

Harris holds rally at Muhlenberg College in wake of firing of professor for speaking out against Palestinian genocide

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Democratic Party presidential nominee Kamala Harris visited Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania on Monday on the final day of the 2024 US election campaign. The venue was clearly chosen as a political signal of the candidate's commitment to support Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Muhlenberg College has been ground zero for the systematic assault initiated on basic democratic rights in the wake of mass protests that began last year against the Israeli government's war on the Palestinians.

Earlier this year, the college terminated Maura Finkelstein, a tenured professor of anthropology, for speaking out against the genocide of the Palestinian people on her personal social media account.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote previously, Finkelstein's removal "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."

Finkelstein's case has begun to gain national attention following the release of a Department of Justice email detailing the flimsy nature of the various complaints which led to the teacher's termination. Several articles have appeared in the national media following the WSW's lengthy interview with Finkelstein in which she defended her anti-Zionist views.

Harris, speaking from Muhlenberg's auditorium, predictably said nothing about any of this. Over the weekend, Harris had visited Michigan for her campaign. While she avoided speaking in predominantly Arab American cities such as Dearborn

and Hamtramck in the Detroit area, she was compelled to give verbal acknowledgement of the mass suffering in Gaza, while promising nothing.

In Pennsylvania, the Democratic candidate gladly dropped this charade. Her appearance was not geared toward making any statements in defense of democratic rights, but in effect lent her campaign's stamp of approval to the college's effort to banish Finkelstein and other opponents of genocide.

Harris's speech, book-ended by banal declarations featured in her various other appearances, called on audience members to fight for the "ideals of America," without explaining what those were. She also did not say how it would be possible to do so under conditions in which freedom of speech was being extinguished on college campuses in the United States with the approval of the Democratic administration in which she is second in command.

In her remarks, Harris praised Democratic Governor Josh Shapiro, who has threatened Pennsylvania schools for alleged weakness in confronting student protesters.

Some of the most vicious attacks on school protests have occurred in Pennsylvania, including the removal of University of Pennsylvania's president Liz Magill for her perceived failure to crack down on protests. The most recent is the effort to administratively remove Philadelphia high school teacher Keziah Ridgeway for letting her students create a pro-Palestinian school exhibit.

Harris's speech continued the candidate's policy of praising and fawning over Republican Party officials who have shown support for her campaign. She praised "Republicans who never voted for a Democrat before," but would do so with Harris because they had decided

to “put the Constitution over party.”

As the WSWS has frequently noted, Republican war hawks such as former congresswoman Liz Cheney and her father, former Vice President Dick Cheney, are not endorsing Harris out of love for the Constitution. Instead they do so because they think she would be more reliable than Trump in conducting wars with American imperialism’s main rivals, Russia, China and Iran.

In fact, Democratic President Joe Biden and Harris as vice president have been attacking constitutional rights in lockstep with the most right-wing and fascistic forces. Muhlenberg itself has been the target of the Department of Education’s witch-hunting of pro-Palestinian groups, initiated at the urging of far-right groups aligned with Trump and the Republican Party.

In spring, the Biden White House published an official statement, denouncing the wave of peaceful anti-genocide protests for “shutting down campuses, forcing the cancellation of classes and graduations.” He declared there “should be no place on any campus, no place in America for antisemitism or threats of violence against Jewish students.” This was followed by an official policy document on countering “antisemitism.”

The attacks on students are mirrored by the growing efforts to intimidate and punish faculty for their opposition. An article in the *New York Times* last month notes, “Attempts to discipline scholars have been rising, to 145 a year in 2022, from four a year in 2000, as education has become more polarized.”

Harris’s visit to Allentown is part of a whirlwind series of campaign stops, culminating in an election night rally in Philadelphia, before Harris visits her alma mater, Howard University in Washington D.C. That the final leg of campaigning included Allentown, a part of the heavily industrialized Lehigh Valley, is not insignificant.

The Biden administration has regularly focused on the Lehigh Valley, of which Allentown is the largest population center. In 2021, Biden visited following the defeat of the 2021 Volvo Trucks strike, which the president collaborated with the United Auto Workers union to isolate and break. Since that time, Biden has sought to heavily involve the trade union leadership in its plans to sell its military foreign policy, even dubbing the trade unions his “domestic NATO.” Significantly, Harris also pointed to a UAW representative in the

audience at her Allentown speech.

Conversations the WSWS held with students at Muhlenberg confirmed the essentially anti-democratic reign of terror which had prepared the way for Harris to speak. Students told WSWS reporters that anyone seeking to talk about the Gaza genocide there had to “walk on eggshells,” because of the atmosphere of repression.

Several students remarked sarcastically that Harris’s visit had upended their class schedule, providing the same “disruption” which was the supposed pretext for the crackdown on protests.

While Harris visited Muhlenberg College to solidarize herself with the attacks on pro-Palestinian free speech, she has made no attempt to make a speaking engagement at a predominantly Arab American location.

Her refusal to give even a perfunctory nod to anti-genocide political views has allowed the fascist Trump campaign to make a cynical appeal to the popular opposition that exists in Arab American neighborhoods. Over the weekend, Trump visited a Dearborn halal food cafe in order to proclaim that if he is elected, “You’re going to have peace in the Middle East.”



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