

Professors file lawsuit against University of Pennsylvania administration's witch-hunt of opposition to Israel's genocide

Landon Gourov
20 March 2024

On March 9, a lawsuit was filed by two University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) professors and a faculty organization over the witch-hunt that has been occurring at the school since Israel launched its genocide in Gaza following Hamas attack on October 7, 2023.

The affidavit named the main plaintiffs as Professor Huda Fakhreddine, Professor Troutt Powell and UPenn Faculty for Justice in Palestine. Professor Fakhreddine is an Arabic literature scholar and has been a major target of the far right and by the Democratic Biden administration for her vocal opposition to the genocide of Palestinians. Professor Powell teaches history and African studies and was the president of the Middle East Studies Association.

The lawsuit accuses both the trustees and billionaire backers of UPenn alongside US Congress members of McCarthyite attacks on universities and academic staff. "This nation is seeing a new form of McCarthyism," it reads. It declares "accusations of anti-Semitism are substituted for the insinuations of Communist leanings which were the tool of oppression in the 1950's."

The complaint also says that UPenn's silencing of speech on campus has threatened academic freedom and also put faculty and professors at the university in danger of potentially losing their positions due to pro-Palestine sympathies.

Concerns were also raised over the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, a committee in the US House of Representatives which has been leading the witch-hunt. In December, the committee interrogated UPenn's then-president Elizabeth Magill as well as the presidents from Harvard and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) about the

colleges' supposed permissiveness toward anti-genocide protests at their campuses. The hearing was the basis of Magill's resignation shortly afterward and the eventual ouster of Harvard President Claudine Gay.

Deepening its attack on democratic rights, the committee sent a letter to UPenn in January that directed them to hand over any documents related to discussion on the Israeli genocide of Palestinians. This demand included any posts by student groups at UPenn that are critical of Israel, their funding sources, activities of specific students on campus and other requests in gross violation of the right to privacy.

UPenn administrators publicly complied with this order on February 7, and announced that they would be handing over documents to the committee for their investigation into UPenn students and faculty.

Professor Fakhreddine was named multiple times in the committee's letter as being an example of those promoting "antisemitic" tropes on college campuses. According to the letter, her "antisemitism" included social media posts supportive of Palestinian resistance to the state of Israel and the declaration that "Israel is the epitome of antisemitism [and] desecrates the memory of the Holocaust victims."

Fakhreddine said in a press release accompanying the lawsuit that UPenn's actions against student groups and faculty with pro-Palestine sympathies has created hostility and silenced any intellectual discussions on the matter over fears of potentially ruining one's career.

UPenn, in particular, had seen a number of incidents which demonstrates the trustee's hostility towards pro-Palestinian demonstrations.

In September 2023, just weeks before Israel began its genocidal campaign, former bassist of Pink Floyd and

prominent anti-war activist Roger Waters was banned from attending a Palestinian literature event on the campus of UPenn. Waters has been an outspoken defender of the rights of Palestinians and has been falsely accused of being “antisemitic” because of this.

Two months later, leaders of a Jewish student group at UPenn called “Chavurah” were threatened with disciplinary action after they showed an anti-Zionist film, *Israelism*, to an audience of Jewish and Muslim students. The event was met with positive feedback from those in attendance, but UPenn claimed the showing of the film could cause “a potential negative response.”

In February, UPenn lecturer Dwayne Booth, who produces art under the name Mr. Fish, was denounced by the Interim President of UPenn, Larry Jameson, for his “antisemitic” political cartoons about the atrocities occurring in Israel against the Palestinians. Of major focus was a cartoon depicting businessmen drinking glasses of blood labeled “Gaza” while one of the men looks at a dove in the distance and says, “Who invited that lousy anti-semite?”

While the lawsuit accuses a number of guilty parties of suppressing freedom of speech, it notably fails to indict the Biden administration. In fact, the actions by the trustees and by the boards of countless other colleges and universities across the United States have occurred under the direction of the White House with an alliance of far-right forces.

In January, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported that the US Department of Education had opened over 100 Title VI inquiries into supposed acts of “antisemitism” on US campuses at the instigation of far-right provocateurs known for publishing hit pieces on college faculty members, accusing them of leftist sympathies. Many of these groups have funding sources and leadership tied directly to the previous Republican Trump administration’s efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election.

Efforts to appeal to the Biden administration to have a change of heart will only fall on deaf ears. The only solution to the endless wars and anti-democratic actions of the US government and other imperialist powers is to mobilize the working class in an international and unified struggle against the capitalist system and its replacement with international socialism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact