

Pennsylvania professor fired for opposing Gaza genocide

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Anthropology professor Maura Finkelstein was fired in May from her position at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, the culmination of a campaign against the professor launched by Zionists outside the college and the Biden-Harris Department of Education which fingered her for “anti-Israel” activism—social media posts she made opposing Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

She had been previously suspended in January, after the spring academic term had already begun, suddenly leaving her students without their professor.

Finkelstein, who is Jewish, is believed to be the first tenured faculty member fired for constitutionally-protected free speech opposing Israel’s genocide—in her case speech that took place *outside* the classroom, thereby trampling on both her academic freedom and her basic democratic rights.

Her removal is intended to intimidate and silence all those opposing American imperialism and its Israeli proxy’s crimes. It is part of a purge of America’s colleges and universities and assault on the democratic rights of students and faculty spearheaded by the Biden-Harris administration.

Finkelstein is the author of the book *The Archive of Loss: Lively Ruination in Mill Land Mumbai*, published by Duke University Press in 2019, which considers the lives of workers in a de-industrialized city in India, as well as a number of academic articles, reviews and essays. Muhlenberg College has raised no objections to her scholarship, teaching, or service to the institution, which constitute the basis of academic employment. She was a tenured professor with the title associate professor of anthropology.

Last week, on September 24, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) sent a letter to Muhlenberg College President Kathleen Harring stating that it would be opening an investigation into the firing of Finkelstein over her pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist views.

Finkelstein started to make public statements against Israel’s policies soon after the Hamas uprising of October 7, 2023, took place. She quickly became a target of Zionist harassment. In response to her open criticism of Israel, a

Change.org petition was created on October 29, 2023, by right-wing Muhlenberg alumni which called for her removal. The petition was promoted by backers of Israel’s genocide, who equate any opposition with antisemitism.

The Change.org petition accused Finkelstein of “appalling actions.” The three offenses she was accused of were “1. Glorifying Hamas, the Terrorists, and Vilifying Israel: [sic], 2. Classroom Bias, Hate Speech, and Targeted Aggression to Jewish Students, 3. Cyberbullying students with her partner.”

Justifying their first charge, the authors of the Change.org petition cited some lines of text which Finkelstein had written in response to an article on Muhlenberg’s student paper, *The Weekly*. Finkelstein’s comments were not a glorification of Hamas, but rather sought to set the October 7 attack in historical context, as any serious scholar should. Finkelstein wrote “these are not unprovoked attacks. Any form of resistance is evacuated of historical context and framed by Israel and the US as terrorist attacks.”

The second offense that the petition laid out is just as absurd. It charged Finkelstein with “classroom bias, hate speech, and targeted aggression to Jewish students,” and cites, as its only evidence, an email in which Finkelstein again reiterated that the October 7 attack emerged out of history: “There is no doubt that Saturday’s surprise attacks are devastating. We must mourn all civilian deaths... But we cannot mourn without also acknowledging the fact that Israel is a settler colonial state.”

Finkelstein’s email aimed not to encourage hate, but to open a discussion with her students. “Muhlenberg can be a hard space to talk openly about and grieve Palestine and Palestinians. Please know there are safe spaces on campus—feel free to reach out to me if you need to.” It is notable in this regard that Allentown, where Muhlenberg College is located, is home to large Arab and Palestinian populations.

Finally, the third charge leveled against Finkelstein was something that she didn’t even do. The alleged “cyberbullying” she was “enabling” consisted of

Finkelstein's partner, Zein Murib, responding to commenters on Finkelstein's Instagram defending her against claims that she was spreading hate.

After the petition was created, Finkelstein reported that she and other faculty were sent thousands of bot-generated emails which consisted of harassment and calling for her to be removed for her views.

These right-wing, Zionist attacks on Finkelstein were soon backed by the Biden-Harris administration.

In January of this year, letters from the US Department of Education were sent to various universities detailing intent to open investigations over rampant "antisemitism" on the campuses via Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Muhlenberg, along with a number of other universities, received these letters.

The letters came in the aftermath of the forced resignations of University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill, Harvard President Claudine Gay and congressional grilling of Massachusetts Institute of Technology President Sally Kornbluth after the Biden Administration, with the full-backing of Republicans, launched a witch-hunt against them for allegedly failing to curtail "antisemitism" on their campuses.

In mid-December of 2023, a civil rights complaint was filed with the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights which accused Finkelstein of discrimination against the anonymous filer. The complaint makes no reference to anything that Finkelstein did or said in the classroom or on campus. The individual who made the complaint was not even one of Finkelstein's students. Nor does the complaint cite any actual instances of discrimination. Absurdly, the only description of alleged discrimination it provides is a link to the Zionist Change.org petition! A single sentence follows: "The link above provides full context for all that Maura has done."

Rather than tossing out the obviously frivolous complaint, this single, dubious charge provided the Department of Education the bogus grounds to open an investigation into Muhlenberg via Title VI.

Around a week after Muhlenberg received the letter from the Department of Education, college administrators abruptly suspended Finkelstein from her position, causing confusion and anger among her students who were given no notice that she was to be removed or that she was under investigation. Finkelstein was afforded no opportunity to answer the charges against her before this removal. She was simply "disappeared" from her classroom.

Her firing in May also came without any semblance of due process, focusing on a social media post that Finkelstein made in January. Finkelstein's post called for "shaming Zionists, not welcoming them into your spaces, making them

feel uncomfortable, not normalizing Zionists, calling them racists, and not allowing Zionists to take up space." This public statement distinguishes between Zionists—right-wing Israeli nationalists who justify the mass extermination of Palestinians—and Jewish people. Again, it must be noted that Finkelstein is herself Jewish.

The decision to fire Finkelstein was taken by a college committee handpicked by Muhlenberg administrators. Once again, she was not allowed to bear witness in her own defense. The panel released a letter on May 8 which determined that her Instagram post constituted grounds for her termination from the college. Finkelstein attempted to appeal the decision, but her appeal was rejected out of hand.

In an email to *Inside Higher Ed*, Finkelstein explained that "I wasn't fired for anything I said in the classroom." She continued:

I was fired because of a charge brought by a student I had never met, let alone taught, who had been surveying my social media account for months. This isn't about student safety, this is about silencing dissent. *We are witnessing a new McCarthyism and we should all be terrified of its implications.* [emphasis added]

Students at universities across the country have been attacked by police and arrested for their vocal opposition to the genocide in Gaza. At the University of Michigan, 11 students are facing charges from the state of Michigan for participating in a pro-Palestine protest. Cornell University international student and graduate instructor Momodou Taal is now being threatened with suspension and deportation for participating in a peaceful protest against the Gaza genocide.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) unequivocally denounces the firing of Finkelstein and demands that she be immediately reinstated. The defense of Professor Finkelstein, and other targeted academics and students, must be taken into the working class, the only social force capable of stopping the genocide and the descent into world war.



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