

Violations of Academic Freedom in the U.S. - University of Illinois Fires Professor for Criticizing Israel

Steven Salaita's Academic Lynching

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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Criticizing Israel is the third rail in American politics, the major media and academia.

Cynthia McKinney twice lost her congressional seat in 2002 and 2006. Supporting Palestinian rights was costly.

DePaul University denied Norman Finkelstein tenure for his outspokenness and books like "The Holocaust Industry."

It did so despite calling him "a prolific scholar and an outstanding teacher." It went further. It cancelled his classes.

It placed him on administrative leave. He became persona non grata. He resigned following his academic lynching.

Bard College fired Joel Kovel for writing "Overcoming Zionism" and comments like calling Israel "a machine for the manufacture of human rights abuses."

The University of Ottawa fired internationally recognized physics and environmental science expert Denis Rancourt.

He was a tenured professor. His students loved him. It didn't matter. Criticizing Israel cost him his job.

Injustice targeted other US and Canadian academics for the same reason. America's First Amendment and Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms don't matter.

Nor other rule of law principles. Or fairness. Or justice. Or other democratic values.

Dissent is an endangered species. Fundamental freedoms are fast disappearing.

Supporting Palestinian rights is verboten. Daring to criticize Israel virtually assures academic lynching. It's a career-ender for professors deserving much better.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-champaign (UIUC) fired Steven Salaita. He was Arab-American Professor of American Indian Studies.

On August 6, Inside Higher Ed said his job offer was “revoked.” He was “informed by Chancellor Phyllis Wise that the appointment would not go to the university’s board, and that he did not have a job to come to in Illinois...”

At issue were his Twitter comments about Israel before and during Operation Protective Edge.

A knowledgeable source said Salaita was fired. Documentation proved it. He resigned his Virginia Tech professorship.

Criticizing Israel cost him his job. UIUC at first remained silent.

On August 22, it shamelessly claimed Salaita’s firing was “not influenced in any way by his positions on the the conflict in the Middle East nor his criticism of Israel.”

UIUC Chancellor Phyllis Wise effectively attacked Salaita unjustly, saying:

“What we cannot and will not tolerate at the University of Illinois are personal and disrespectful words or actions that demean and abuse either viewpoints themselves or those who express them.”

“We have a particular duty to our students to ensure that they live in a community of scholarship that challenges their assumptions about the world but that also respects their rights as individuals.”

“As chancellor, it is my responsibility to ensure that all perspectives are welcome and that our discourse, regardless of subject matter or viewpoint, allows new concepts and differing points of view to be discussed in and outside the classroom in a scholarly, civil and productive manner.”

“A Jewish student, a Palestinian student, or any student of any faith or background must feel confident that personal views can be expressed and that philosophical disagreements with a faculty member can be debated in a civil, thoughtful and mutually respectful manner.”

“Most important, every student must know that every instructor recognizes and values that student as a human being.”

“If we have lost that, we have lost much more than our standing as a world-class institution of higher education.”

Salaita’s firing got over 3,000 scholars in numerous disciplines to boycott UIUC. They pledged not to visit Urbana-Champaign campus to lecture or attend conferences until he’s reinstated.

A general petition demanding reinstatement has over 16,000 signatures as of August 24. Salaita’s friends and colleagues began a supportive campaign, saying:

He “now has no job nor does his wife who quit her job in Virginia to support the family’s move, no personal home to live in, and no health insurance for their family, including their two year-old son.”

The Organizing Collective of the US Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (USACBI) expressed outrage over his firing.

It called doing so “a blatant violation of (his) academic freedom and an insidious assault upon him and those who uphold the right of honest and ethical critique in the academy.”

“We are gravely concerned about this attack on a leading scholar in Arab American studies and ethnic, indigenous, and American studies, whose brilliantly pathbreaking and highly prolific scholarship has put him at the forefront of these fields.”

USACBI called his firing “politically motivated.” It demanded “he be reinstated and allowed to continue with his academic pursuits and his teaching duties and that the university protect his rights to engage in political discourse on and off campus.”

UIUC’s American Studies Program faculty cast a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Wise.

On August 24, its web site said its “sentiment is based on Wise’s decision to effectively fire Prof. Steven Salaita, whose de facto hir(ing) had been properly vetted...and approved by the college through standard academic procedure.”

“This process culminated in the signing of a good-faith contract between Prof. Salaita and our college, and only awaited customary rubber-stamp approval by the UIUC Board of Trustees.”

“In clear disregard of basic principles of shared governance and unit autonomy, and without basic courtesy and respect for collegiality, Chancellor Wise did not consult American Indian Studies nor the college before making her decision.”

Her action is a clear First Amendment and academic freedom violation, AIS added.

On August 22, UIUC students staged a sit-in outside a Board of Trustees meeting. On Facebook, they demanded Salaita’s “immediate reinstatement as a tenured faculty member in the Department of American Indian Studies.”

“Full and fair compensation to Dr. Salaita for time missed during which he would otherwise have been working.”

“Immediate increased transparency in the faculty hiring process – as a public university. UIUC has the responsibility to make public all intended faculty changes as well as take public comment in regards to any change.”

A Tuesday follow-up action is planned. Expect others ahead. A supportstevensalaita.com web site was established.

“Fight Back!, it states.

“Help support Steven Salaita’s case against the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign for its unethical and unconstitutional firing of him only 3 weeks before his scheduled classes were to begin, for speaking out against war and violence on Twitter.”

Saliata was a tenured professor. He signed an October 2013 UIUC contract. He resigned his Virginia Tech position to do it.

Weeks before classes begin, he was told he no longer had a job. Among other reasons cited was a disingenuous claim about lacking Board of Trustees approval.

Interim College of Liberal Arts and Sciences dean, Brian Ross, wrote Salaita's job offer letter, saying:

"The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign offers a wonderfully supportive community, and it has always taken a high interest in its newcomers."

"I feel sure that your career can flourish here, and I hope earnestly that you will accept our invitation."

On August 25, [Mondoweiss](#) headlined "Salaita's hire set off fundraising alarm at U of Illinois, per emails to chancellor," saying:

Wise "was lobbied by 70 pro-Israel folks, including donors, who were upset by Salaita's comments on Twitter about Gaza."

UIUC "fundraisers were alarmed and sought a meeting with Wise."

Salaita was hired to teach American Indian Studies. No evidence suggests he's anti-Semitic.

He criticizes Israel justifiably. His Twitter comments said nothing about Jews. They're insightful, forthright and important. Examples include:

"Israel is a great example of how colonization impairs ethics and compels people to support shameful deeds in the name of atavistic ideals."

" Hamas is the biggest red herring in American political discourse since Saddam's 'weapons of mass destruction.' "

"When will the attack on Gaza end? What is left for Israel to prove? Who is left for Israel to kill? This is the logic of genocide."

" Hamas makes us do it! This logic isn't new. American settlers used it frequently in slaughtering and displacing Natives."

"Forget biting the hand. Israel just devoured Obama's arm to the shoulder blade."

"Pro Tip: when a majority of a state's prime ministers were born in another country, that state is a settler colony."

"Only Israel can murder around 300 children in the span of a few weeks and insist that it is the victim."

Salaita is the latest academic lynching victim for criticizing Israel justifiably. He won't be the last.

He deserves immediate reinstatement. An unequivocal apology from Chancellor Wise and

Board of Trustee members is warranted.

He's entitled to full compensation for pay and benefits lost. He merits more for pain and suffering.

Salaita has the courage of his convictions. He deserves universal support.

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