

Hundreds sign open letter defending professor

University of Michigan president attacks Faculty Senate chair for opposing Israel's war on Gaza

Stephen St. Clair
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Following the University of Michigan's commencement ceremony on May 2, U-M President Domenico Grasso publicly attacked outgoing Faculty Senate Chair Derek Peterson for remarks opposing the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza. "Sing for the pro-Palestinian student activists," Peterson told the graduates, "who have over these past two years opened our hearts to the injustice and inhumanity of Israel's war in Gaza."

Within hours, the university removed the entire video of the commencement ceremony from its website, and Grasso issued a statement reprimanding Peterson. Grasso wrote:

At today's U-M spring commencement ceremony, our outgoing Faculty Senate Chair made remarks regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict that were hurtful and insensitive to many members of our community. We regret the pain this has caused on a day devoted to celebration and accomplishment. For this, the university apologizes.

The Faculty Senate Chair deviated from the remarks he had shared before the ceremony. The Chair's comments were inappropriate and do not represent our institutional position. Nor do they represent the diversity of views across our entire faculty.

This is an act of censorship and a blatant attack on freedom of speech. In seeking to muzzle Peterson, Grasso is defending the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The immediate backlash to Grasso's authoritarian decree indicates broad support for Professor Peterson. Over 1,500 students, faculty and staff have signed an open letter denouncing Grasso and defending Peterson. A separate alumni letter with over 750 signatures is also circulating. The main letter declares:

Nothing in Professor Peterson's statement warrants any apology. To the contrary, it is President Grasso's statement for which the University should apologize. ... Many members of

our community have family members who have been killed, whose houses have been destroyed, and whose lives have been transformed by Israel's conduct of the war in Gaza. President Grasso has now told these members of our community that their perspective on this issue is so out of bounds that the University should apologize for its even having been expressed. We can think of little the University could do that is more "hurtful and insensitive" to the deep moral commitments and expressions of these community members.

According to the official figures of the Palestinian authorities, 72,615 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed and 172,400 injured, the vast majority of casualties being civilians, largely women and children. U.N. Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese has cited estimates suggesting the real death toll could be as high as 680,000. Of that estimate, some researchers suggest 380,000 could be children under five.

The United Nations and other international bodies have condemned Israel for targeting and destroying schools, hospitals, homes and other essential civilian infrastructure. The International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant for crimes against humanity. The International Court of Justice has repeatedly ordered a halt to Israeli operations.

Zionist settler attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank have surged in 2026. In Lebanon, the latest Israeli offensive, launched in tandem with the criminal US-Israeli war against Iran, has resulted in 2,700 dead and 8,300 injured, with over a million people displaced from their homes.

Grasso's cynical excuse that he is protecting the sensibilities of members of the U-M community who are offended by Peterson's remarks has become the standard justification for shutting down anti-genocide opposition and defending the Israeli state and Zionists on and off campus. The underlying slander in such statements is the lie that opposition to Israeli mass murder and Zionist ethno-nationalism equals antisemitism.

Grasso's attack on Peterson is not an aberration. Grasso was appointed interim president in May, 2025 after Santa Ono resigned to unsuccessfully pursue employment at the University of Florida.

Grasso has accelerated Ono's persecution of Gaza genocide protesters.

In March 2024, when students held peaceful "die-in" protests, the administration issued trespass citations and building bans. When students established a solidarity encampment on campus in May of 2024, the university sent riot police to violently clear it, resulting in four arrests and multiple injuries. When the Students Allied for Freedom and Equality continued organizing, the university banned it in January, 2025—the first suspension of a legacy student organization in U-M's history.

In April, 2025, FBI raids targeted the homes of student protesters. Democratic Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel brought felony charges against protesters that were dropped after popular opposition in May 2025. In October 2025, the administration brought disciplinary charges against a new group of protesters. It deployed plainclothes private investigators to surveil and harass students on and off campus, trailing protesters to cafes and bars and secretly recording their conversations.

Despite this history of repression, there has been no protest from the campus trade unions regarding Grasso's latest actions. The Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO), which covers 2,300 graduate student workers, has said nothing, even while engaging in negotiations after its contract expired on May 1.

Grasso's defense of the Gaza genocide is inseparable from his collaboration with the Trump administration and the Democratic Party in the witch-hunting of Chinese scientists. This xenophobic campaign is part of Washington's war preparations against China and Trump's drive to establish a presidential dictatorship. Five U-M researchers—Yunqing Jian, Chengxuan Han, Xu Bai, Fengfan Zhang and Zhiyong Zhangù—as well as Youhuang Xiang at Indiana University, were arrested on trumped-up federal charges of conspiracy and smuggling. They were accused of terrorism by top administration officials, such as FBI Director Kash Patel and then-Attorney General Pam Bondi, held without bail for months and ultimately deported.

On March 19, Danhao Wang, a 30-year-old Chinese postdoctoral research scientist at U-M, jumped to his death from an upper floor within the G.G. Brown Laboratory building the day after he was interrogated by federal agents. It has been seven weeks since Wang's death, and Grasso and U-M have said nothing to the broader U-M community. Under conditions of government persecution and institutional betrayal, the suicide of Danhao Wang takes on the character of a social murder.

A week after Wang's death, Grasso testified before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce at a hearing titled "US Universities Under Siege: Foreign Espionage, Stolen Innovation, and the National Security Threat." Grasso described his active support for the anti-Chinese campaign, declaring:

As an engineer and an army veteran, who currently holds a top secret security clearance, I'm deeply committed to protecting our nation's security. ... This commitment is illustrated by our decision to end a relationship with a university in China that is seen as a potential threat to America's interests. We made this decision after discussion with this committee and the House Select Committee on the CCP (Chinese Communist Party).

He boasted of terminating the visas of Chinese researchers at U-M, making them subject to deportation:

In isolated but serious incidents, a small number of university students and researchers from China have been arrested for unlawful activities. ... Once alerted, we acted swiftly and decisively—working with federal law enforcement, promptly terminating student and work visas, and severing all ties with those individuals.

With these words Grasso expressed his contempt for basic democratic principles, such as due process and the presumption of innocence.

The Trump administration has rewarded the University of Michigan for its complicity. U-M was added to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's revamped program to train officers and is partnering with Los Alamos National Laboratory to build a \$1.25 billion military and nuclear weapons research data center in neighboring Ypsilanti. U-M receives \$100 million in annual support from the Pentagon for 414 active projects.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at U-M is calling for:

? The immediate resignation of President Domenico Grasso.

? An end to all collaboration between the university and the US military and intelligence agencies.

? An end to the witch-hunt against Chinese scientists and reparations to those already targeted, jailed, and deported.

? A full, independent investigation into the suicide of Danhao Wang.

However, replacing one administrator with another will not change the fundamental class dynamic. A ruling class plunging headlong into global war cannot tolerate democratic rights at home.

The fight to defend free speech, stop the genocide and end the persecution of Chinese scholars requires a turn to the only social force capable of halting the war machine: the international working class. The root cause of war, inequality and dictatorship is the capitalist system itself. The choice facing humanity is between socialism or world war and fascist barbarism.

We urge youth and students who oppose the genocide in Gaza and the suppression of democratic rights on campus to join the IYSSE.



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