

PEN America attempts to muzzle its workers

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On Wednesday, PEN America, the writers advocacy organization currently in serious crisis because of its refusal to oppose the genocide in Gaza, suffered another blow to its prestige and credibility. PEN America United (PAU), the organization that negotiates on behalf of the organization's employees, issued a statement accusing PEN America of seeking to clamp down on employees' right to free speech. PAU is a part of United Autoworkers Union (UAW) Local 2320, a division of UAW Region 9A.

At a March 14 contract negotiation session, according to PAU's Twitter/X feed, "Management proposed language under which PAU members could be disciplined for engaging in any political activity that 'impacts the ability of PEN America to engage in its mission.'" The PAU tweet points out that "PEN America has received criticism for its response to the ongoing violence in Gaza, resulting in the loss of members, donors, writers, volunteers, & staff. PAU members expressed similar concerns internally, including letters to leadership with recommendations for remediation."

PAU continued: "In light of this tension, it is critical to include protections for PAU members' off-hours political activity in our contract." However, under management's proposal, the union argues, "PAU members could be subject to discipline for attending a protest, reposting an article, or expressing their personal beliefs." The union indicated that it was made clear that discipline could extend to any activity that management "determines could bring negative attention to PEN America. This subjective standard is not in line with PEN America's mission of protecting free speech and can be weaponized to censor PAU members."

PAU's Executive Board also noted in a statement that "PEN America Management's language chills free expression while asking union members to surrender

their rights as workers and renounce a safeguard from retaliation. Sweeping restrictions like these coming from a leading free-expression organization would set a very dangerous precedent for employees everywhere."

PAU's statements reveal there is widespread opposition among PEN America staff to the organization's refusal to take a stand against the mass murder in Gaza. PAU has publicized material about the many writers who have taken a stand against PEN America's tacit support for the genocide. Numerous writers issued an open letter March 14 and announced they were withdrawing from PEN America's World Voices Festival in New York City because "attending this year's festival would only serve to contribute to the illusion that PEN America is truly devoted to 'the defense of free speech at the center of humanity's struggle against repression,' as it has claimed."

PEN America issued a statement calling PAU's statement a "false claim" and that it only sought "the avoidance of conflicts of interest for the organization that could result from an employee playing a public role in a political campaign or running for office." In other words, PEN America is now publicly reiterating its claim made first to PAU's Bargaining Committee, that its employees do not have First Amendment rights like the rest of the American population.

The organization that presents itself as the defender of free speech, conducting, for example, a vigorous campaign to stop the censorship of books by the fascist-dominated State Assembly of Florida, an organization that claims to be a shield for writers who are imprisoned and oppressed around the world, now seeks to slap its own workers into silence.

This is possible because PEN America has undertaken to defend the interests of American imperialism, whose interests not only extend to foreign affairs, but to dictatorial methods in the United States as well. In that regard, its clampdown on free speech

parallels actions taken by numerous universities and other institutions in the US and elsewhere. In the face of mass and persistent opposition to the Gaza crimes, the instinctive, universal response of the ruling elite is to make that opposition illegal!

PEN America's persistent refusal to defend Palestinian writers, artists and journalists, who are being murdered by the scores by Israeli aircraft dropping American-made bombs or shot by Israeli troops with American-made bullets, is only one aspect of the collapse of the organization's claim to defend writers' civil rights and more broadly artistic freedom.

PEN America acts in line with the goals and needs of the Democratic Party. Its CEO, Suzanne Nossel, is a former high-ranking US State Department official and acolyte of the veteran imperialist thug, Richard Holbrooke, a "bully and a liar for the most rapacious and militaristic power in the world," as the WSWS has termed him.

That is why PEN America prefigures its silence on the bloody results of Zionist ultranationalism with an open advocacy of the ethnocentric goals—the pulping of Russian books and destruction of statues of Russian writers—by Ukrainian ultranationalism, even agreeing to shut down a panel of Russian speakers at last year's World Voices Festival when right-wing Ukrainian writers refused to participate if a single Russian spoke at *any* of the festival's events.

PEN America staff are doubtlessly disgusted with the conduct of their employer, both for the organization's support for the Gaza genocide and for its attempt to take away their basic democratic rights. But workers at PEN America must also consider that PAU has placed itself under the umbrella of another reactionary and pro-imperialist group of gangsters, the well-paid bureaucrats of the UAW.

In February 2023, Vice President of Local 2320, Vail Kohnert-Yount, a longtime Democratic Party operative, was elevated to Assistant Director of UAW Region 9A with a salary of \$174,000 after she donated \$25,000 to the campaign of Shawn Fain, now the UAW's president. Kohnert-Yount was the recording secretary of United Auto Workers for Democracy, a faction of the bureaucracy close to the Democratic Socialists of America.

Fain is the representative of this affluent, privileged bureaucratic layer thoroughly subordinated to the aims,

internationally and domestically, of corporate management and American imperialism. While the UAW under his leadership passed a toothless resolution for a ceasefire in Gaza, Fain has prevented the organization's members from shutting down the production of military equipment that goes to Israel.

Not only have Fain and the UAW bureaucracy enthusiastically called for a vote for the chief genocide perpetrator in the White House in the November elections, but Biden signaled Fain out for praise as a "great friend and a great labor leader" during his State of the Union speech earlier this month.

The UAW bureaucrats showed their real attitude to the membership and to Israel's monstrous crimes in Gaza when anti-genocide UAW members were thrown out of UAW's Community Action Program in Detroit conference in January.

PAU members have shown principle in helping to expose PEN America's real face, but they must continue the struggle for real artistic freedom and democratic rights by a conscious break with all factions of the Democratic Party and the trade union apparatus.



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