

# “Talking about (the Silencing of) Palestine” conference defies boycott by Frankfurt’s Goethe University

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In mid-January, the conference “Talking about (the Silencing of) Palestine” in Frankfurt, Germany, hosted over 60 speakers from universities in ten countries, and several hundred participants. A further 2,000 or so people participated online. The conference had to overcome considerable political resistance and a boycott by the renowned Goethe University, which had cancelled all the rooms booked for the event shortly before it began.

The two-day conference, held on January 16 and 17, covered numerous topics related to the history and present situation of Palestine, Zionism and Israel, as well as the public perception and silencing of the genocide in Gaza and the response of Western universities. There was a wealth of interesting, detailed lectures by researchers, lecturers, Middle East experts, historians, journalists, doctors and activists.

Among them were the Australian genocide researcher and history professor in New York, A. Dirk Moses, sociologist Donatella della Porta from Florence, political scientist Helga Baumgarten, who worked at Birzeit University in Ramallah, and Wieland Hoban, editor of *Jewish Voice for a Just Peace in the Middle East*.

There were many Palestinian speakers, such as anthropologist Rami Salameh from Birzeit University, who had needed two days to travel from the West Bank to Frankfurt; researcher and editor Hazem Jamjoun, who gave the very informative introductory presentation on the history of the conflict; or the professor, writer and doctor Ghada Karmi. (Short statements from some of the speakers can be found here).

According to a press release, the aim of the conference was “to explore and address the dynamics of the discussion about Palestine” and counteract the attempt to silence discussions about Palestine from the outset. “This conference,” it continued, “is an attempt to defend and open critical spaces for discourse at universities.”

But that was already too much for Goethe University. Less than ten days before the start of the conference, University President Enrico Schleiff announced that the room bookings for the event had been suspended. A day later, the organisers learned from the press that the university had cancelled all room allocations. This was preceded by a campaign by Hesse Commissioner for Jewish Life and the Fight against Anti-Semitism, Uwe Becker (Christian Democratic Union, CDU), who denounced the conference in a press release as a “travelling circus of well-known haters of Israel.”

The same Goethe University, which had no qualms about inviting right-wing agitators like Boris Palmer or the pro-police ideologue Rainer Wendt (who was only uninvited due to an outcry among

students and staff) as part of Susanne Schröter’s so-called “Islam research,” criticised the “short notice” of the application and the purported “lack of transparency” of the applicants in the case of the Palestine Conference. The organisers were mainly lecturers, research assistants and students at the Frankfurt university themselves. Since last year’s “Students4Palestine” protest camp in April, they had repeatedly tried to enter into dialogue with the university administration.

In May 2023, the same Frankfurt university also tried to stop an anti-war meeting organised by the International Youths and Students for Socialist Equality (IYSSE) from taking place in the premises of the Protestant Student Community. The meeting was ultimately allowed to go ahead due to an international protest campaign. However, the most recent Palestine conference had to be moved at short notice to the premises of Medico International.

“This conference should have taken place at the university,” said Dr Ilyas Saliba from Berlin in the closing session, which was dedicated to the “perspectives of academic freedom.” He described how, in recent times, increasing political influence has led to police presence on campus becoming the norm. Hostility towards academics was being stirred up in society. As a result, not only Palestine-related topics came under fire: “Covid or climate issues are also affected by defamation and hate speech.”

Italian professor Donatella della Porta added that the boycott by Goethe University was by no means an isolated case, pointing to dozens of cases, such as that of the Lebanese-Australian scientist Ghassan Hage, who was dismissed without notice by the Max Planck Institute because he dared to condemn the Israeli mass murder of Palestinians on social media.

Della Porta criticised Germany’s “matters of state” doctrine, which operates with an abusive concept of antisemitism by taking the definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Association (IHRA) as its basis. This definition is an ahistorical and anti-democratic construct that defines any political opposition to Zionism and to Israel’s oppression of the Palestinians as antisemitic. Significantly, all the parties represented in the Bundestag (federal parliament) have either agreed to this disgraceful definition or tacitly supported it (as does the Left Party). Della Porta pointed out that economic and military interests were behind this, and that the IHRA definition had nothing to do with academic seriousness.

