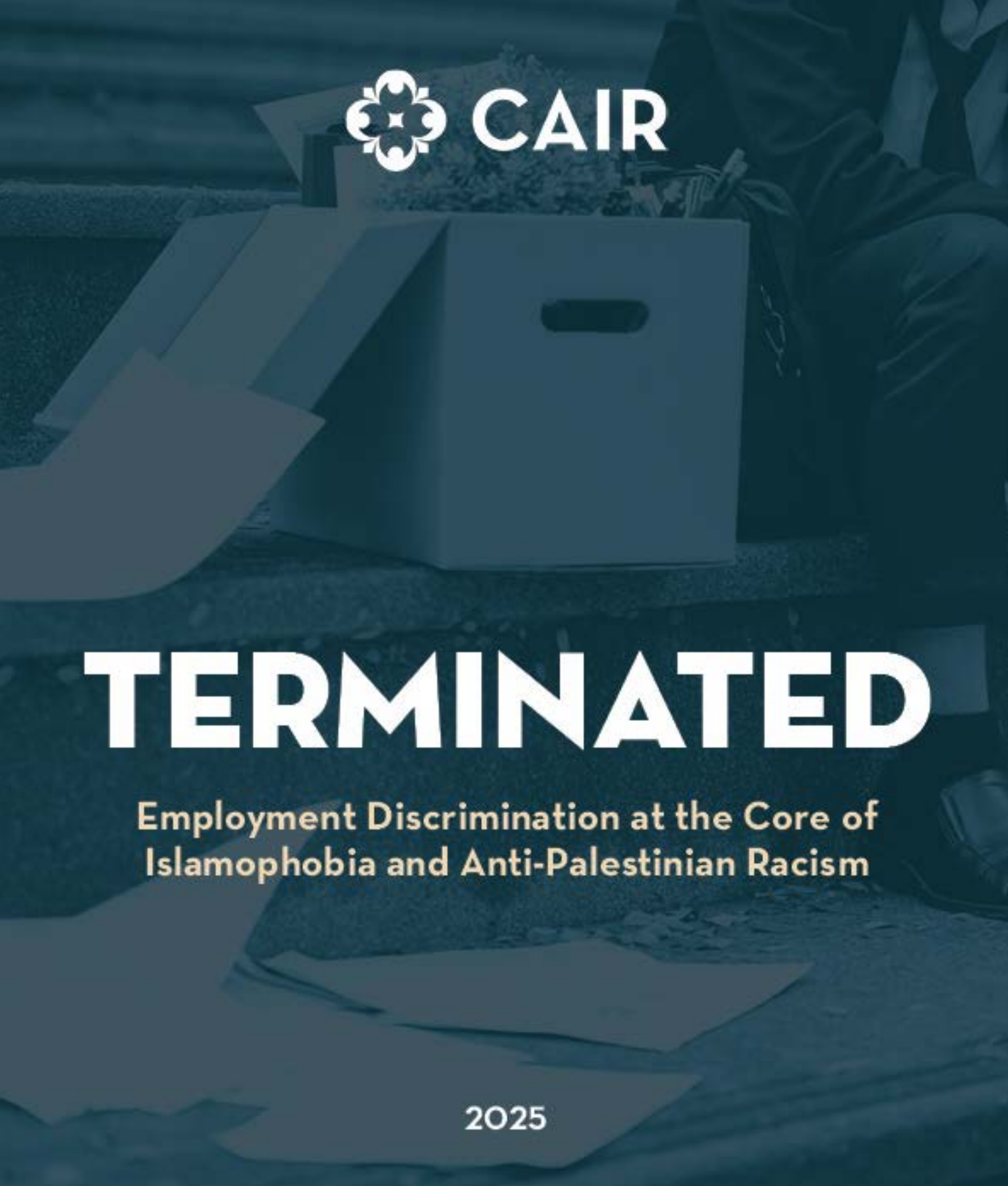

CAIR

TERMINATED

Employment Discrimination at the Core of Islamophobia and Anti-Palestinian Racism

2025

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CAIR is America's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization. Its mission is to enhance the understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American-Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.

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INTRODUCTION

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) is today releasing a new analysis on the role of US employers in targeting Palestinians, Muslims, Arabs, and other workers who demonstrate support for Palestinian rights.

