

Academic Freedom at SFSU
Submitted by the PSC International Committee

Whereas the responsibility of universities to safeguard academic freedom is foundational to higher education in the United States, widely recognized in governance plans, and established by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in its 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure;

Whereas the AAUP Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure cautioned in the 2007 statement Academic Freedom and Outside Speakers, “college and university administrators have displayed an increasing tendency to cancel or to withdraw funding for otherwise legitimate invitations to non-campus speakers. Committee A notes with concern that these reasons for canceling outside speakers are subject to serious abuse, and that their proper application should be limited to very narrow circumstances that only rarely obtain. Applied promiscuously, these reasons undermine the right of campus groups to hear outside speakers and thus contradict the basic educational mission of colleges and universities”;

Whereas on September 23, 2020, an open virtual class, “Whose Narratives? Gender, Justice & Resistance: A Conversation with Leila Khaled,” co-sponsored by San Francisco State University’s (SFSU) Arab and Muslim Ethnicities and Diasporas Studies Program and Women and Gender Studies Department, was cancelled at the last minute by Zoom, blocked by Facebook from livestream, and removed twice by YouTube;

Whereas the shutdown of the SFSU open virtual class on September 23, 2020, featuring international Black, Jewish, Zainichi and Palestinian public intellectuals and former prisoners Ronnie Kasrils, Laura Whitehorn, Sekou Odinga and Rula Abu Dahou, Rabab Abdulhadi and Tomomi Kinukawa, usurped the university’s responsibility and stated commitment to academic freedom, subverted the California State University, SFSU, and AAUP principles on academic freedom, and violated the California Faculty Association’s Collective Bargaining Agreement;

Whereas Zoom proceeded to shut down an October 23, 2020, webinar in solidarity with and focusing on the censorship of the SFSU open classroom by Big Tech companies, hosted by the NYU AAUP chapter, co-sponsored by several NYU departments and institutes, featuring Leila Khaled along with other advocates for Palestinian rights, such as Fred Moten, Katherine Franke, Radhika Sainath, and Andrew Ross;

Whereas in rescinding their platforms for the SFSU and NYU events, Big Tech companies succumbed to a pressure campaign organized by Campus Reform, Campus Watch, the Anti-Defamation League, StandWithUs, and the Lawfare Project, equating criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism, alleging that these events violated the Big Tech platforms’ terms of service, and threatening liability under 18 US Code 2339B (Providing Material Support or Resources to Foreign Terrorist Organizations); and

Whereas, the privatization of higher education has intensified dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with respect to out-sourcing of educational platforms to Big Tech companies. Private corporations are accountable to shareholders, not to an academic community

47 whose norms and values enshrine the freedom to pursue research, teaching, and extra-mural
48 speech on controversial matters; therefore, be it

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50 Resolved, that that the Professional Staff Congress (PSC-CUNY) unequivocally affirms its
51 support for academic freedom in the context of online education and the accelerated privatization
52 of platforms for teaching and learning;

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54 Resolved, that PSC-CUNY joins the California Faculty Association's condemnation of the
55 censorship by Big Tech companies of the SFSU virtual class¹ and joins the NYU-AAUP chapter
56 in stating that the "shutdown of a campus event is a clear violation of the principle of academic
57 freedom that universities are obliged to observe. Allowing Zoom to override this bedrock
58 principle, at the behest of organized, politically motivated groups, is a grave error for any
59 university administration to make, and it should not escape censure from faculty and students"²;

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61 Resolved, that PSC-CUNY joins the AAUP in calling on college and university administrators to
62 take affirmative steps to safeguard academic freedom in its online learning platforms. These
63 steps should include but not be limited to: public acknowledgment of the threat to academic
64 freedom posed by the institution's reliance on private, third-party vendors; and review and
65 renegotiation of contracts with Big Tech companies "to better protect the rights of faculty and
66 students to engage with controversial ideas"³; and

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68 Resolved, that PSC-CUNY urge AAUP Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure to
69 investigate administrative responses at SFSU and NYU to these instances of suppression of the
70 academic freedom of proponents of Palestinian rights.

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¹ <https://www.calfac.org/item/cfa-resolution-zoom-cancellation-sfsu-zoom-classroom>

² <https://academeblog.org/2020/10/23/statement-from-the-nyu-aaup-on-zoom-censorship-today/>

³ <https://academeblog.org/2020/10/29/aaup-urges-nyu-president-to-address-zoom-censorship/>