Dr. Britta Ohm, a media anthropologist at the Gutenberg University in Mainz, shed light on the social structures that prevail at universities and favour censorship. She made it clear to the participants that 92

percent of university staff were only employed on a temporary basis and could lose their jobs at any time. Only eight percent, the professors, enjoyed tenure as “civil servants for life.” They were “untouchable; they have power over everything.” She recalled the role that university professors had played during the Nazi era.

A student assistant teacher from Leipzig, who was also on the podium, called for not accepting research “becoming militarised. They are supporting genocide! We are accepting defeat too quickly; we are not fighting enough. Do we believe in universities as a space for discourse?” Dr. Hanna Pfeifer, professor of political science at the Goethe University, said that it was about “reclaiming the universities as academic undertakings.”

This triggered a sometimes emotional discussion at the end of the conference. There were many students in the audience, and they described their experiences with state repression since the solidarity camp protests in early summer and of a “climate of fear.”

One said that a conference organised by [Susanne] Schröter “is treated completely differently than our conference; everything is paid for. Why? Her research on Islam, migration and the police directly meets the needs of the state.” Another described the universities as “places for reproducing the social order.”

One participant said, “I quit my job after October 8, 2023, it was a very difficult year!” Some expressed the opinion that more could have been achieved with stronger protest and pressure on those in power, while others supported the opinion that the universities should be more harshly criticized.

At the end of the conference, students chanted slogans such as: “The students united will never be defeated.” This reflected the lack of perspective regarding the necessary action to halt the genocide in Gaza and the persecution of the Palestinians more generally. While it was important that the conference was able to take place despite the boycott and was a success, it ended with an open question: how can we move forward?

This can only be answered from a Marxist perspective. It is clear that appeals for more militancy and determination in academic circles will not be enough to stop the genocide against the Palestinians and break the official silence. To do that, it is necessary to turn to the working class, educate it and win it over to a socialist programme against capitalism, war and genocide.

It is no coincidence that the conference raised this question so sharply and left it unanswered in Frankfurt of all places. Goethe University is the historical stronghold of the “Critical Theory” of the Frankfurt School developed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. While Marxism, as understood by Marx and Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky, is inextricably linked to the working class, the Frankfurt School wrote off workers as a revolutionary class. It saw workers only as a backward mass, stupefied by consumption, media and repressive education.

This view must be overcome if there is to be a future. The author of these lines put forward the book “The Logic of Zionism: From Nationalist Myth to Genocide in Gaza” by David North at the conference. This volume explains the Marxist perspective on the Palestinian question, “No matter how heroic the struggle of the Palestinians, the intolerable conditions they confront will not be resolved without the development of an international movement of the working class for socialism.”

This is very evident in the developments of the last few days and President Donald Trump’s inauguration in Washington. The so-called ceasefire in Gaza cannot be trusted; the ceasefire agreement with

Lebanon has been repeatedly violated by Israel since November 2024. On his first day, Trump signed, among many new executive orders, one lifting all sanctions against violent settlers in the West Bank.

In Germany, too, government politicians are continuing their attacks on Palestinians and on migrants as a whole. At the beginning of January, it became known that the German authorities had quietly cut funding to numerous NGOs. This affects at least six Palestinian and two Israeli organisations, Zochrot and New Profile, which work for conscientious objectors and for the reappraisal of Israeli history.

The attack is part of a socio-political “new era,” corresponding to that in foreign and military policy. February’s early federal elections are to bring a stable government to power in order to triple military spending, slash social spending and enforce mass layoffs, as at VW. This means that the working class in Germany is also facing enormous new struggles. It is the only force capable of changing the situation.

All over the world, resistance is growing against Israel’s policy of eradicating Palestinian life, as well as against the collaboration of each government with the Zionist butchers. This resistance can only be effective if it rests on the working class and arms it with a socialist and internationalist perspective. Only in this way can the genocide be ended, the Jewish apartheid state overcome and replaced by a state that grants its Palestinian and Jewish citizens full equality.

As it says in “The Logic of Zionism”:

The great historical and political paradox of the present situation is this: The Israeli working class cannot defend its own democratic rights without fighting for the democratic rights of the Palestinian people against Zionist oppression. And the Palestinians cannot achieve their aspirations for democratic rights and social equality without forging a fighting alliance with the Israeli working class. The only viable perspective is not a mythical “two-state solution,” but a unified socialist state of Jewish and Arab workers.



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