

Harvard professor named to task force investigating allegations of antisemitism comes under right-wing attack for views on Israel

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Enormous pressure continues to be applied to Harvard University to muzzle widespread student opposition to the genocide of Palestinians by the Israeli military. The campaign is being orchestrated by billionaire donors, fascistic forces of the right, the capitalist media and the state. It is part of a wider effort by imperialist governments and institutions across the world to suppress and ultimately criminalize all opposition to the Gaza genocide.

The latest attack has centered around the appointment of Harvard professor Derek Penslar, director of the Harvard Center for Jewish Studies, as co-chair of a task force at the university investigating allegations of antisemitism on campus.

Penslar, who is Jewish, is widely regarded as one of the leading historians of Zionism in the world. He received a lifetime achievement award from the Association for Israel Studies and is an elected fellow of the American Academy for Jewish Research. But these credentials have not satisfied those forces leading the false charges of widespread antisemitism on college campuses, due to Penslar's views of the state of Israel.

Penslar signed a letter in August by Academics4Peace against apartheid in Israel. This article, titled "The Elephant in the Room," signed by close to 3,000 academics, students, public figures, clergy and others from the US and around the world, including Israel, refers to Israel's "illegal occupation of millions of Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories." It adds, "There cannot be democracy for Jews in Israel as long as Palestinians live under a regime of apartheid, as Israeli legal experts have described it."

On December 29 of last year, Penslar penned an opinion

piece in the *Harvard Crimson* headlined, "Before Invoking Antisemitism, We Need To Define It." It noted that the definition adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which has been adopted by the US government, states that, in Penslar's words, "calling Israel racist or subjecting it to criticism not directed toward any other democratic country is antisemitic." Other definitions, including one developed by the Nexus Task Force, which Penslar later joined, "leave more room for criticism of Israel, and in that sense they are more conducive to the essential, though difficult, conversations happening within the Harvard community."

Penslar has not called for a ceasefire in Gaza or called the murderous Israeli assault on the Palestinians genocide. However, any criticism of Israeli state policy is beyond the pale for the enemies of the free speech and democratic rights of Harvard students and faculty. Though the aim of the task force was to relieve the Harvard administration of further scrutiny, this measure has come under broad attack by the billionaires and their political and media mouthpieces. After ousting Harvard President Claudine Gay, they smell blood in the water.

In response to Penslar's appointment to the Harvard task force, right-wing media outlets, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Post* and *National Review*, were outraged. He was not suited to the task, the *National Review* argued, because he "has been critical of Israel."

An editorial in the *Journal*, "Harvard's 'Apartheid' Prof and the Antisemitism Task Force," asks, "Well, how about appointing to lead an antisemitism task force a professor who believes Israel operates a 'regime of apartheid' that employs 'Jewish supremacism'?"

Far-right Republican Congresswoman Elise Stefanik

issued a statement denouncing Penslar for “his despicable antisemitic views and statements.” As proof of this outrageous slander, she cited the “The Elephant in the Room,” which, she wrote, “called our great ally Israel ‘a regime of apartheid.’” Stefanik has herself invoked the antisemitic “Great Replacement Theory.”

Former Harvard President Lawrence Summers, who served as director of the National Economic Council in the Obama administration and secretary of the Treasury under Clinton, wrote January 21 on Twitter/X, “Prof Penslar has publicly minimized Harvard’s anti-Semitism problem, rejected the definition used by the US government in recent years of anti-Semitism as too broad, invoked the need for the concept of settler colonialism in analyzing Israel, referred to Israel as an apartheid state and more.”

Billionaire hedge fund manager Bill Ackman chimed in January 24 on Twitter/X that with the selection of Penslar as co-chair of the antisemitism task force Harvard “continues on the path of darkness.”

On October 9, two days after the Hamas-led attack on Israel, Ackman and other CEOs and right-wing figures were calling for the doxxing of students who had signed a joint letter of 34 student groups condemning Israeli treatment of Palestinians. Names and details of students were leaked online, and students’ faces were displayed at Harvard by right-wing provocateurs. This intimidation didn’t stop thousands of students from protesting the genocide in Gaza throughout the fall semester. In December, over 100 professors at Harvard signed a letter calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

Harvard’s administration, led by then-President Claudine Gay, reacted by distancing itself from student opposition, but this wasn’t enough to appease the mob of billionaires and Democratic and Republican politicians, who refused to accept Gay’s initial concession that “students have the right to speak for themselves.” Congress dragged Gay and the presidents of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Pennsylvania before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, which had set up a hearing on the supposed surge of antisemitism on college campuses.

In the face of this right-wing attack, Harvard’s administration has accepted the reactionary framework of the witch-hunt of students and faculty on campus. It has continued to genuflect before right-wing forces that have demanded more active measures be taken by Harvard to stifle opposition.

The attack on Penslar is a major escalation in the assault on freedom of speech on campuses. As David Meyers, a leading historian of Jewish thought, correctly noted in an opinion piece published in the *Los Angeles Times*, “what they are attacking is not just an eminent scholar, but more broadly, the American university as the site of expertise and critical thinking.”

The mass demonstrations by tens of millions of workers and young people throughout the world against the genocide in Gaza have provoked an ugly and repressive response by the ruling class in all the imperialist countries. As students return to classes at Harvard and other universities for the spring semester, the right-wing pressure at campuses will mount, along with demands for effectively banning all expressions of student and faculty opposition and protest.

The false invocations of “antisemitism” on campuses, and the attempt to clamp down on opposition to Zionism and the genocide in Gaza, are an expression of a larger development throughout the world in which democratic forms of rule, democratic rights and freedom of speech are being challenged by the emergence of authoritarianism all over the globe.

There is no solution within academia alone to the repression of students and faculty at universities across the country. Faculty members and students must broaden their struggle, connect it with that of the working class as a whole and the fight for a socialist perspective.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) has called for a political general strike to halt the production and shipment of weapons used by the Israeli government in its assault on Gaza. We encourage students and faculty interested in stopping the genocide and defending democratic rights to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and share information about the attacks on democratic rights and the struggle against the Gaza genocide. Tell us about conditions on your campus and discuss the organization of meetings and demonstrations.



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