

Democratic Socialists of America covers for right-wing attack on democratic rights on campuses

Andy Thompson, Clara Weiss
14 January 2024

In response to the global protests against the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza, the world's governments and bourgeois institutions have launched a major anti-democratic campaign of censorship, aimed at intimidating all those who hold pro-Palestinian, anti-war and anti-imperialist views.

Students in the United States have been kicked out of school, doxxed, fired from their jobs and arrested. Chapters of the Students for Justice in Palestine and the Jewish Voice for Peace, which have played a central role in organizing protests in the US, were banned by multiple universities. Opponents of genocide, including Jewish students, are now regularly slandered as "antisemites."

The process is international, with students around the world facing similar attacks. The German government has gone as far as to make it a crime to carry the Palestinian flag and to use the slogan "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."

This campaign to eliminate free speech on the campuses has found its temporary culmination in the forced resignation of Harvard University President Claudine Gay. Having only held the post for six months, Gay was forced to resign after being summoned to a vitriolic McCarthyite style congressional hearing where the far-right Republican Elise Stefanik, herself a genuine antisemite, accused Gay of supporting the "genocide of Jews" because of the mass pro-Palestinian student demonstrations on Harvard's campus.

University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill was also called to the hearing and forced to resign December 9. Leaders of the attack against Gay included far-right billionaire donors like Bill Ackman who threatened to withdraw their donations to the school unless Harvard totally banned opposition to the genocide and free expression. They also included Christopher F. Rufo, a fascistic adviser to Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, and Carol M. Swain who co-chaired the ultranationalist 1776 Commission which was initiated by Donald Trump.

The DSA on the ousting of Harvard's Claudine Gay: Promoting complacency and capitulation to the far-right

In the face of this massive campaign of repression on the campuses, the DSA has not issued a single statement opposing the attacks on democratic rights, including the banning of chapters of the SJP and JVP. In fact, the organization has not made any official political statements since November 8, following the vote in the House of Representatives to censure Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib. The YDSA, the youth wing of DSA, has not published any political statements on the genocide in Gaza.

After over four months of complete silence on the crackdown on democratic rights on campuses, *Jacobin* magazine, the leading publication associated with the DSA, published an article titled, "Claudine Gay Fought Palestine Solidarity at Every Turn." With this article, rather than opposing the right-wing campaign against Gay, *Jacobin* has joined it.

The article gives left-wing credentials to the campaign led by fascists and billionaires, while promoting dangerous complacency and indifference in the face of their assault on democratic rights. The article's subheading states, "Former university presidents Elizabeth Magill and Claudine Gay were no friends of Palestine. In fact, they suppressed free speech and equated solidarity efforts with antisemitism." *Jacobin* cites a number of Gay's statements and emails to Harvard students and staff where she denounced the popular pro-Palestinian slogan "from the river to the sea" as a call for "the eradication of Jews." The magazine concludes that, ultimately, her forced resignation is no great loss as she was in fact not a supporter of Palestinian rights and that the media coverage of her ousting has been overblown.

While acknowledging that the campaign against Gay was spearheaded by the "right wing," the piece refuses to denounce it. Instead, it concludes, "It is our responsibility to learn and speak out about Israel's assault on Gaza and the many brutalities that came before it, as both the university presidents and their critics so clearly failed to do." But how can students "learn and speak out about Israel's assault on Gaza" without opposing such a fundamental assault on academic freedom as the ouster of Gay?

Whatever the radical rhetoric employed, this attitude is a capitulation to the onslaught on democratic rights by the far right, the oligarchy and the state apparatus, and seeks to numb young people and workers to the immense dangers they are confronted with. Such a line of argumentation, which bases the attitude on a given case on the politics of an individual, can be used to justify and downplay any attack on democratic rights.

