

Protests mount over Zionist targeting of Leeds University academic James Dickins

Harvey Thompson, Robert Stevens

29 August 2024

The University of Leeds in West Yorkshire, England, is facing growing opposition to its pro-Zionist witch-hunt against a distinguished member of faculty, Professor James Dickins.

An investigation by the university has recommended stripping Professor Dickins of his emeritus status, on the grounds that he encouraged a protest on campus against a pro-Israel event. A professor who retires from an educational institution in what is considered “good standing” may be given the title “professor emeritus” as a mark of distinguished service.

Dickins is an advocate for Palestinian human rights and was until recently chair of the Leeds branch of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) and a supporter of the University of Leeds Palestine Solidarity Group (PSG). Although retired in 2023, he has continued to supervise PhD students. Staff and students at the University of Leeds have amassed over 10,000 signatures in just a few weeks for a petition calling for his defence.

On July 17, the University of Leeds branch of the University and College Union (UCU) published a statement, “Solidarity with Professor Emeritus James Dickins,” declaring that the “recommendation to revoke his emeritus status is unwarranted”.

The persecution of Dickins stems back to January this year, when the Jewish Society (JSoc) at the University of Leeds advertised an event organised by StandWithUs (SWU). Also known as Israel Emergency Alliance, SWU is a pro-Israel “advocacy organisation”, which has a significant presence on university campuses across the UK, US, Canada, South Africa, Australia and Brazil.

The event was billed as part of a SWU UK “campus tour” to be addressed by US/Israeli rapper and hip-hop artist Noah Shufutinsky, whose brother Dimitri Shufutinsky is a member of the right-wing lobbying group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and has served in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF).

Dickins sent WhatsApp messages on February 2 to the

WhatsApp chat of the Palestine Solidarity Group, regarding the proposed event, saying in one: “I think a co-ordinated response is needed from Leeds PSC, Leeds University PSG, and staff at Leeds University.”

A scurrilous campaign was launched attempting to link Dickins with the daubing of graffiti on a Leeds campus building, Hillel House, which is used by JSoc to hold meetings. The graffiti, which read “Free Palestine” and “IDF off campus”, was written on the building on February 8—almost a full week after Dickins’ messages—and was denounced as “antisemitic” by the pro-Zionist Jewish News.

The *Jewish News* posted screenshots of Dickins’ social media messages on its website in a February 12 article, as if these were some kind of evidence of criminal activity. The President of Leeds JSoc [Jewish Society], Emma Levy, responded that “her main priority was ensuring the university cut ties with James Dickins.” One student submitted a complaint to the university about Dickins’ messages triggering an investigation and leading to the threatened removal of Dickins’ status as emeritus professor.

By his messages, Dickins did not—as other leading academics have noted—intend to encourage a protest or demonstration but had in mind an open letter. The event in question passed off without incident.

Indicating the spurious nature of the attack on Dickins, a July 16 article by the British Committee for the Universities of Palestine (BRICUP) noted of the affair, “After threats of legal action, Jewish News removed all reference to Dickins in its 12 February 2024 report.

On July 29, BRICUP announced that 21 Fellows of the British Academy (FBA) had signed a letter calling on University of Leeds management to end their victimisation of Dickins, “resulting from an evidence-free attack on the Professor by pro-Israel students and others.”

The letter, in part, read: “Professor Dickins’s ‘crime’, it appears, is being critical of the State of Israel, for we have seen no other evidence whatsoever of wrongdoing on his part,” adding “there is no substance to the allegations.”

The letter clarified: “Professor Dickins is accused of

having ‘leaked’ the address of the Hillel House for the purpose of encouraging protest that endangered the residents, and which resulted, putatively, in vandalizing graffiti on the Hillel House. In actuality, the address of the Hillel House is nowhere in the WhatsApp messages Professor Dickins exchanged with others--but is in the public domain for all to obtain. He did not encourage any protest connected with the Hillel House, and in fact, no such protest ever took place.”

The FBA letter concluded: “The proceedings against Professor Dickins are based on the complaint of a single student and have neither merit nor factual base,” and Dickins’ messages “were a political expression of his views endorsing anti-Zionism, not antisemitism.”

The letter explained that the moves to strip Dickins of his emeritus status violated not only due process, but also the University’s duty to protect and foster both free speech and academic freedom.

On August 20, the Committee for Academic Freedom (CAF) published an article detailing the witch-hunt being conducted against Dickins, in which it said:

“There are no grounds, whatsoever, to believe that Dickins incited violence or did anything else which might justify a restriction on the right to protest. Thus, the university’s punishment of Dickins is, in effect, punishment for advocating for protest simpliciter. This is an appalling violation of freedom of speech. It is also almost certainly illegal. Universities have a duty to secure freedom of speech under the 1986 Education Act.”

The attack on Dickins is part of an escalating assault on protest and free speech. The British government, Tory and now Labour, alongside the US and other NATO powers, has fully backed and armed Israel’s genocidal assault on Gaza. It has responded to mass demonstrations against the butchering of Gaza’s Palestinian population with an assault on the right to protest and free speech seeking to criminalise left-wing, socialist and anti-war opposition.

The persecution of Professor Dickins is in particular an attempt to silence widespread opposition to war on campus among staff and students. This was made clear when thousands of academics declared their opposition last October in an open letter to the then Tory’s attempts to brand academics who opposed the Gaza onslaught as holding “extremist views.” The letter to the UK Research and Innovation that funds and directs academic research in the UK denounced “the current wave of repression and attempts at censorship led by the government against lawful expressions of solidarity with Palestinians and criticisms of the Israeli military’s heavy bombardment of the Gaza Strip since 7 October.”

With the incoming Labour government as slavish in

support of the Israeli regime as were the Tories, the attack on opponents of Israel’s slaughter of the Palestinians is only being stepped up. Earlier this month the Court of the University of St Andrews in Scotland dismissed rector Stella Maris, a vocal opponent of the Gaza genocide. Maris was targeted because of an email she sent on November 21 last year to all 10,000 St Andrews students calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. Maris told St Andrews student newspaper *The Saint*, “I have faced the full force of the University... all because I made a statement supported by the overwhelming majority of students, calling for an end to a genocide.”

Earlier this month seven students at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) were suspended and are threatened with expulsion. They were involved in a campus encampment protesting Israel’s genocide on Gaza. The university has previously suspended four students and three alumni for holding a Palestine solidarity event on campus last October when Israel invaded Gaza.

In February, police raided the home of a SOAS student, arresting her under the Terrorism Act for protesting in defence of the October 7 Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation.

Management at several universities deployed security and the police and took legal action to tear down dozens of encampments set up last term. Today just two encampments remain ahead of the start of the new term next month.

Labour Home Secretary Yvette Cooper, utilising riots by far-right forces earlier this month to strengthen the state, said the government will “conduct a rapid analytical sprint on extremism, to map and monitor extremist trends.” Its aim is to “identify any gaps in existing policy which need to be addressed to crack down on those pushing harmful and hateful beliefs and violence.”



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