violated their institutions' policies. The presidents gave legalistic, correct answers but "failed" to condemn such "calls for genocide." Of course, no such calls are being made, on college campuses or in other protests against the actual, real, ongoing genocide of Palestinians in Gaza.

The sound bite "gotcha" is based on the assertion that calling for an "intifada" or a free Palestine "from the river to the sea" is actually a call for the extermination of Jews. This is bogus. It brings me no pleasure to say that Gay was to some extent hoisted on her own petard: She had condemned the slogan "from the river to the sea" repeatedly since October 7, including in an email sent to campus affiliates just days before the hearing.

Gay apologized to the student newspaper, the *Harvard Crimson*, for not having forthrightly condemned, again, hypothetical and non-existent calls for genocide. In another world, she may have apologized for not dismantling the false premise of the question, or pointing out the questioner's own antisemitic connections (beyond the Great Replacement Theory, Stefanik is, of course, an acolyte of Donald Trump, who praised the Charlottesville fascists and hosted Hitler-lovers Nick Fuentes and Kanye West for dinner), or simply asking, "Have you no sense of decency?"

Of course, in Stefanik's case, the question would be as clearly rhetorical as it must have been to Senator Joseph McCarthy.

It appeared that Gay had weathered the storm. As right-wing outlets began trying a different tack—this time focusing on allegations of plagiarism—the Harvard Corporation met on December 12 and issued a unanimous statement the next day supporting Gay while conceding that she had made mistakes during the hearing and had found instances of "inadequate citation" in some of her work but no sign of "research

misconduct.” Later statements identified additional instances of “duplicative language without appropriate attribution.”

This, of course, was not enough for the witch-hunters. Magill’s resignation from the University of Pennsylvania just whetted their appetite. On December 13, the House passed a resolution demanding Gay’s and MIT President Kornbluth’s resignations. Eighty-four Democrats voted for the resolution, including House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries.

What exactly changed between now and then, and the precise maneuvers behind the scenes, are still unclear. The *Crimson* reported today that Gay made her decision last week. No doubt the ongoing “donor revolt” played a major role; 8 percent of Harvard’s revenue comes from current-use gifts, with another 37 percent coming from the university’s gargantuan endowment. The sums involved are in the millions. In late October I wrote

... the crisis atmosphere is such that the “direct report” subordinates to Harvard President Claudine Gay are meeting twice daily as they respond to “hundreds” of angry donors. A previously scheduled meeting of the anodyne-sounding “President’s Advisory Group”—which consists of dozens of longstanding wealthy donors and donor families—was devoted to the topic instead of Harvard’s financial report. I have heard the discussion between the donors and President Gay at that meeting described with euphemisms like “challenging.”

Senior leadership at Harvard have been in “crisis mode” since, with my colleagues faced with unprecedented tasks: deciding which donors to stop soliciting for a year, even if they have an ongoing pledge; cataloging the thousands of communications we’ve received on this subject, from defense of President Gay to vile abuse; and even soberly notifying colleagues that any threats need to be reported to the police.

Far-right politicians, hedge-fund billionaires, committed Zionists and antisemites alike joined hands to force the resignation of a college president. This was no more about plagiarism than it was about protecting Jewish students. Observers from within the Harvard community pointed this out: The *Crimson* published two thoughtful editorial statements (“Harvard and President Gay Must Not Yield” on December 12 and “President Gay Plagiarized, but She Should Stay. For Now.” on December 31) and an op-ed from Bernie Steinberg, Harvard Hillel’s executive director from 1993 to 2010 (“For the Safety of Jews and Palestinians, Stop Weaponizing Antisemitism”), to cite but a few.

Hundreds of faculty signed a letter to the Harvard Corporation over the course of less than a day before its early December meeting, which said: “We, the undersigned faculty,

urge you in the strongest possible terms to defend the independence of the university and to resist political pressures that are at odds with Harvard’s commitment to academic freedom, including calls for the removal of President Claudine Gay. The critical work of defending a culture of free inquiry in our diverse community cannot proceed if we let its shape be dictated by outside forces.”

Such “outside forces” have taken a scalp. And, predictably, these vandals are out for yet more. Kornbluth’s ouster is on the horizon, if they get their way—never mind that she is Jewish, the facts are secondary for these layers. Stefanik posted today on X that “Harvard Corporation Board Members’ resignations must be forthcoming.”

Gay’s forced resignation must serve as an alarm for anyone concerned about academic freedom, the right to protest and the rights of the Palestinian people. If the presidents of two Ivy League universities can be forced out for the “crime” of not having condemned non-existent “antisemitic” speech enough, who is safe? Will oppositional professors be next? How long until principled artists are hauled before Congress and demanded to say, “I am not, nor have I ever been, an anti-Zionist”?

On its own, academia is incapable of defeating this neo-McCarthyism. There are principled defenders of democratic rights on the campuses, even on the wealthiest of campuses like Harvard. The editorials and open letters cited above, along with the spirited and uncowed protests by students, testify to this. But to the extent that this war becomes intertwined with the US-NATO proxy war against Russia and machinations for war against Iran and China, it will become impossible for the US ruling class to permit dissent, especially from the universities, which play a key role in what is taken as public opinion.

Those of us in academia who value free inquiry and democratic rights must orient to the working class, which is the only social force that is not organically tied to the nation-state, and which has an objective interest in replacing the capitalist system that breeds war, bigotry of all forms and authoritarianism. Contact the International Youth and Students for Social Equality to take up this fight today.



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