The campaign to remove university presidents Gay at Harvard and Magill in Pennsylvania were not simply attacks on individuals with whose politics one may disagree. And the issue for Harvard's billionaire donors and the fascist Republicans who forced Gay's resignation were not Gay's personal opinions on Israel, with which they have far more in common than with the students protesting the genocide in Gaza. It was that her position on the pro-Palestinian protests was deemed insufficiently aggressive.

Gay's removal was a sign that even a slight hesitation when it comes to enforcing the imperialist war plans will not be tolerated by the ruling class and that the state apparatus and the oligarchy reserve for themselves the right to hire and fire leading administrators and academics as they please. In the face of millions who have protested the genocide of Gaza, the ruling class is testing the waters for the establishment of dictatorship.

This undoubtably will include the replacement of the heads of all of

society's leading organizations, including in the elite universities like Harvard that set official ideological policy. As the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) explained in a statement immediately after Gay's ouster, her removal "marks a milestone in the ongoing campaign by the state, the far right, Zionist forces and the White House to crack down on opposition to the US-Israeli genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza." The IYSSE therefore issued a call to mobilize the American and international working class to oppose her ouster and defend democratic rights.

At stake in the issue of Gay's ouster are fundamental principles of the defense of democratic rights. The arguments advanced by the DSA stand in direct opposition to the century-long tradition of the socialist and Marxist movement, which has always defended democratic rights against attacks by the ruling class, through the mobilization of the working class.

In 1951, amid the McCarthyite red scare witch-hunts, James P. Cannon, leader of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), then the American Trotskyist movement, described in the party newspaper *The Militant* the prevailing atmosphere, denouncing those who failed to take an unequivocal stance in defense of democratic rights.

The dominant powers are waging a psychological war against free thought and dissenting opinion on a scale that goes far beyond its legal suppression. ... Ever since the beginning of the cold war brutal and ignorant reaction have been on the offensive. The raging witch-hunt has invaded the schools and trade unions, and so far, has met little or no opposition. Indeed, the labor leaders who could easily be the next victims of a mounting reaction, as the tragic experience of Germany in the thirties so clearly demonstrated, gave at least left-handed support to the witch-hunt and rode on it in their internal fight with the Stalinists.

It is worth recalling that Cannon wrote these lines a little over a decade after the Stalinist purges in the Soviet Union, in which thousands of Marxists and Trotskyists had been murdered, and just 11 years after the assassination of Leon Trotsky himself—historic crimes against the working class that the CPUSA defended and supported. However, this did not in the slightest soften the principled attitude of the Trotskyist movement toward the defense of the democratic rights of members of the CPUSA. The SWP understood that the US government's suppression of political activity by the Communist Party was an attack on the right of the working class to determine their own independent politics.

Cannon concluded his article by writing:

There is not much value in talking about defending civil rights unless one is willing to defend the victims of their violation. The truth is always concrete, and so are civil rights. (James P. Cannon, "Tentative Action on the Civil Rights Front," *Notebook of an Agitator. From the Wobblies to the fight against the Korean War and McCarthyism*, Pathfinder Press, 1993, 410, 412-413.)

Among the most fundamental civil rights are freedom of speech and, by extension, academic freedom.

It is on these grounds that socialists oppose Gay's removal as Harvard president. There is no question that Gay's political outlook is that of the same Democratic Party that is supplying the weapons and political support necessary for Israel to carry out its genocide. Nor is there a question that she herself is a representative of a highly privileged layer of the upper-middle class that has benefited from the decades-long suppression of the

class struggle and the promotion of identity and racial politics.

Nevertheless, her ouster through the direct intervention of billionaire Zionists must be opposed as a dangerous attack on academic freedom and freedom of speech. The fight against the genocide and imperialist war cannot be carried forward without a defense of these fundamental democratic rights.

