

Berkeley law student Gaza protest sparks frenzy from university administration

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On Wednesday, video of a University of California Berkeley law professor, Catherine Fisk, assaulting a Palestinian student peacefully protesting at a graduation dinner went viral. The university administration leapt into action defending the professor and slandering student protesters as antisemitic.

Fisk's husband Professor Erwin Chemerinsky, the Dean of the law school, a leading US constitutional lawyer and a prominent Zionist, wasted no time in misrepresenting the protests and giving interviews to the media calling the students antisemites and denying that students have a First Amendment right to protest state university policies at university events. The official frenzy to demonize the protest points to UC Berkeley's ongoing plans to crack down on opposition to the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

In sharp contrast to how the university presents them, Berkeley Law Students for Justice in Palestine carried out a remarkably calm and measured protest. After the graduation dinners were announced to be at Dean Chemerinsky's house, law students planned to protest over a Zionist professor holding a celebratory dinner while Palestinians were being starved by Israel.

The law students registered and were invited guests to the dinner where Malak Afaneh, a Palestinian student, began to address the crowd and shortly into commemorating the final day of Ramadan was attacked by Fisk who tried to seize Afaneh's microphone. Chemerinsky and Fisk are both heard clearly on camera ordering them to leave their house as Afaneh and other protesters calmly defend their right to speak and call on the university to divest from Israel despite Professor Fisk's one-sided attack. After Fisk threatened to call the police, the protesters calmly left without further disruption.

Immediately after, Chemerinsky began misrepresenting events. He claimed that students had no right to speak to a private dinner at his house despite the fact that it was an official event paid for by the university and he was hosting solely in his role as dean of the law school. He further gave interviews to the media claiming that he was being targeted

solely for being Jewish and completely ignored the repeated statements of students that what they objected to was his Zionism and the university's economic investments in Israel.

UC Berkeley Chancellor Carol Christ immediately issued a statement parroting Chemerinsky's lies stating, "I am appalled and deeply disturbed by what occurred at Dean Chemerinsky's home last night.... While our support for free speech is unwavering, we cannot condone using a social occasion at a person's private residence as a platform for protest."

The chair of the UC Board of Regents, Richard Leib, issued the harshest slander of students writing: "The individuals that targeted this event did so simply because it was hosted by a dean who is Jewish. These actions were antisemitic, threatening, and do not reflect the values of this university." Leib is a notorious Zionist bigot and a diverse group of faculty and student organizations called for his resignation last December over social media activity painting Palestinians as backward and defending the Israeli assault on hospitals.

The frenzy with which the UC System denounced the protesters indicates that they are preparing to crack down on the standing anti-genocide protests being at Berkeley and on campuses across the state.

Since Israel launched its genocide of the Palestinians in Gaza last October, Berkeley has been the site of persistent anti-war protests and vigils, with a prominent and consistent presence at the iconic Sather Gate that overlooked much of the Free Speech Movement in the 1960s. In a statement last month Chancellor Christ stated the university was reexamining its rules on protests, which she acknowledges the anti-genocide protesters have been following, given the number of complaints from Zionists around Sather Gate in particular.

Far from a groundswell of antisemitism, the Berkeley campus has seen a sharp rise in Zionist provocations and attacks on pro-Palestinian protesters as the genocide continues. Over the past couple months far-right Zionist

student organizations have been taking an increasingly aggressive approach seeking to mobilize the university administration against students. Their main method of provocation at the moment is to invite open war criminals, fascists, and bigots to speak at Berkeley, who demand harsher military measures against civilians, and then calling any protest against their speakers an antisemitic attack on free speech.

Zionist student groups invited Mosab Hassan Yousef to speak on April 18. Yousef is famous among other things for likening Islam to Nazism and calling for the “free world” to unite in destroying the religion. More extreme was their invitation of the Israeli fascist and war criminal Ran Bar YOSHAFAT in February. YOSHAFAT has made numerous social media posts declaring that there are no civilians in Gaza and that children and elderly are legitimate military targets.

He laments that Israel did not shoot enough unarmed Palestinians during the Great March of Return five years ago, and is an open advocate of ethnic cleansing:

As for the rest of the Arabs in Gaza, there is no escape from the expulsion of most of them. The only question is to where. Those who insist that we live alongside them, will simply cause that in the next war, instead of 120,000 we will have to eliminate 1,200,000. (Ran Bar YOSHAFAT’s Facebook, Jan 7, 2024)

As Deputy Director of Israel’s Kohélet Institute, YOSHAFAT is a deeply despised figure in Israel itself. He played a role in enshrining Jewish supremacy into Israel’s basic law and was a major proponent of the far-right judicial reforms that were met with mass protests across Israel which only stopped with the invasion of Gaza.

In response to the planned speech of this fascist, anti-genocide protesters blocked the venue and forced its initial cancellation. Chancellor Christ wrote that these protests against an open advocate of genocide “violated not only our rules, but also some of our most fundamental values.”

Following the cancellation of YOSHAFAT’s speech, the Republican-controlled House Committee on Education and the Workforce added UC Berkeley to its investigation of antisemitism on college campuses. The letter from committee member Virginia Foxx specifically called the protests against YOSHAFAT’s support for genocide “an act of anti-Jewish hate.”

Included in the congresswoman’s complaint were numerous instances of constitutionally protected political speech by students in defense of Palestine. The committee’s

previous McCarthyite investigations forced the resignations of the presidents of Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania. In targeting Berkeley, the House Committee is seeking to accelerate the administration’s attack on student protests.

Despite his long history as a liberal Zionist who criticized the extremes of Israel’s anti-Palestinian policies and defended the legal rights of pro-Palestinian protesters, Chemerinsky has aligned himself with these far-right provocations. In an interview with CNN’s Jake Tapper the day after his wife assaulted the Palestinian student, Chemerinsky emphasized that he has made no public statements about the war or Israel’s conduct of it, and therefore was only being targeted because he was Jewish. This is a lie.

By the end of October, Chemerinsky had published an opinion piece in the *Los Angeles Times* headlined, “Nothing has prepared me for the antisemitism I see on college campuses now.” In it he denounced all opposition to Zionism as antisemitism and concluded, “there is no bridge between those who seek the elimination of Israel and those who believe it is essential to have a Jewish state.” In short, for Chemerinsky one can criticize specific methods and actions of Israel but not the ethnic cleansing at the heart of carving out a Jewish ethnostate from Palestine.

The vast majority of students are opposed to the genocide being carried out by the United States and Israel but are under increasing attack from the university administration which seeks to intimidate and silence their voices. No amount of protest or letter-writing will bring around die-hard imperialists and Zionists like Christ, Leib, or President Joe Biden. There is, in fact, no bridge between those seeking the liberation of the Palestinians and those who defend US imperial interests. Instead students must turn to the broader working class to oppose the capitalist government tobogganing towards World War III.



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