While educational spaces have been the central focus of anti-Palestinian and Islamophobic activity, employment spaces have proven to be at the core of modern day Islamophobic incidents. In 2023, CAIR received 8,061 complaints across the country; the second-highest reported complaint category was employment discrimination. In 2024, CAIR received 1,329 complaints of employment discrimination, making it not only higher than education-related concerns but also the highest reported category to CAIR offices for the first time in the organization's 30-year history.[1] Other organizations have also received heightened employment complaints. In November 2024, Palestine Legal reported that it received 604 intakes involving employment-related issues since the beginning of the year.[2]

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The numbers reveal a growing crisis in employment. Following the 2020 murder of George Floyd by police, as well as a series of protests and demonstrations against anti-Black racism and police brutality, workplaces, along with other US institutions, overwhelmingly moved to introduce new policies and initiatives to promote inclusive work cultures. Across a variety of sectors, employers have sought out employees from marginalized backgrounds and even encouraged them to share their cultural heritage in the workplace, with some companies notably establishing affinity spaces for employees.

Yet, long before the Trump administration's recent efforts to shutter DEI programs and hiring initiatives, employers across various sectors of American society were reneging on their commitments.

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Following the escalation of hostilities in Palestine and Israel in 2023 and 2024, Palestinian, Muslim, and Arab employees have been encouraged to share their cultural and religious identity at work only to the extent that it does not threaten to express a criticism of the Israeli government, which, as of the writing of this report, continues to engage in a campaign of destruction of Palestinian and Muslim cultural and religious heritage in Gaza.[3]

Yet, long before the Trump administration's recent efforts to shutter DEI programs and hiring initiatives, employers across various sectors of American society were reneging on their commitments.

Moreover, workplaces that had in the recent past encouraged all employees to share support for political and social movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, have punished even the slightest expressions of sympathy with Palestinian civilians from Muslim, Arab, and other sympathetic employees. Across the country and across sectors, employees have had workplace chats shut down and posts removed and have been disciplined and even terminated for commenting on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. These actions strongly suggest that prior "grand gestures toward diversity, equity, and inclusion" have "fallen short in this ongoing crisis or were superficial all along."[4]

These employees must not only navigate what appear to be clear double standards set forth by their employers but also amplifying pressure from US politicians, which has also existed long before the present moment. In addition to targeting students, the House Committee on Education & the Workforce has set its eyes on employees at universities, with representatives notably demanding whether faculty who support peaceful student-led sit-ins for Palestinian rights would be fired.[5]

Even as the data suggests a troubling rise in employment discrimination, the impact of crackdowns on employees cannot be fully understood. Numerous reports to CAIR indicate that employees experiencing internal and external harassment may feel pressure to leave their place of employment, as employers fail to protect them or are even directly responsible for creating hostile work environments. This often leaves former employees without a

means to find legal recourse, while making it challenging to quantify the extent of employment discrimination experienced across the country.

Still, even from the anecdotal evidence available, a clear trend has emerged: employment discrimination is on the rise, and a wide variety of employers are promoting a double standard that encourages cultural representation at work while punishing Muslim, Palestinian, and Arab employees who call attention to the very destruction of their cultural heritage. This special report consolidates these incidents, highlighting complaints across a variety of sectors within US employment. Due to the sheer number of incidents targeting Palestinian, Arab, Muslim and other employees calling attention to Palestinian rights, this report does not seek to be a comprehensive account. Instead, it is a sampling of experiences, intended to amplify key patterns across employment in the United States.

TECH

While restrictions on speech have been a staple of multiple sectors of employment, perhaps no sector has been as thorough in its suppression than the tech world. In particular, many tech corporations have rolled back commitments to inclusive work cultures, both shutting down channels of communication for Arab and Muslim workers, as well as other employees who express support for Palestinian rights, and outright terminating employees.

Other posts closed to comments include "We demand a #CeasefireNow Microsoft!!"; like all posts closed to comments, it was reportedly appended with a note to "practice compassion and kindness to each other."