Behind the DSA's support for the attack on democratic rights

The de facto support granted by the DSA to the attack on democratic rights by an alliance of the Democratic Party, the far right, the state apparatus, oligarchs and Zionists, is all the more striking as many members of the DSA are no doubt among the victims of this anti-democratic campaign, genuinely opposed to the genocide and have participated in protests against it. In fact, many members have abandoned the DSA and its youth wing, the YDSA, over their position on Gaza, deepening an already severe crisis of the organization.

This makes it imperative for young people and workers to understand that the position taken by the DSA on Gaza and the attack on democratic rights flow from its entire history and class orientation. Whatever its talk about "socialism," the DSA was founded as an anticommunist organization within one of the oldest capitalist parties in the world.

Historically, political support for US military aid to Israel has been one of the core tenets of the policy of the DSA. As the WWSW has reviewed, Michael Harrington, the long-time leader of the DSA, advocated US military support for Israel since 1967. When Israel invaded Lebanon in June 1982, the DSA took a position of ostensible "neutrality" between the warring sides. For four years, the DSA refused to even mention the massacre at Sabra and Shatila, in which the IDF was complicit in the murder by Lebanese Phalangists of up to 3,500 Palestinian refugees.

In the past five years, representatives of the DSA, including Jamaal Bowman, have voted for funding the Iron Dome. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has voted "present," though in the weeks after the beginning of the genocide, she said she would vote for funding. Ocasio-Cortez also voted "yes" on Resolution 888 reaffirming Israel's "right to exist," that "Jewish people are native to the Land of Israel," and that "denying Israel's right to exist is a form of antisemitism."

In fact, no Democrat in the House voted against the resolution. Even Rashida Tlaib, a DSA member who was censured by the House for demanding a ceasefire, did not vote against the resolution, instead voting "present." Cori Bush, another DSA member in the House, did not cast a vote on the resolution.

Bernie Sanders, long promoted by the DSA, in interview after interview has insisted that there can be no end to the bombing. "I don't know how you can have a ceasefire, a permanent ceasefire, with an organization like Hamas, which is dedicated to turmoil and chaos and destroying the State of Israel," he said in one CNN interview. "I think what the Arab countries in the region understand is that Hamas has got to go."

As the official death toll in Gaza is passing 30,000, it is clear now that what Sanders means by "Hamas has got to go" is that millions of Palestinians must be forced from their homes and driven out into the desert never to return to Gaza.

In their silence on the attacks against democratic rights and support for Claudine Gay's removal, the DSA has positioned itself in alliance with the imperialist war drive and the fascists who are making open preparations to install Donald Trump as dictator. With this lurch to the right, the DSA is following the trajectory of the Democratic Party as a whole, which is the accomplice-in-chief of the Israeli genocide in Gaza and is enabling the rise of fascist forces within the United States itself.

The defense of democratic rights is a class question

In the days that followed the publication of the article by *Jacobin*, the United States and Britain launched illegal attacks in Yemen, expanding the war in Gaza to the wider Middle East. This has greatly increased the danger of a direct war between the United States and Iran, which threatens the lives of millions. It will also mean an intensification of the attack on democratic rights on campuses and beyond, in the United States and internationally.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in its New Year statement, the genocide in Gaza and the war in Ukraine can only be understood as part of an emerging imperialist redivision of the world. The emergence of a new world war and the rule of a tiny oligarchy, whose class interests the Democratic Party defends, are incompatible with the preservation of democratic rights.

Students, socialist workers and all those fighting to defend Palestinians from genocide and who are opposed to imperialist war must draw the necessary conclusions from the present situation. The Democratic Party and all its factions stand against you. This includes the trade union bureaucracies, which seek to suppress any expression of opposition by the working class and the union rank-and-file, and pseudo-left organizations like the DSA.

The politics that must be embraced are those of principled socialism, that is, Trotskyism. The only way for young people and academic workers to defend democratic rights is by mobilizing the working class, breaking from all bourgeois political parties, and turning to revolutionary socialist politics. To advance this fight, chapters of the IYSSE must be built on every campus, high school and workplace. Contact us today to join.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact