

Harvard files suit against Trump funding freeze

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On Monday, Harvard University filed a lawsuit against the Trump administration, demanding a federal court block the government's attempt "to gain control of academic decision-making" at the oldest institution of higher learning in the United States.

The lawsuit names as defendants Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the Health and Human Services secretary; Linda McMahon, the Department of Education secretary; Stephen Etkin, acting administrator of the General Services Administration; Pam Bondi, US Attorney General; Pete Hegseth, Secretary of Defense and several other key Trump administration officials.

Harvard's 51-page complaint to the US District Court for the District of Massachusetts states that the White House has violated the First Amendment by seeking to coerce the university and control what faculty can teach students. The lawsuit states in its introduction:

The First Amendment does not permit the Government to "interfere with private actors' speech to advance its own vision of ideological balance," ... nor may the Government "rely[] on the 'threat of invoking legal sanctions and other means of coercion ... to achieve the suppression' of disfavored speech," ... The Government's attempt to coerce and control Harvard disregards these fundamental First Amendment principles, which safeguard Harvard's "academic freedom."

Harvard's complaint says therefore the Trump administration's decision to freeze over \$2.2 billion in research grants and a threat of an additional \$1 billion in government funding are unlawful. The White House has justified these actions by accusing Harvard of failing to respond to "antisemitism" on campus—meaning not cracking down hard enough on opposition among students, faculty and staff to the genocide in Gaza—and for opposing Trump's directives to change admissions and diversity policies. The complaint argues that these measures are an abuse of executive authority.

In an accompanying letter to the Harvard community, university President Alan Garber said that government's cuts of more than \$3 billion—along with "numerous investigations" of the university's operations, threats against international students and

threat to revoke its tax-exempt status—"have stark real-life consequences for patients, students, faculty, staff, researchers, and the standing of American higher education in the world."

As he had done in his statement of April 14 that preceded the White House announcement of funding cuts, Garber emphasized that the administration's demands threaten academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

Furthermore, the Harvard lawsuit spells out that the actions taken by the Trump administration violate the terms of the government's funding agreement with the university. As the complaint states:

Under whatever name, the Government has ceased the flow of funds to Harvard as part of its pressure campaign to force Harvard to submit to the Government's control over its academic programs. That, in itself, violates Harvard's constitutional rights. But the Government has also failed to engage in the statutorily mandated process Congress required under Title VI before funds are cut off, which provides independent grounds for declaring the freeze unlawful.

Lastly, Harvard's complaint argues that the government

cannot identify any rational connection between antisemitism concerns and the medical, science, technological and other research it has frozen that aims to save American lives.

The Harvard lawsuit highlights an emerging conflict between major US universities and the fascist agenda of the Trump administration. The attack on Harvard is part of an across-the-board attack on universities which the White House has accused of being overrun by "radical Left and Marxist maniacs."

Beginning on April 3, the Trump administration intensified its effort to effect a rightward shift in college and university policies and curriculum, by freezing funds and demanding the elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) measures on campuses as part of its rampage against all democratic rights.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has analyzed, the Harvard

administration's claim to be leading the fight against Trump is contradicted by its accommodation to the government's conflation of pro-Palestinian and anti-Gaza genocide protests with "antisemitism" that began under the Biden administration and has intensified after Trump returned to the White House in January 2025.

As we have explained, the disgraceful capitulation of other academic institutions, such as Columbia University, to the blackmail of the Trump administration has produced a backlash among students and faculty who have demanded that Harvard take a stand against Trump. Trump's campus goon squad led by Leo Terrell, Senior Counsel to the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, has emerged as a central figure in the assault on academic freedom.

Terrell leads the Department of Justice's "Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism," which was established in February 2025 to address "antisemitic" incidents on college campuses. His task force has gone after leading universities, including Harvard, and embraced lawsuits filed by students who accused Harvard of "deliberate indifference" to antisemitic harassment on campus.

In March 2025, in an entirely predictable manner, Terrell was known to have shared a blatantly antisemitic social media post from a known white supremacist aimed at Democratic Party Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's Jewish identity. Despite Terrell's involvement in the promotion of actual antisemitism, he continues to be a leading figure in the Trump administration's efforts to attack educational institutions for failing to effectively suppress pro-Palestinian speech on campuses across the country.

According to an article in the student publication the *Harvard Crimson*, numerous legal experts expect that Harvard's claims are likely to hold up in court. For example, Michael J. Gerhardt, a professor at University of North Carolina School of Law, called the Trump administration's demands "egregiously illegal."

Gerhardt said:

The Trump administration is disproportionately penalizing Harvard for whatever it thinks Harvard has done wrong, but the remedies and sanctions that the administration has sought are themselves outrageous.

Meanwhile, on Tuesday, a statement signed by 190 university leaders across the US, including Harvard President Garber, denounced "unprecedented government overreach and political interference" in higher education. The statement, published by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU), calls for a "constructive engagement" with the White House that would avoid putting research and academic pursuits in peril.

Once again, both the assumption that court decisions will prevent Donald Trump's attempt to establish a dictatorship in the US—modeled on Adolf Hitler and the German Nazis—and the idea that universities can "engage" with the fascist in the White House, are in large measure the product of the integration of major universities such as Harvard with the US government and the military-intelligence apparatus of US imperialism.

explained by the *World Socialist Web Site* on April 15, As

Garber and the administrators who preside over these institutions are operating under immense pressure, as the government's billion-dollar extortion attempt reveals, and—as noted above—would like, if they can, to reach a deal.

However, these are issues over which no compromise or conciliation is possible. The fate of intellectual life and the democratic rights of the population hang in the balance. The attacks on students and faculty, including the abduction of foreign students for opposing the Gaza genocide, coincide with the hammering of living standards by inflation, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of federal workers' jobs and the assault on Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare, all of which threaten to further impoverish wide layers of the population.

The fight against Trump and the rest of the fascist forces cannot be waged successfully apart from the broadest popular mobilization.

The working class must come forward in defense of the students and the rights to freedom of thought, speech and assembly. The universities and the knowledge they contain are the heritage of—and a resource that belongs to or should belong to—the entire working population. It has a critical stake in this. Workers cannot allow the cultural vandals infesting the White House, relentless promoters of everything backward and ignorant, to destroy such institutions.

There is no way to defeat the menace of dictatorship without getting to the core of the problem—the capitalist system, with its vast social inequality and oligarchic rule. The fight to defend democratic rights is a struggle that transcends the boundaries of Harvard Yard and other universities and colleges.

In the final analysis, the defense of all democratic rights is inseparably bound up with the struggle against the capitalist system. The oligarchy that rules society cannot tolerate freedom of speech and the exercise of critical thought. It understands all too well that the power of reason, when exercised without restraint, will lead to the conclusion that capitalism is incompatible with the needs of modern society and must be ended and replaced with socialism.



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