“A shame and a sham”

Noguchi Museum in New York City fires workers for opposing Gaza genocide

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On Wednesday, the Noguchi Museum in Queens, New York City, fired three of its gallery attendants for showing their opposition to the genocide in Gaza by wearing keffiyehs, Palestinian headscarves. Their supervisor, the director of visitor services, had been fired August 29. Museum management had unliterally banned the wearing of keffiyehs or any other “political expression.”

This is the latest attack by the museum and its director, Amy Hau, on the democratic rights of the staff and part of the determined effort to prevent any identification of the arts institution with opposition to the war crimes carried out by Israel in Gaza and funded by the US government.

Sources at the museum sent the *World Socialist Web Site* a recording of an encounter in which supervisors tell a worker who is wearing a keffiyeh that “unfortunately the keffiyeh is also a political symbol not just cultural. And right now, we don’t want to get into semantics about it, but right now you guys have to go home under suspension with no pay and we will be in touch because right now you’re in violation of the policy, and you can be terminated.”

The worker tells the managers about the atmosphere of fear at the museum and that the latter have created an “air … of threats of retaliation.” This worker courageously tells the supervisors that they have no plan on changing their behavior and says, “I will not take this keffiyeh off and I really think this policy is a shame and a sham.”

During the conversation, the employee exposes the hypocrisy of the museum officialdom, who took a verbal stance against anti-Asian racism and police violence in 2020, “and now that things are happening to the Palestinian people, the museum has fallen dead silent. And that’s very telling. Very telling.” The worker observes that gallery assistants are among the lowest paid at the museum and are now, effectively, without rights. The managers then fire the employee when they refuse to back down.

The recording is a repugnant instance of museum officials enforcing a right-wing policy, which accommodates itself to a world-historical crime, the deaths of tens of thousands of innocent men, women and children, against a worker who stands on the principle of defending an oppressed people.

The actions of the museum are doubly foul and hypocritical because the institution features the name and work of Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi, who was interned by the Roosevelt administration during the Second World War because of his ethnic background and who himself fought in defense of democratic rights.

The conflict at the Noguchi Museum began August 14, when a gallery attendant was pulled off their job—for wearing a keffiyeh—and into a meeting with Hau, who informed them they could not wear the headscarf, and that if they continued to do so, they would be disciplined. The museum employee refused to comply and was sent home, even though two others were also wearing keffiyehs.

At a hastily called staff meeting, workers were instructed to refrain from wearing “political dress” and a new set of regulations was imposed which similarly violated the staff’s First Amendment rights. More staff were sent home the next day for wearing the banned headscarves, and much of the staff walked out in support.

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The museum was shut on Friday, August 16 and over the subsequent weekend. Staff delivered a petition to management that read in part, thus far "the museum has not made any public statement surrounding the ongoing war in Gaza, but by changing the dress code to ban the keffiyeh it is taking a public stance."

On August 25, supporters of the employees and opponents of the genocide protested outside the museum. On Sunday, according to a report on *Hyperallergic*,

> at least 60 people including former workers and supporters protested outside the Queens institution and handed out flyers to inform visitors of the ban, which has been billed by museum leadership as a dress code update prohibiting "political dress" that could make visitors feel "unsafe" or "uncomfortable."

Former Noguchi Museum staffer Trasonia Abbott, one of those fired for wearing a keffiyeh, addressed the crowd. "We are gathered here today to mourn a once great museum," Abbott reportedly said into a microphone.

> "It's one thing if I showed up to work wearing Kamala Harris pins. That would be political," Abbott told *Hyperallergic*. "But I think that people being murdered in the mass, industrialized way that it's happening—that's not political."

Three elected officials, members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), New York City Council member Tiffany Cabán, New York State Assembly member Zohran Mamdani and New York State Senator Kristen Gonzales, wrote a polite letter to the leadership of the museum. The DSA politicians did not use words such as "genocide," "war crimes" or "repression," let alone "democratic rights" or the "First Amendment," but expressed their "disappointment" with the keffiyeh ban that has "no place in our diverse, open and caring community … We ask you to reconsider this decision."

Of course, the museum will not reconsider. Artistic and educational institutions have come under great pressure, particularly in areas where the Democratic Party is in control, to clamp down on any expression of opposition to the Gaza genocide. It is fair to say that these institutions have become drenched with the spirit of repression in recent weeks.

New York University has rewritten its discrimination and harassment policies to place anyone identifying as a "Zionist" in a protected class. Columbia University has banned encampments and restricted access to its campus, and students at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor were dragged out of a protest against the university's ties with Israel by the police.

The Gaza genocide is one of the initial manifestations, along with the US/NATO proxy war in Ukraine, of a global war that is being prepared as part of a new imperialist division of the world. Such a war is incompatible with democratic rights, and US and European cultural institutions, so often funded by corporations and ultra-wealthy individuals, have stepped in to try and silence opposition to the policies of their respective governments.

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