

Norman Finkelstein, opponent of Zionist crimes against Palestinians, speaks at University of Michigan

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On February 8, political scientist Norman Finkelstein, an opponent and chronicler of the crimes of Zionism and the Israeli state, spoke at the University of Michigan (U-M) in Ann Arbor. The discussion, titled “Free Gaza, Free Speech,” was sponsored by the U-M Law Students for Justice in Palestine.

On relatively short notice, the event drew an engaged audience of around 500 people from across a broad spectrum, including students, workers and community members, both young and old. On multiple occasions, attendees cheered when Finkelstein denounced the role of the Democratic Party and the Biden administration in fully backing the genocide with bombs, money and political and diplomatic support, as well as in overseeing the anti-free speech crackdown on pro-Palestinian protests on college campuses.

The biggest applause came when Finkelstein commented:

President Biden paved the way for this moment... 92 percent of buildings in Gaza are gone or badly damaged, there is 50 million tons of rubble. Who created that? I loathe the man, but was that Trump? Did Biden defend academic freedom at any point? No.

Finkelstein also denounced the slander that support for the Palestinians and opposition to genocide was evidence of antisemitism, saying this was a fraudulent pretext to attack the protests.

The event as a whole reflected broad popular anger and deep disgust over the normalization of genocide and the role of the entire political system and the corporate media in promoting it.

Finkelstein, the son of Holocaust survivors, has been the target of right-wing attacks over the last two decades for his principled opposition to and consistent exposure of the crimes of the Israeli regime and its imperialist backers against the Palestinians.

Last month, members of Betar, a fascist Zionist tendency originally founded by Ze'ev Jabotinsky, recorded themselves as they physically threatened Finkelstein while he was walking

in New York City.

Finkelstein is best known for his 2000 book *The Holocaust Industry*, which argued that the Holocaust has been exploited to support Israel and its role as an attack dog for US imperialism in the region. He also wrote valuable criticisms of Daniel Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, which argues that the cause of the Holocaust lay in the inherent antisemitism of the German people as a whole.

In 2005, he published *Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History*, which presented an extensive critique of arguments that justify Israeli oppression of the Palestinians. This included a lengthy exposure of falsifications published in right-wing Zionist attorney Alan Dershowitz's *The Case for Israel*. Dershowitz, in turn, waged a filthy legal campaign against Finkelstein that played a key role in DePaul University denying him tenure as professor in September 2007.

In May 2008, in a blatant attack on democratic rights, Finkelstein was detained and interrogated in a Tel Aviv airport while traveling to the West Bank. He was deported and issued a 10-year ban on entering Israel.

Most of the 14 books that Finkelstein has published involve a careful review of the violations of human rights, diplomatic agreements and international laws by Israel and its backers over the past three decades. His 2018 book *Gaza: An Inquest Into Its Martyrdom* examined three violent and illegal Israeli military attacks on Gaza between 2008 and 2014 and their connection to the whitewashing of Israeli crimes and violations.

At U-M, an ideological and political stronghold of the Democratic Party, protests have been relentlessly attacked and suppressed by the Board of Regents, the administration and the Democratic attorney general. In the summer of 2024, the U-M administration revised its student code of conduct to interpret virtually any protest action on campus as “disruptive” behavior. This has been accompanied by the first ever banning of a legacy student club, the Students Allied for Freedom and Equality (SAFE), affiliated with Students for Justice in Palestine, as well as the filing of criminal charges against 14 student protestors by Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel.

In the course of his remarks, Finkelstein said of the repression of anti-genocide protesters at U-M and on campuses across the country, “What took place this past spring involved the biggest attack on academic freedom in US history.”

He criticized the impact of what he referred to as “woke culture”—criticisms that are taken up in depth in his 2023 book *I’ll Burn That Bridge When I Get to It! Heretical Thoughts on Identity Politics, Cancel Culture, and Academic Freedom*. In general, Finkelstein criticized the right-wing character of identity politics and the way its proponents have used extralegal “MeToo”-style allegations to pursue political goals. He noted at one point that “woke culture colluded with the Democratic Party to attack genuine left politics... it has nothing to do with left politics.”

“The attacks on academic freedom were obscured by the skewering of language by the left and later adopted by the right” he told the audience. He continued:

The impact of “woke culture” in academia was to put limits on freedom of speech... using the criteria of “Does this speech make me feel unsafe? Does it make me feel unwanted? Does it make me feel uncomfortable?” If you can tick these boxes, then you are allowed to limit the speech.

He added:

Thus, as usual, when you start infringing on free speech, the rich and powerful move in to exploit that to their advantage... Billionaire Jewish supremacists like Bill Ackman at Harvard get a section of Jewish students to say they “feel unsafe” around protest slogans like “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free”... and they used this as the means to attack the protests.

He commented on the “McCarthy-like” atmosphere of congressional hearings at which university presidents were brought before far-right members of Congress in the spring 2024, which ultimately led to the ouster of the presidents of the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard and Columbia.

“None of them,” he said, “even mentioned the words ‘academic freedom,’ which historically would have been the first words you invoked.” He spent some time reviewing the history of academic freedom, attributing its defense to the efforts of “socialists, communists, anarchists and those in the workers’ movement historically.”

At multiple points he called for the defense of immigrants under attack from the Trump administration. He ended the meeting by calling for a renewed defense of freedom speech,

connected with the defense of the Palestinian people.

Finkelstein’s exposure of the crimes of Zionism, his defense of democratic rights, and his criticism of identity politics from the left are courageous and principled. At the same time, his presentation revealed the limitations of his political perspective.

Essentially, his opposition remains within the framework of middle-class protest politics. He does not see or present the historic crimes against the Palestinians as one expression of a global breakdown of the capitalist system, in which United States imperialism seeks to offload its own existential crisis by turning to global economic and military war and to dictatorship and fascism at home.

Above all, he does not see the working class as an independent force being driven into mass struggles that have the potential to avert fascism, barbarism and nuclear war if provided a socialist program and revolutionary leadership. In the course of his more than hour-long remarks, he made no significant reference to the working class and the mass opposition it will mount to Trump’s policies of dictatorship and impoverishment at one pole and ever greater wealth for the oligarchs at the other.

This makes Finkelstein vulnerable to illusions in left-talking Democratic frauds such as Bernie Sanders, to whom he referred a several points as an embodiment of the “historic genuine left.”

Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at U-M spoke with attendees outside of the event and distributed *World Socialist Web Site* articles calling for the defense of the Palestinian people, immigrants and student protesters based on a turn to the working class and the building of committees in workplaces, schools, universities and neighborhoods in defense of democratic rights, and the fight for a socialist and internationalist program.



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