

Holocaust survivor leads Michigan vigil against US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza

Our reporters
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Rene Lichtman, an 86-year-old Holocaust child survivor, led a vigil in the Detroit suburb of Farmington Hills Sunday afternoon to protest the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza. The event, held outside the Zekelman Holocaust Museum, was sponsored by the Coalition Against Genocide.

Lichtman's parents were Polish Jews who fled to France the year before his birth in Paris, in 1937. His father joined the French army and was killed in the first weeks of the German invasion in 1940. As a small child Lichtman was hidden and protected by a French family on the outskirts of Paris until the end of the Nazi occupation in 1945.

After arriving in the United States in 1950, Lichtman was radicalized by the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War and became a founding member of the World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust.

He has been an outspoken opponent of the Israeli onslaught on Gaza, comparing the mass killings, hospital bombings and cutoff of water and food by the Israeli military to the methods the Nazis used to exterminate European Jews. For that reason, he was fired by the directors of the Zekelman Holocaust Museum where he had been a regular speaker for 10 years.

In its call for the vigil, the Coalition Against Genocide said that prominent historians with Jewish backgrounds, including Ilan Pappé, Avi Schlaim and Norman Finkelstein, have been excluded from job positions in academia because of their pro-Palestinian views. "They will never be invited to any Holocaust Museum. The Israel Lobby will continue to see to that," the statement said.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site* before the vigil started, Lichtman explained, "The museum is not objective. They present the history that the right-wing will allow them to put on. The question we have for them is: How are you now going to portray the Nakba [the 1948 expulsion of Palestinians]? You end the story, and I know because I've been speaking here forever, with the happy ending of the Jews, the camp survivors coming to Israel. But that is no longer the ending. We know that from the last eight months.

What about the Palestinian people?"

He added, "All my relatives lived in Poland and western Russia, and, of course, they were completely wiped out, there is nobody left. So, I know what the Germans did. The first stage was humiliation, that's what the Germans did, and that's what the Israelis are doing also.

"They humiliate people at the crossings and make fun of them. We have videos of that. It is unbelievable, you have these young Israelis laughing in the house of someone they just took over and destroyed. These are 18- and 19-year-old kids who are racist.

"So, the techniques are exactly the same. The difference is, which makes it even worse, that the Israelis are public about it. They brag about it. In terms of famine, there was just another young boy who died of starvation. These are war crimes, and the international community should put these people on trial, including the leadership of the state of Israel."

Referring to the financial, military and political backing the Biden administration has provided Israel, Lichtman said, "Biden is a hypocrite, he pays lip service [to the deaths of Palestinians] and then sends Israel all this ammunition." Biden was a war criminal too, he said, who should be put on trial alongside Netanyahu and other Israeli leaders.

Lichtman introduced and invited Heather Burnham, an educator whose grandparents were Holocaust survivors, to read a letter being delivered to the museum's directors. It read in part:

As Jews, we believe that it is important to prevent the horrors of the Holocaust from happening again, even when such crimes are being done in our name. We believe it is important to distance Judaism from Zionism and believe that showing true Jewish values and integrity is the only way to combat antisemitism.

Thus, we are asking that the museum make a statement of support for a ceasefire and solidarity

with the people of Palestine. We are also asking that you divest from working with any companies that are funding Israel's human rights violations. In asking you for this we are asking you to honor your website statement touting "the importance of standing up against prejudice, discrimination, and hate." Standing against the murder of innocent Palestinians is a cause we believe encompasses all that you teach.

Also speaking was Dr. Nadal Jboor, a member of Doctors Against Genocide, who said, "As doctors, we think we can save more lives by interfering and stopping these crimes. Peace is possible but the military industrial complex and Israel's lobbyists don't want peace. As doctors, we demand a ceasefire because that is a medical intervention to save lives, and that is our main mission."

Lichtman also invited Jerry White, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for US vice president, to speak. White said the presence of Rene and others at the rally, and the tens of thousands of Jewish youth who have participated in demonstrations around the world, "is the greatest rebuke of the slanders and the lies of the Democrats and Republicans who claim the protests against this 21st century genocide are anti-Semitic."

This genocide, he said, would not be possible without the "military, political and financial support of the Biden administration and both parties in Washington." Both parties, he said had invited the "Butcher of Gaza" Netanyahu to speak before a joint session of Congress on July 24. "Why have they invited him? They are looking for a progress report from their agent in the Middle East over how he is conducting the war in the interests not only of the Zionist state but of American imperialism."

The Socialist Equality Party, its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees was organizing a demonstration and meeting in Washington on the July 24, "not to beg Congress to change its policies," White said. The last nine months had proven that no appeals to reason, let alone morality, would make them change course. Instead, the SEP insisted, what was needed was a "new political orientation and strategy."

A powerful movement of the working class had to be developed to stop the genocide and the global escalation of imperialist militarism by the US ruling class and its NATO collaborators. Between Biden's senile mutterings during the debate with Trump last week, White said, two things came out clearly: "Ironclad backing for Israel's genocide and a massive funding for Ukraine for war against Russia even if it leads to nuclear holocaust."

That is why in the call for its July 24 demonstration, the SEP has set out three fundamental principles: the complete political independence of the movement from both corporate-controlled parties; the international unity of workers and young people against war; and the conscious fight to put an end to capitalism, the source of war, and the establishment of socialism.

The international working class, he said, is that "social force that can stop war. The millions of workers who will be told to fight and sacrifice their sons and daughters for these wars. The millions of workers who will be told to give up their Social Security, health care and public education to fund these wars. The working class, he said, has the capacity to shut down the war machine of the US and its client states.

He concluded, "The struggle against war is the struggle against capitalism, and it's a struggle for socialism. It means the ending of a system where all human needs are subordinated to the profit of the billionaires... It means creating a society all over the world based on equality, peace and the international brotherhood of all workers."

Asked if he would urge workers and young people to attend the July 24 demonstration, Lichtman told the WSWS, "Yes, absolutely. Anything like this that exposes the imperialists and what Biden is doing with Netanyahu is very good. They are the architects of genocide. People should go, you can't be bystanders. That is one of the lessons [of history]. That's why we are here. This museum talks about tolerance, empathy, and the Jewish values of justice. That's what they are teaching. So now, they have to apply it to this genocide. What are they going to say?"



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