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Palestine solidarity

# How being pro-Palestine got a professor fired

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**The campaign to defend academic freedom for Steven Salaita is part of a struggle for the rights of all workers, explains Bill Mullen, a professor of English and American Studies at Purdue University and one of the organizers of the push to get the American Studies Association to vote to honor the academic and cultural boycott of Israeli institutions.**

Steven Salaita a leading Arab-American scholar and tireless public critic of Israeli racism and colonialism, was notified in early August that he had been fired from his new job at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (UIUC) "before he even set foot in a classroom.

The reason? Salaita's angry tweets denouncing Israeli atrocities committed during the month-long bombing of Gaza that killed nearly 2,000 Palestinians and wounded some 10,000 more.

Salaita had already resigned his position at Virginia Tech University after signing a contract to begin work as associate professor of American Indian Studies at UIUC. Then he was notified by UIUC Chancellor Phyllis Wise and Christophe Pierre, vice president for academic affairs, that he was fired.

The egregious assault on Salaita's First Amendment rights, academic freedom and right to due process generated a storm of outrage, anger and condemnation. The Campus Faculty Association of the University of Illinois came to Salaita's defense, sending a publicly posted letter to University Chancellor Phyllis Wise which demanded that he be reinstated.

For years, Zionism has been a potent ideological and political force on U.S. university campuses. Groups like the David Project and AMCHA Initiative have conducted dirty wars of harassment and intimidation against pro-Palestine faculty and students, who have grown increasingly bold in their criticism of Israeli apartheid and settler-colonialism.

What you can do

Sign the change.org petition demanding that Steven Salaita be given his job back. [here](#)

Send an e-mail expressing your support for Steven Salaita to UIUC Chancellor Phyllis Wise. Copy your e-mail to the chair of American Indian Studies Robert Warrior.

Salaita, the most recent victim of such a war, is the author of six books, a regular contributor to ElectronicIntifada.net and a featured speaker at this year's Socialism 2014 conference last June in Chicago.

UIUC's action came after right-wing news site The Daily Caller published an article denouncing Salaita's tweets. The executive director of the Simon Weisenthal Center also sent a letter to University of Illinois President Robert Easter calling Salaita a "baseless anti-Semite."

On August 7, the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) issued a blistering attack on UIUC and a strong defense of Salaita. "An attempt by university officials to repress or penalize speech on a matter of public concern such as Israel/Palestine because of disagreement with its message is impermissible 'viewpoint discrimination,' a serious First Amendment violation," wrote Baher Azmy, CCR Legal Director.

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One day later, Palestine Solidarity Legal Support and the National Lawyers Guild of Chicago compared the university's firing of Salaita to the McCarthy-era witch-hunts directed against left-wing academics. The letter also noted that the dismissal is part of an ongoing campaign to harass and intimidate scholars, such as Palestinian Professor Rabab Abdulhadi at San Francisco State University, who has been targeted by AMCHA.

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To be sure, Salaita's 140-character tweets, issued in the midst of Israel's savage bombing of Gaza, are furious and provocative. And since it's impossible to make a fully developed point in such a short space, pro-Israel critics have seized on a few statements in an effort to claim that Salaita is "anti-Semitic" — even though it's clear his criticisms are directed at the policies of Israel and the war crimes it committed in Gaza.

Both the national American Association of University Professors (AAUP, one of the two largest unions in higher education in the U.S.) and the union's Illinois chapter have also come to Salaita's defense, pointing out that Salaita's use of social media was protected under AAUP guidelines for faculty activity and academic freedom.

This full-throated defense of Salaita by the AAUP was a slap in the face to past AAUP President Cary Nelson. Nelson, an ardent defender of Israel, began a public campaign to attacks scholars associated with the American Studies Association (ASA) vote last December to boycott Israeli universities. Salaita was one of the scholars who helped lead that campaign. University of Illinois Chancellor Phyllis Wise, who fired Salaita, also rejected the ASA boycott vote.

When Salaita's firing was announced, Nelson said that the administration of UIUC, where he is emeritus professor of English, had done the right thing. Nelson claimed that Salaita lacked the "civility" or collegiality to work at the institution. Such charges of incivility are regularly used to academics whose dissident opinions strike out at discrimination and marginalization by the establishment guardians of the Ivory Tower.

Nelson's attacks were barely concealed attempts to smear, bully and intimidate scholars critical of Israel. To their credit, the AAUP official statements defending Salaita distanced themselves from this bombast.

As of this writing, Salaita has retained lawyers to represent him. More than 13,000 people have signed a change.org petition demanding that he be re-hired. Hundreds, if not thousands, have written e-mails and made phone calls to Chancellor Wise, making the same demand.

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SALAITA'S CASE is a watershed moment for Palestine solidarity within the academy. The wave of legal, political and popular support he has received marks a challenge to years of Zionist intimidation against scholars and students supportive of the Palestinian people.

The support for Salaita's pro-Palestine politics also reflects the growing strength of the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement in the U.S. The organizing collective of the United States Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (USACBI) is among the groups that have issued public defenses of Salaita.

Salaita's backing is also a carry-over from the groundswell of mass protests against Israel's ongoing killings in Gaza. An already mobilized Palestinian solidarity network in the U.S. turned its attention to Salaita's case the day his firing was announced at the Inside Higher Ed website.

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Salaita's firing also exposes increasing bureaucratic intimidation and harassment by university administrators, which is intended as a measure to divide and discipline both faculty and students. University of Illinois at Chicago Prof. Lennard Davis, who last year helped lead a faculty strike, has written that Salaita's unilateral firing by top administrators reflects a weakening of faculty governance that is part of the "continuing fallout from the corporatization of the American university."

Faculty at UIUC, unlike graduate employees, are not collectively organized. "Is it merely coincidental that the administration at Urbana was emboldened to tamper with a departmental appointment because it knew it would not face organized faculty opposition?" asked Davis. "Would a union have made a difference?"

The most important political lesson to be drawn from the case of Steven Salaita is that any worker in the United States can be fired for what they put on Facebook or Twitter. This is especially true for workers of color, women, immigrants, LGBT workers and now especially in a time of Israeli occupation and the war in Gaza---Arab and Arab-American workers. Bosses looking for new ways to divide and discipline employees will not hesitate to go outside the office to run their own dirty wars.

In the very same week Salaita was fired for his tweets against the massacre in Gaza, the New Israel Fund reported that dozens of Palestinian citizens of Israel had been fired from their jobs for voicing their opposition to the war through social media.

Only international working-class solidarity with Palestinian self-determination can defeat Israeli Zionism and bring down the last settler-colonial state on earth. Only workers united in the fight to control of our destinies can keep the bosses off our backs and out of our computers.

Steven Salaita must have his job back. Our job is to stand with him.

[Socialist Worker](#)

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