At Microsoft, two Arab employees were terminated after they reportedly organized a vigil for Palestinians killed in Gaza outside Microsoft headquarters. Microsoft claimed that the employees violated company policy which does not permit employees to "use devices like bullhorns and speakers in public areas"; the two employees, however, contested that their vigil violated company policy, arguing that the event followed the same procedures as other employee charity events. One employee's termination was reportedly publicized online before the employee had himself received notice of his dismissal.[6]

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The terminations follow months of reports of double standards at Microsoft, which is accused of moderating expressions of concern for Palestinian civilians while permitting those in support of the Israeli government. One of the terminated employees accused Microsoft of subjecting him to "repeated internal investigations and reprimands for comments about Gaza," while posts that he flagged for "racism or personal attacks against him did not result in any disciplinary actions."[7] Other employees report similar experiences. In the months following October 2023, arguments between employees popped up on internal Microsoft message boards, including accusations that employees expressing sympathy for Palestinian civilians were "terror supporters." Microsoft stepped in by closing down comments for multiple posts expressing support for Palestinians. Other employees expressed their frustration with the company, with one reportedly accusing Microsoft, "a company that so strongly promotes Diversity and Inclusion" of "showing such strong discrimination and marginalization." Microsoft reportedly closed that post to comments, as well. Other posts closed to comments include "We demand a #CeasefireNow Microsoft!!"; like all posts closed to comments, it was reportedly appended with a note to "practice compassion and kindness to each other."[8]

And yet, the company has reportedly "allowed supporters of Israel to speak freely about their opinions on the topic, while taking a heavy hand with Muslim employees."

Similar reports of double standards have also been made against other tech giants. At Google, multiple employees report that "Google and their colleagues tried to stop their activism by censoring them, firing them, and threatening some of them by turning the company into a 'hostile work environment.'"[9] In November 2023, dozens of Palestinian and Muslim employees at Google signed an open letter, where they detailed a number of incidents in which they were subjected to hate and racism, while the company reportedly turned a blind eye. For example, when employees appealed to others to donate to a Google-sponsored charity for Palestinians, they reportedly received comments calling Palestinians "animals" and arguing that Palestinian schools and hospitals were being used for "terrorism." Google managers themselves stand accused of asking Muslim employees if they support violence and "tacitly endorsing the surveillance

of Google employees on social media." In one case, Arab and Muslim employees were told to avoid making comments in support of Palestinians under the guise of "being respectful in the workplace."[10] Those who do report being forced to speak with HR.

Notably, Google employees argue that the company's response "starkly contrasted with its response to the war in Ukraine," when the company sent a message of support for both Ukrainians and Russians working for the company. In general, they claim, "there was an open political space" and "nowhere near as much moderation and shutting down of conversation as [they] have seen with Palestine."[11] Other employees argued that the company ordinarily has an "open culture, where employees can publicly criticize leadership and are encouraged to embrace their racial identity and sexual orientation while at work." And yet, the company has reportedly "allowed supporters of Israel to speak freely about their opinions on the topic, while taking a heavy hand with Muslim employees."[12]

Reports of similar incidents have emerged at a number of other tech giants. At Meta, internal posts that expressed support for Palestinians were flagged for removal.[13] In November 2023, Apple indefinitely suspended internal Slack channels for Jewish and Muslim employees[14] and one worker was reportedly terminated after wearing a keffiyeh, a Palestinian scarf, and other markers of Palestinian solidarity.[15]

EDUCATION

Threats to employees are not restricted to corporate life; rather, restrictions on Palestinian, Muslim, Arab, and other employees who sympathize with Palestinians have been commonplace across US employment, including in educational settings. Numerous instructors, from K-12 schools to institutions of higher

As Professor Thrasher wrote in a column, "university administration has been supportive of [him] when [he] applied social justice journalism to race, LGBTQ identity, and infectious disease." However, it "did not like when [Professor Thrasher] began applying this same analytic to the genocide in Gaza and the obliteration of our journalism colleagues in Palestine..."

education, have faced disciplinary repercussions and even termination. Targeting of these employees oftentimes demonstrates a Palestine exception to free speech, where instructors who otherwise are permitted or even encouraged to discuss social and political issues are disciplined for doing the same regarding Palestinian human rights.

CAIR announces the filing of a complaint challenging the suspension and investigation of three Montgomery County Public School teachers for their speech on Palestine.

In K-12 schools, teachers and staff report restrictions on forms of speech or attire that show support for Palestinians, even when no such restrictions had existed on other forms of speech in past years. In December 2023, CAIR filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) against the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) after Hajur El-Haggan, an Arab Muslim middle school teacher, was placed on administrative leave reportedly for expressing support for Palestinians in her email signature. According to the complaint filed by CAIR, MCPS "had never taken adverse action against any other employee who chose to include political speech in their email signature."[16] In February 2024, CAIR filed a lawsuit on behalf of Montgomery County Public Schools teachers suspended for their speech on Palestine, even though "teachers have long been allowed to express their views on a range of public topics – from racial justice to the war on Ukraine – as the First Amendment requires."[17]

