

The Firing of Steven Salaita: Palestine Solidarity & Academic Freedom

In Fall 2013, Professor Steven Salaita accepted a tenured faculty position in the American Indian Studies Program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) after a rigorous, year-long faculty hiring process. Relying on UIUC's contractual promise, Professor Salaita resigned from his tenured faculty position at Virginia Tech University. In August 2014, just two weeks before he was due to start work, UIUC informed Professor Salaita that it had terminated his appointment. He was not given an opportunity to object or be heard.

UIUC later stated that it acted based on Professor Salaita's speech: namely, a handful of tweets he posted on his personal Twitter account while watching the civilian death toll mount during Israel's Operation Protective Edge in Gaza in July 2014. The UIUC Chancellor and Board of Trustees said the University found the tone of the tweets "uncivil," but documents later obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests revealed that UIUC acted after major donors had complained about Professor Salaita's views and threatened to pull donations from the university if it did not terminate his appointment.

UIUC's firing of Professor Salaita violates his constitutional rights and tramples on long-cherished principles of academic freedom.

UIUC's retaliatory firing of a tenured professor in response to the viewpoints he expressed on a matter of public concern represents a serious violation of his constitutional right to free speech. Universities have historically been sites of rigorous political debate where dissent and disagreement are not only welcomed, but are at the heart of a campus climate that fosters new ideas. Historically, through writings, protests, boycott and divestment campaigns, as well as through media and, increasingly, social media, students and faculty have often been at the forefront of engaging with the world's most pressing issues, from challenging Jim Crow laws in the U.S. to apartheid in South Africa.

The U.S. Supreme Court has written that universities are "peculiarly the 'marketplace of ideas'" that must encourage critical thought and questioning of social and political orthodoxy. And during McCarthy-era censorship, the Supreme Court held that, "To impose any strait jacket upon the intellectual leaders in our colleges and universities would imperil the future of our Nation." Indeed, one of the three core principles of the American Association of University Professors' definitive *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*, which is widely accepted throughout academia and had been sent by UIUC to Professor Salaita with his job offer, is that professors are citizens and should be able to speak and write as citizens without "institutional censorship."

Perceived "incivility" is no cause for Professor Salaita's firing.

Concerns about the supposedly "uncivil" manner in which Professor Salaita expressed himself on Twitter are unlawful pretext. The Supreme Court has repeatedly rejected attempts to infringe on First Amendment rights due to a perceived offensive or harsh tone, recognizing that speech is often necessarily "vehement, caustic and sometimes unpleasant." UIUC's own Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure found that holding civility up as a standard of conduct conflicts with academic freedom. Professor Salaita has consistently received stellar student evaluations, including in the category of "concern and respect for students." UIUC's Director of Holocaust, Genocide and Memory Studies quashed any notion of antisemitism, stating "I strongly believe that neither Professor Salaita himself nor the tweets that are at issue are antisemitic." Tellingly, in 2012, UIUC took no action when a professor made racist comments at a gathering of white supremacists, and in 2010, UIUC reinstated a lecturer who had been terminated for making homophobic comments in an email to a student. The starkly different treatment of Salaita reveals that UIUC's real motivation was donor pressure to silence unpopular political speech.

This incident comes amidst increasing suppression of Palestine solidarity activities.

In 2014 alone, CCR's partner, [Palestine Solidarity Legal Support](#), documented over 230 cases of repression faced by those who advocate for Palestinian rights. The majority of those incidents occurred on college campuses, where students and faculty have been investigated and disciplined based on their speech.

Get Involved

UIUC's actions have been met with near universal condemnation, including statements by a number of prominent academic organizations, a 'no confidence' vote in the administration by 16 UIUC departments, and a growing boycott campaign endorsed by over 5000 academics.

Find out more about the case and the widespread support for Professor Salaita at <http://tinyurl.com/mv98mkm>. **Sign the petition** in support of his reinstatement at <http://tinyurl.com/ppn6mei>.

Academics can pledge to boycott UIUC at <http://bit.ly/1yyruLq>.

Students can organize to ensure that their own universities protect the right to dissent. See the **Know Your Rights Guide** at <http://tinyurl.com/otpgz2k>.