

New York police arrest journalist on “hate crime” charges for filming anti-genocide protest

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On Tuesday, the New York Police Department (NYPD) arrested video-journalist Samuel Seligson on charges of felony hate crime and criminal mischief for allegedly recording a protest against genocide. Seligson is charged with videoing activists as they painted anti-Zionist graffiti June 12 on the homes of Brooklyn Museum Director Anne Pasternak and three other members of the museum’s board of directors.

Taylor Pelton, a 28-year-old illustrator, was arrested July 31 for participating in the same action.

Seligson’s attorney, Leena Widdi, told the media that the NYPD officers twice raided her client’s Brooklyn apartment in the week before he turned himself in. She called the police actions “appalling.”

In a statement to the *Intercept*, Widdi added:

The state has not provided any reliable evidence that he was actually there. And even if he were there, they have not made any allegations that he engaged in any activity beyond mere presence.

The anonymous activists painted red inverted triangles—allegedly a symbol of Palestinian resistance—on Pasternak’s residence, and hoisted a banner that read, “Anne Pasternak Brooklyn Museum White-Supremacist Zionist.” On the sidewalks in front of other board members’ homes they painted slogans such as “Blood on Your Hands,” as well as anarchist symbols.

In a statement sent to *Hyperallergic*, the anonymous group of activists said:

The museum’s complicity in the Palestinian genocide is a filthy inescapable reality and so is its violence against those protesting it ... Our action is a retaliation against the museum’s direct connections to the networks that materially support the genocidal entity as well as its collaboration with the fascist NYPD.

Hyperallergic noted in its coverage of the June 12 action that the

statement from the group alleges that [Brooklyn Museum] Board Treasurer [Neil] Simpkins [whose residence was also targeted] “unsuccessfully chased down activists from his \$37 million townhouse.”

The statement, according to *Hyperallergic*, added that Simpkins

is a senior director at the investment firm Blackstone and notes the company’s alleged ties to weapons manufacturing, investments in the destruction of the Amazon rainforest, and real estate ventures that have been accused of contributing to global gentrification.

The anti-genocide group’s desire for “retaliation,” aside from the general opposition to the museum board’s connection to “networks” supporting Israel, clearly refers to the brutal police attack on a protest organized at the Brooklyn Museum on May 31. During that event, the NYPD entered the museum and violently assaulted protesters, which resulted in the arrest of 34 people.

Democracy Now! reported that

New York police officers were again filmed using violent tactics to arrest the protesters. A captain of the Strategic Response Group [SRG], who was identified as Christopher Carlson, was seen punching at least two women at the protest.”

Inside the museum, “one of the leading activists with the group Within Our Lifetime, Nerdeen Kiswani, was violently tackled by New York police officers, who then arrested her as her hijab came off.

Organizers of the protest, the Cultural Front for Free Palestine, called the police action an “unprecedented show of force and violence, the likes of which has never been seen before in the long history of museum protests in New York City.”

The corporate media and Democratic Party establishment have put their propaganda machinery in gear to smear the June 12 graffiti action against the various Brooklyn Museum board

members as “antisemitic.” Brad Lander, New York City Comptroller and recently declared “progressive” Democratic candidate for mayor, tweeted: “The cowards who did this are way over the line into antisemitism, harming the cause they claim to care about, and making everyone less safe.”

Hyperallergic points out that “the *New York Times* initially misidentified all four museum leaders targeted as Jewish; only Pasternak is Jewish.”

In a statement to *Hyperallergic* last week, Taylor Pelton’s lawyer, Moira Meltzer-Cohen, expressed concern over “the general trend toward alleging antisemitic hate crimes in the context of expressions of grief and rage over Israel’s attacks on Palestine.”

Any time we see charging enhancements being applied in a politically motivated way, it should give us pause. ... The claim that the Jewish Peoples, who are historically oppressed religious groups, are synonymous with the state of Israel, which is a global nuclear power, is not historically accurate and it is not neutral. It functions to discourage criticism of the powerful by exploiting laws intended to protect the vulnerable.

In response to journalist Seligson’s reactionary and, frankly, preposterous—all the more so because Seligson is of Jewish descent—arrest August 6, the Freedom of the Press Foundation noted on its twitter feed that

Cops and prosecutors have dreamed up plenty of convoluted theories to criminalize journalism, but @nypdnews charging a reporter with a hate crime for documenting news has to be one of the most outrageous yet.

Widdi, Seligson’s attorney, commented that her client was

being charged for alleged behavior that is protected by the First Amendment and consistent with his job as a credentialed member of the press. Nothing in the complaint against Mr. Seligson alleges anything more than behavior consistent with his role as a journalist.

In a statement to the *World Socialist Web Site*, photojournalist Alexa Blair Wilkinson, who has covered anti-genocide protests in the New York area since October, commented:

It’s plainly obvious to those of us on the ground daily and weekly who is being targeted/hunted and who is just on the waiting list. The NYPD, beholden to the mayor,

beholden to donors, has been caught time and time again capitulating to money rather than serving the needs of his own citizens. Freedom of the press is essential to a thriving democracy and a healthy society, so it’s not a huge surprise that as we see fascism on the rise the unprotected and independent press are the first ones targeted.

Mr. Seligson was doing his job as a credentialed member of the press. He was not participating in the alleged crimes, nor did he organize that action. If we start to understand how and why the state targets citizens and members of the press, we start to understand that all arrests are political especially when political aspirations are on the line. Anne Pasternak makes over \$1 million as Museum director, and I’m sure the corporate sponsor list at the Brooklyn Museum will Venn Diagram nicely with Mayor Adam’s campaign contributors.

The attack on Seligson is part of a systematic campaign of repression in defense of Israel’s monstrous crimes by the New York City political and economic elite. This campaign includes the firing of New York City Public School educators for voicing pro-Palestinian sympathies; the labeling of anti-genocide protests by high-school students as “anti-Jewish”; the removal of pro-Palestinian parents from education committees for calling for a ceasefire; along with the brutalization of anti-genocide demonstrators by the NYPD. It was the Adams administration, no doubt in collaboration with the Biden White House, that ordered the raids at Columbia University, the New School, the City University of New York and other colleges, presiding over the arrests and victimizations of students for exercising their right to free speech.

The case against Pelton and Seligson raises more general questions about the nature and social role of museums, which are repositories of thousands of years of human culture. Should they be the mere playthings of billionaire investors, many of whom support imperialist crimes such as the Israeli genocide in Gaza, which has also seen the destruction of schools, museums, archives and libraries?

The arrest of a journalist on charges of committing a “hate crime” is part of a pattern of suppression of information and knowledge, which includes the targeted assassination of journalists in Gaza on an unprecedented scale. From the point of view of the fascist Netanyahu regime, the imperialist powers and their political representatives, including the Democratic Party, the suppression of the truth remains a central goal.



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