Oppose the frame-up of the Toronto “Peace 11”! All charges must be dropped against anti-genocide, pro-Palestinian activists!

Socialist Equality Party (Canada)
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The Socialist Equality Party (Canada) calls for the dropping of all charges against the “Peace 11”—anti-genocide, pro-Palestinian activists—and an end to the prosecution and persecution of all anti-war protesters.

The “Peace 11” were arrested in November in connection with a non-violent protest against Heather Reisman, the billionaire CEO of Indigo, Canada’s largest bookstore chain. Reisman is a financial supporter of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and complicit in the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Members of the group who have been suspended from their jobs, including at York University, must be immediately reinstated.

Workers across Canada and internationally must mobilize to oppose this far-reaching assault on free speech and the democratic right to protest and demand an end to the prosecutions. An email campaign by Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East directed at Ontario’s Attorney General and Indigo executives has obtained more than 1,600 signatures.

The prosecutions began this week with initial procedural hearings. They are a complete frame-up and are part of a broader effort aimed at suppressing protests against the Israeli onslaught and the complicity of the imperialist powers, including Canada, which have swelled internationally over the last three months.

With the full support of the mainstream media, the ruling elites of North America and Europe have smeared protesters who oppose Israel’s genocidal assault Gaza and its occupation of Palestine and advocate anti-Zionist positions as antisemites. This has involved efforts to ban pro-Palestine protests in Europe, including the proscription of slogans and seizure of literature in Germany.

In the United States, McCarthyite witch-hunts led by far-right forces against university presidents deemed to have failed to clamp down with the necessary vigour on “antisemitism” have forced the resignation of the presidents of Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania.

All 11 face charges of mischief over $5,000 and conspiracy to commit an indictable offence with the possibility of 10 years in prison if convicted. The charges relate to a protest on November 10 in which the front doors of a Toronto Indigo store were splashed with washable red paint and affixed with posters with Reisman’s picture and the phrase “Funding Genocide.”

The Toronto police arrested one person suspected of involvement in the protests on November 14. The remaining ten were detained in early morning “no-knock” raids on their homes one week later. According to witnesses, the police ransacked homes, handcuffed those present during the raid, including the parents of one suspect, and seized phones and computers.

While none among the 11 has been charged with a hate crime, the Toronto police announced in a press release that the protest was being “treated as a suspected hate-motivated offence.” Seizing on the fact that Reisman is Jewish, the mainstream media has picked up on the police statement and depicted the Indigo bookstore incident as a main exhibit in a supposed surge of antisemitism in Canada. This libelous claim obscures and distorts the purpose of the protest, and smears opponents of the Zionist regime’s genocide as beyond the pale.

Reisman and her husband, billionaire investment fund founder Gerry Schwartz, established the HESEG Foundation in 2005 to provide financial support and cover tuition for so-called “lone soldiers” in the IDF. “Lone soldiers” do not have Israeli citizenship or family in the country but decide to remain after their service in the military. In 2022, Reisman and Schwartz donated $7.1 million to HESEG, which is considered a charity by the Canada Revenue Agency.

As a result, Indigo has long been a target of protest by those who support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which seeks to use economic pressure to effect reforms in the Zionist state’s apartheid policy in Gaza and the West Bank. Left-wing activists have noted that

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Canadian law bans recruitment by foreign militaries and that financial support for the armed forces of another country does not count as “charitable” for tax purposes.

Among the Peace 11 is York University Associate Professor Lesley Wood, the chair of the school’s sociology department from 2017-2021. Her academic work has focused on criticizing the policing of protests and examining collective action tactics by demonstrators. After York University suspended her and two other university employees who are among the 11, the Sociology Department adopted a resolution calling for their reinstatement.

The conditions for the prosecution of the Peace 11 have been created by the provincial and federal governments, and the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP). Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau long rejected popular demands Canada call for a ceasefire in Gaza and when it did formally vote for one at the United Nations, his government made clear that Ottawa’s support was conditional on Israel achieving its stated war aims. While making clear Canada’s support for the Netanyahu regime and the IDF’s heinous war crimes, Trudeau has decried the “very scary rise of antisemitism in Canada.”

The Ontario provincial government of Tory Premier Doug Ford led the charge against former NDP legislator Sarah Jama after she denounced the repression of the Palestinians and called Israel an apartheid state. Jama’s party joined in the witch hunt, ousting her from the NDP’s Ontario legislature caucus. Jama’s isolation allowed the Ford government to pass an unprecedented motion of censure that silences her in the legislature until she retracts her statement supporting the Palestinians. Ford and his ministers have also publicly named and smeared pro-Palestinian university professors and students as “antisemites” from the floor of the legislature and demanded that universities crack down on protests against the slaughter of the Palestinians of Gaza.

Recent events have made clear that the threat of antisemitism is very real. However, as was the case throughout the history of the 20th century, this threat comes from the far right, not the left and opponents of genocide.

In September, the entire Canadian parliament led by Trudeau and Ukrainian President Volodymy Zelensky rose to applaud Yaroslav Hunka, a 98-year-old Ukrainian veteran of Adolf Hitler’s Waffen-SS living in Canada. The Canadian government has been one of the main backers of the Kiev regime, which is riddled with fascist elements and deploys neo-Nazi forces in the US-led war against Russia. The Canadian Armed Forces has provided weapons and training to units which openly display Nazi swastikas and other fascist insignia.

The smear campaign against defenders of the Palestinians was preceded by a state-backed censorship drive against opponents of Canadian imperialism’s support for the war on Russia. It was led by the far-right Ukrainian Canadian Congress, which enjoys close ties with the Canadian state, and supported by the Ontario Progressive Conservative government. One of the main targets of this witch-hunt was the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the SEP, because it organized anti-war meetings in Waterloo, Toronto, and Montreal in the spring of 2023. Attempts to prevent and disrupt these events failed.

The waging of war by Canada in alliance with the US and its NATO partners is taking the form of a third world war—with fronts against Russia in Ukraine, in the Middle East, where genocide has been adopted as state policy in preparation for war against Iran, and against China in the Indo-Pacific. This imperialist redivision of the world, driven by the irreconcilable contradictions of the capitalist system, is incompatible with democratic rights at home. As the working class enters into mass struggle on a scale not seen for decades, ruling elites everywhere feel the need to turn to authoritarian forms of rule to uphold their vast wealth at the top of societies riven by monstrous levels of social inequality.

The case against the Peace 11 is ultimately an indictment of the capitalist system, which cannot tolerate even the most basic signs of opposition. While the wealthy financial elite fantastically enrich themselves, workers struggle to afford to put food on the table. In cities like Toronto, it is increasingly impossible to even afford housing. The working class must rally to the defence of the “Peace 11” and take up the fight for socialism to put an end to war, repression and social inequality.

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