

Controversial CUNY Law Commencement Speech Sparks Outrage and Accusations of Insurrection



A recent commencement speech delivered by a graduating law student at the City University of New York (CUNY) sparked outrage and accusations of incitement. The speech, given by Fatima Mousa Mohammed, has garnered significant attention for its calls to dismantle capitalism and Zionism while labeling laws as "White supremacy."

Jeffrey Lax, a CUNY professor who co-founded the group Students and Faculty for Equality at CUNY, expressed his dismay at the speech, calling it the most disturbing commencement address he has ever heard. Lax described the speech as a blatant call for American insurrection, stating that it went beyond the typical anti-Semitic tropes against Israel and Zionism. According to Lax, Mohammed not only criticized Israel but also called for rage to be the fuel for fighting against capitalism and Zionism, which he believes comes dangerously close to inciting violence.

Lax further expressed his concern with the university administration's handling of the situation. He argued that the issue lies not solely with the student's remarks but also with the faculty and administration that allowed the speech to be delivered. Lax criticized the faculty for failing to teach Mohammed the difference between incitement and free speech, suggesting they should have intervened more effectively.

CUNY Law responded to the controversy, stating that the student speeches at commencement reflect the individual perspectives and voices of the students themselves. They defended the inclusion of various viewpoints on advocating for social justice. Initially, the school removed the speech from YouTube but later reinstated it following a public outcry and a records request submitted by the group SAFE CUNY. Lax questioned the school's motives behind removing the video, suspecting it was an attempt to protect itself amid an ongoing investigation by the New York State Division of Human Rights. The investigation is looking into allegations of discrimination against Jews stemming from the faculty council's resolution supporting the pro-Palestinian BDS movement last year.

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Lax firmly believes that the video was taken down to prevent investigators from seeing the student's admission of the active implementation of BDS (boycott, divestment, and sanctions) at CUNY Law School. In her speech, Mohammed praised CUNY Law for endorsing BDS on both student and faculty levels, highlighting their defense of students' rights to speak out against Israeli settler colonialism. She argued that silence on the matter is no longer acceptable, especially given the alleged actions of Israel, such as indiscriminate attacks and targeting of Palestinian homes and businesses.

Neither Mohammed nor CUNY has responded to requests for comment regarding the controversy and accusations.

This incident has brought attention to the delicate balance between free speech and incitement. While universities are spaces that encourage diverse perspectives and the expression of ideas, there is an ongoing debate about the boundaries of acceptable speech. The controversy at CUNY Law underscores the challenges faced by educational institutions in navigating these issues and ensuring a respectful and inclusive environment for all students.

The outcome of the New York State Division of Human Rights investigation will shed further light on the allegations of discrimination at CUNY Law and provide insights into how the institution handles controversial issues going forward. In the meantime, this incident serves as a reminder of the importance of fostering open dialogue while also addressing concerns related to incitement and discrimination in educational settings.