In another publicly reported incident, in April 2024, high school teacher Erin Donevan was terminated after she refused to remove a "Free Palestine" pin that she began wearing to signal solidarity with teachers in Gaza, where

schools have been deliberately and systematically destroyed, and support for students who wanted to discuss the issue with her. Shortly after she began wearing it, however, the school's principal insisted that she refrain from wearing the pin, after reportedly receiving a complaint from a student's family. While the school reportedly touted its commitment to "enriching society" and "social justice," and while other teachers reportedly wore pins signaling support for other causes, Donevan was fired after refusing to remove the pin.[18]

Such restrictions, however, are not confined to K-12 settings. Beyond the persistent attacks on students critical of the Israeli government, higher education administrators have also sought to silence advocacy by targeting another group expressing solidarity with Palestinians: their own employees. Dr. Raz Segal, an Israeli American Jewish scholar, reportedly had a job offer to lead the University of Minnesota's Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies rescinded after he characterized the Israeli government's attacks on Palestinians as a "textbook case of genocide."[19]

Dr. Segal joins adjunct and non-tenured faculty who have similarly faced repercussions for discussing Palestinian rights. Professor Steven Thrasher, hired as an endowed chair for social justice at Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism, was suspended and had his classes cancelled, seemingly related to his participation in an encampment earlier in 2024, where he was also assaulted by university police for trying to protect student protesters.[20] As Professor Thrasher wrote in a column, "university administration has been supportive of [him] when [he] applied social justice journalism to race, LGBTQ identity, and infectious disease." However, it "did not like when [Professor Thrasher] began applying this same analytic to the genocide in Gaza and the obliteration of our journalism colleagues in Palestine…"[21]

HEALTHCARE

Healthcare workers have also faced similar repercussions, in many cases being explicitly discouraged from criticizing attacks against Palestinians even as they are encouraged to share elements of their cultural heritage. At a public hospital in Minneapolis, an event featuring local Palestinian doctor Dr. Christine Harb and organized by a group of employees to discuss "the effects to healthcare workers in Gaza" was postponed abruptly by hospital leadership. Hospital administrators and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) officials had suggested the event as an alternative to a public statement that several employee affinity groups sought to release. However, the hospital, which reportedly "prides itself on anti-racism and moving toward health equity," had canceled the talk amid concerns that the event "may have caught the interest of some outside demonstrators." Administrators argued that while the event "was an opportunity to normalize Palestinian culture," they would not allow it to be "used or co-opted for activism," suggesting that it was somehow possible to recognize Palestinian culture while refusing to acknowledge the ongoing threats to their cultural heritage.[22] A rescheduled version of the event was in the works, reportedly without Dr. Harb. According to one employee, the hospital has reportedly mandated that "if Dr. Harb, or any other Palestinian guest lecturer, were invited back to speak there would be new guidelines to censor their topics and PowerPoint presentations in order to maintain a sole focus on 'cultural celebration.'"[23]

Yet, as the National Writers Union (NWU) uncovered in a May 2024 report on the impact of anti-Palestinian repression among media and arts workers, "what counts as 'objective' and what is deemed biased depends on factors including the background and identity of the worker; the prejudices of management; and external pro-Israel individuals and advocacy groups exerting pressure on any given media organization."

Similarly, in May, a nurse at NYU Langone Health was reportedly fired after she gave a speech commenting on the suffering of Palestinian women in Gaza. Hesen Jabr had been tapped

to receive an award from NYU Langone Health; however, the day after her speech, she was pulled into meetings with senior leaders who reportedly accused her of "putting others at risk," "ruining the ceremony," and "offending people," following her remarks critical of the Israeli government's attacks on Palestinian civilians.[24] Jabr alleges that NYU Langone administrators claimed that it was fine to "mention [her] mother and [her] grandmother" but that she "should've stopped there." An NYU Langone spokesperson also stated that Jabr was warned not to "bring her views on this divisive and charged issue in the workplace," further demonstrating how Palestinian employees are permitted to discuss their cultures only to the extent that they do not criticize the impending threat to their cultural heritage posed by the Israeli government's continued attacks.[25]

In December, CAIR-California and Legal Aid at Work filed a complaint with the California Labor Commissioner on behalf of Lauren Gaw, a registered nurse who was unlawfully terminated for displaying stickers on her water bottle supporting Palestinian liberation. Source: CAIR-San Diego.

