

Palestinian academic secures legal victory against witch-hunt at Sheffield Hallam University

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Palestinian academic Shahd Abusalama has won a legal and political victory against her former employer, Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), over its discriminatory leaking of confidential and derogatory information to the *Jewish Chronicle*, MPs and government ministers—used as part of efforts to destroy her career and repress pro-Palestinian activism on campus.

Abusalama launched a legal challenge in the Employment Tribunal two years ago, with a crowdfund raising more than £27,000. On Monday, she thanked donors: “After a long-running two-year legal battle, I am glad to announce to you all MY SUCCESS in winning the case against Sheffield Hallam University.”

All remaining donations will be used to aid victims of Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

SHU chose to settle the case for an undisclosed sum, agreeing to pay all Abusalama’s legal costs. It was tacit admission that its actions were discriminatory and in breach of employment law.

Abusalama was born in Jabalia Refugee Camp in Gaza. After finishing her undergraduate studies—amid Israel’s illegal blockade and military bombardment of Gaza—she completed an MA in media studies at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). She was awarded a full PhD scholarship at SHU to study representations in film of Gaza-based Palestinian refugees.

During her time as a student at SHU, the *JC* targeted Abusalama, branding her an antisemite over her involvement in the Boycott, Divestments and Sanctions movement. (Her account of the witch-hunt can be read [here](#).) The *JC* functions as a crude propaganda outlet for the Israeli state and has been exposed for fabricating stories.

Appointed a lecturer in January 2022, Abusalama faced immediate attack from the *JC* based on manufactured allegations of antisemitism. She explained: “I was repeatedly investigated, and exonerated, by SHU under the controversial IHRA [International Holocaust

Remembrance Alliance] definition of anti-Semitism, which conflates anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, and was by SHU in the face of government threats to withdraw funding.”

She was suspended from teaching on January 20, 2022 after she posted a message on social media in defence of a first-year student who had created a poster that read: “Stop the Palestinian Holocaust.” Her post was deemed antisemitic by the university.

Abusalama had written: “I understand why a first-year university student used #Holocaust when thinking of Israel’s repeated bombardment of Gaza... Maybe she thought she’d garner European sympathy for Palestine by evoking ‘Never Again’ slogan.”

The university defended Abusalama’s suspension. A spokesperson told the *Times of Israel* that SHU “has adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism.”

Students and staff immediately protested her suspension. The SHU branch of the University and College Union (UCU) passed an emergency motion on February 2, 2022 affirming the right of academics to free speech, demanding the university apologise to Abusalama and calling for a “moratorium” on the use of the IHRA definition.

The next day the university reversed its suspension. Abusalama reported she had been “wholly exonerated of the false charges of antisemitism, brought under the not-fit-for-purpose IHRA”, announcing she had been offered a more secure employment contract.

But she faced fresh accusations of antisemitism, this time by Zionist students who claimed her pro-Palestinian activism had transformed the university into “a hostile environment for Jews”. An independent review by Akua Reindorf KC found these claims were baseless and cleared Abusalama of any wrongdoing.

In October 2022, Abusalama and SHU reached a confidential agreement to part ways. But the terms of the agreement were immediately breached by the university.

Abusalama's lawyers submitted court documents showing that between August and November 2022, SHU briefed against her to various third parties, including MPs, government ministers and the media.

Information leaked to the *JC* resulted in a further witch-hunting article on November 8, 2022, portraying Abusalama as a terrorist sympathiser. It included comments from Deputy Vice-Chancellor Richard Calvert that "she is no longer an employee of the university", yet he failed to mention that an independent review had cleared her of any wrongdoing.

The *JC*'s report made clear that "a senior university official" had reached out to discuss Abusalama's case. Its selective briefing to this right-wing publication took place, as the *JC* reported it: "on the eve of an announcement today that Sheffield Hallam is about to build a second, southern branch at Brent Cross, in the heart of north London's Jewish community." SHU's investment in the project was £8 billion. Abusalama has since indicted the university for "prioritising public relations and economic interests over principles".

On her crowdfund site, Abusalama explained: "This victory is not just personal. It is a victory against attempts to silence advocates for justice in Palestine", including through the IHRA definition, "a tool designed to protect Israel rather than combat anti-Jewish bigotry."

Ten days ago, Abusalama wrote in *Declassified UK* of her family's terrifying experience amid "the ceaseless horrors of northern Gaza", which they described as "the worst stage of genocide". Abusalama wrote of her own struggle to convey "its gruesome and apocalyptic nature". She has since tweeted of being displaced to Barcelona to care for her "recently displaced family from Gaza".

Britain served as incubator for the reactionary campaign equating opposition to Zionism with antisemitism. From 2016, accusations of "left-wing antisemitism" were central to the vendetta by the British state to oust Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader and crush his supporters in the party. Corbyn's refusal to challenge the Blairites, who spearheaded this state offensive, facilitated the suppression of left-wing and socialist opposition to militarism and war.

Abusalama's legal victory follows the release of a 120-page judgement in the case of Professor David Miller who was fired by the University of Bristol for his statements opposing Zionism that were deemed "offensive." The Employment Tribunal found Miller was unfairly dismissed and that his anti-Zionist views are protected under UK employment law.

In September, the University of Leeds retracted its threat to strip Professor James Dickins of his emeritus status for his political activism against the genocide in Gaza. The

climbdown followed protests by students, but the university also vindictively threatened to strip the rights and benefits from his status.

All three cases have highlighted the escalating assault against academics and students opposed to Israel's genocide in Gaza. But the state will not be deterred so easily from ongoing efforts to proscribe and criminalise dissent.

The Labour government is escalating attacks on the right to protest. Within weeks of the general election, police launched a violent crackdown on student encampments, with student protestors and journalists opposed to the Gaza genocide arrested, detained and interrogated under counter-terrorism laws.

The Sheffield branch of the UCU recently highlighted "serious concerns about academic freedom on campus" after a planned "Palestine teach-in" at University of Sheffield on October 1 was cancelled the day before. This blatant act of censorship saw university officials citing a new "events safety guidance" document, introduced in April 2024, requiring additional risk assessments.

These measures are part of a global crackdown by capitalist governments. The ruling class cannot allow university campuses worldwide to become a focus of mass opposition to its war plans. They fear student protests will connect with the explosive social opposition building in the working class to savage attacks on living standards and the growing sense among millions of workers that the entire social order is rotten.

The defence of democratic rights means building a mass socialist movement in the working class and youth against the source of genocide, imperialist war and austerity—the capitalist system. This is the perspective fought for by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.



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