

University of Michigan DEI administrator fired over alleged “antisemitic” remarks

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On December 10, the University of Michigan (U-M) fired a director of one its Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) units for alleged “antisemitic” remarks. Rachel Dawson, the director of the Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives (OAMI), was summarily sacked for comments she allegedly made to two professors in a private conversation at a diversity conference held last March in Philadelphia.

Dawson was removed despite the admission by an investigating law firm, hired by U-M, that there was no independent verification that she made the “antisemitic” remarks of which she was accused. Dawson has denied the allegations and declared her intention to sue the university.

A member of the U-M Board of Regents, Mark Bernstein, intervened when the university decided in October that Dawson would not be suspended or terminated, but would be required to undergo “training” on the issue of antisemitism. Bernstein objected and demanded that Dawson be fired, and the university complied.

The firing came only days after U-M announced that it was ending its requirement that for hiring and promotion purposes candidates submit diversity letters—personal narratives explaining how they would contribute to the university’s DEI programs. The two developments make clear that U-M is seeking to accommodate itself to the incoming Trump administration by rolling back its DEI policy and related efforts to promote identity politics. As the WSWS noted earlier in the week:

Trump and the Republican Party are spearheading a right-wing “America First” ideological offensive that falsely links identity politics and programs such as DEI, long the stock in trade of the Democratic Party, with Marxism.

This, in turn, is bound up with a massive escalation of attacks on democratic rights and basic social programs, from public education to healthcare.

Trump and the Republicans are threatening to cut off federal funds to universities that continue DEI and similar programs. These programs, championed by middle-class radical academics and organizations, have been used across the country to elevate personal identity—race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation—above class in order to sow divisions in the working class while covering up the real roots of inequality and discrimination in the capitalist profit system.

Far from promoting equality, they have facilitated the elevation of a thin layer of blacks and other minorities into lucrative positions in academia, the media, government and the military, while the social position of the broad masses of workers of all races has deteriorated and social inequality has reached unprecedented levels. The fascistic right is taking advantage of the discrediting of identity politics, which has nothing to do with genuine Marxism, to promote extreme national chauvinism and anti-communism.

In relation to Dawson’s firing, a December 16 statement sent to the Michigan Advance news site by the university’s director of public affairs, Kay Jarvis, also cites her support for U-M students who faced police attack and arrest for protesting against the US-backed genocide in Gaza and the university’s ties to military aid to Israel. Jarvis writes that Dawson was “fired by the Provost because her behavior as a university representative at a conference and during an on-campus protest was inconsistent with her job responsibilities....”

U-M, along with universities and colleges across the US and around the world, is carrying out a vicious witch-hunt

against opponents of the US/Israeli genocide, slandering them as antisemites.

Dawson's lawyer, Amanda Ghannam, told the Advance that Jarvis' reference to an "on-campus protest" referred to her client's presence at an August 28 anti-genocide protest on the Ann Arbor, Michigan campus Diag, at which four peaceful protesters were arrested. "What Ms. Dawson did there was advocate for student protesters not to be violently arrested," she said. Dawson, who has a law degree, can be seen in Twitter/X videos of the protest trying to advise student protesters who are being brutally detained by police.

According to an account in the *New York Times*, the alleged "antisemitic" incident took place at a diversity conference when Dawson was approached by two professors, Naomi Yavneh-Klos of Loyola University-New Orleans (LUNO) and another, unnamed, Jewish professor. Yavneh-Klos, who lists multiple academic collaborations in Israel on her university bio page, approached Dawson, together with the other professor, claiming to have "heard about the 'negative experience' of a University of Michigan Jewish student." She "wanted to know, 'Does the DEI office work with these students?'"

Yavneh-Klos claims, according to the *Times*, "She [Dawson] said no. Jewish students are all rich. They don't need us. That was the gist of what she said. It was really horrifying." Yavneh-Klos also claims that Dawson said the "university is controlled by wealthy Jews" and that "Jewish people have no genetic DNA that would connect them to the land of Israel."

In a statement through her lawyer, Dawson said that "she unequivocally denies making the comments attributed to her." She acknowledged that a discussion took place with the two professors, but said their allegations are deliberate mischaracterizations of what was discussed. For instance, Dawson says she told the professors that Jews and Palestinians shared an ancestral connection to the region.

Yavneh-Klos contacted the Zionist Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and filed a report the day of the discussion. The ADL waited until August to send a letter to the University of Michigan about the allegations.

In response to the August letter from the ADL, the University hired the outside law firm Covington & Burling to investigate the allegations, which itself is a highly unusual move for matters that are generally addressed internally. The *New York Times* reported that the ADL and Covington & Burling worked together

previously on similar types of cases involving allegations of antisemitism, underscoring the biased and prejudicial character of the so-called "investigation."

In an investigative report sent to the university on September 25, Covington & Burling wrote that it could find no independent verification that antisemitic remarks were made by Dawson. Nevertheless, it concluded that the "weight of the available evidence supports ADL Michigan's report."

According to the *Times*, Dawson's superiors, including the office of U-M President Santa Ono, initially determined that she would get a warning and undergo "training in antisemitism and leadership."

When a university vice president informed the Board of Regents of this decision in late October, one of the regents, Mark Bernstein, immediately responded to the president's office that he was "disgusted" with the decision. Bernstein wrote that it made "a mockery of your/our commitment to address antisemitism and broaden our DEI efforts to include antisemitism and/or Jewish students," and said the only acceptable response was that Dawson be "terminated immediately."

Bernstein, a Democrat, has frequently denounced the anti-genocide protests as evidence of a "toxic presence of antisemitism" on campus."

Shortly after Bernstein's intervention, Dawson was informed that the president's office was reversing its decision, and on December 10 she was fired. Geoffrey Stone, a constitutional law scholar from the University of Chicago, was quoted in the *Times* as saying the firing was likely unconstitutional, as U-M is a public university, and even if she made the alleged comments "her speech should be protected by the First Amendment."

Dawson's firing is a brazen violation of democratic rights and due process. Students, staff and faculty at U-M should demand that the decision be reversed and she be reinstated without any penalties or sanctions.



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