In September, the San Francisco Bay Area chapter of CAIR filed a formal complaint with the California Civil Rights Department on behalf of Yasmin Bishr, a former nurse at MarinHealth Medical Center, who was compelled to resign from her position in early 2024 after wearing a "Free Palestine" badge reel on her lanyard.[26] While a spokesperson for the medical center claimed that "all employees are required to uphold a professional 'standards of appearance' policy,"[27] Bishr's co-workers have reportedly been permitted to display badge reels with various political messages, such as "Black Lives Matter," without repercussions. Bishr, however, who is visibly of Middle Eastern and North African descent, was reportedly singled out by hospital staff and ordered to remove the badge at risk of termination.[28]

MEDIA/ARTS

For media industry workers, in particular, employers have cracked down on speech by calling into question the 'objectivity' of those who dare to express sympathy with Palestinians and thereby implying that they have betrayed a golden standard of their work. Yet, as the National Writers Union (NWU) uncovered in a May 2024 report on the impact of anti-Palestinian repression among media and arts workers, "what counts as 'objective' and what is deemed biased depends on factors including the background and identity of the worker; the prejudices of management; and external pro-Israel individuals and advocacy groups exerting pressure on any given media organization."[29] In other words, based solely on their identity, Palestinian, Muslim, and Arab employees have been deemed less objective and therefore more prone to censorship and termination when showing sympathy for Palestinian civilians. Such restrictions, the NWU reports, have rarely been applied in the past, when employees of marginalized racial and/or ethnic backgrounds have sought to comment on other social and political issues.

In past years, journalists at the publication have signed open letters "without reprisal," and "frequently express political opinions in public, including on Twitter (now X), without any punishment."

In particular, NWU has documented 44 cases of reported retaliation in Western media between October 7, 2023 and February 1, 2024. Their findings suggest that retaliation over support for Palestinian rights has disproportionately targeted workers of Middle Eastern or North African descent and those who identify as Muslim. In September 2024, NPR reported that nearly a dozen arts workers in New York City had left their jobs or been fired after expressing solidarity with Palestinian suffering. Workers report being fired for wearing keffiyehs, or leaving employment after management introduced new policies that restricted employees from expressing personal views about politics or social issues while at work.[30]

As NWU reported, common forms of retaliatory action included social media repression, as outlets such as The Guardian reportedly ordered staff not to

sign open letters and petitions or publish posts on social media[31] and others like Hearst Magazines encouraged workers to report colleagues who 'like' "controversial content" online.[32] At The Los Angeles Times, 38 workers were reportedly banned from covering Israel or Palestine after signing an open petition condemning the deaths of Palestinian journalists.[33] In past years, journalists at the publication have signed open letters "without reprisal," and "frequently express political opinions in public, including on Twitter (now X), without any punishment."[34]

Beyond arbitrary restrictions, a number of workers have also been terminated. Artforum's Editor-in-Chief David Velasco was fired after he oversaw the publication of an open letter by artists and cultural workers in solidarity with Palestinians.[35] PhillyVoice Sixers Writer Jackson Frank was fired, reportedly due to his criticism of the Israeli government's attacks on Palestinian civilians.[36] Writers Jazmine Huges and Jamie Lauren Keiles were reportedly resigned after they were "forced out" of The New York Times Magazine for signing an open letter criticizing Israel.[37] A number of freelance workers have similarly lost opportunities for speaking out for Palestine. One freelancer reported to the National Writers Union that "a local outlet she regularly wrote for killed three of her stories after she posted criticism on social media regarding Israel's military campaign in Gaza."[38]

RECOMMENDATIONS

Employers have a responsibility to ensuring that all employees, including Palestinian, Muslim, Arab, and other employees expressing support for Palestinian rights, are treated equally and fairly in their place of work. Employers must:

1. **Refuse viewpoint discrimination.** If employers promote open dialogue on social and political issues, then those same commitments should be equally extended to Muslim, Palestinian, and Arab employees. Applicants who have previously voiced opinions in support of Palestinian rights should not be automatically rejected.

2. **Prevent the abuse of internal investigative processes against employees.** Employees should not be subjected to disciplinary action solely due to expressing viewpoints in support of human rights.

3. **Refrain from releasing polarizing statements.** Should employers choose to comment on foreign affairs, statements should recognize that the loss of any human life, including Palestinian life, is a tragedy.

4. **Protect affinity group spaces.** Affinity groups should not be suppressed on the basis of sharing views with which employers do not agree.

5. **Establish regular trainings to prevent bias.** All employees should be trained to enhance understanding of Islamophobia and anti-Palestinian racism.

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