



**Contact:** Nicole Rosen  
202-309-5724

## **University of Illinois Jewish Students File Complaint With U.S. Department of Education Alleging Anti-Semitic Hostile Environment**

WASHINGTON, D.C. (October 23, 2020): Jewish students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (“UIUC”) have faced an unrelenting campaign of anti-Semitic harassment, according to a complaint filed with the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (“OCR”). The complaint, which was announced for the first time today, was submitted on behalf of UIUC’s Jewish students and alleges that UIUC has allowed a hostile environment to proliferate on its campus in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The complaint outlines how Jewish and pro-Israel UIUC students have been subjected to an alarming increase in anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism over the past five years. It details how numerous swastikas have been found on UIUC’s campus, Jewish ritual items such as menorahs and mezuzahs have been vandalized, and windows of Jewish fraternity houses have been smashed by bricks. It also describes how members and supporters of Students for Justice in Palestine at UIUC publicly glorify members of U.S. government-designated terrorist organizations, harass UIUC Jewish and pro-Israel students with epithets like “Nazi” and “white supremacist,” advocate the expulsion of Zionists from campus, and have converted mandatory UIUC diversity training into anti-Israel indoctrination.

Examples of anti-Semitic incidents that occurred at UIUC before the complaint was filed and since can be found [here](#). A summary of the complaint can be found [here](#).

The complaint was prepared by Arnold & Porter Kaye Scholer LLP together with the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, in consultation with the Jewish United Fund, and Hillel International. Arnold & Porter are official legal counsel and Brandeis Center lawyers serve as the federal policy advocates and experts.

“Hillel has been working for years to support Jewish and pro-Israel UIUC students cope with serious challenges on their campus. Sadly, too many of them actually fear for their safety, and some have been warned to refrain from openly wearing Jewish symbols while walking around campus,” said Mark Rotenberg, Hillel International’s Vice President of University Initiatives and Legal Affairs.

“Jewish students at UIUC have been targeted for years,” said Alyza D. Lewin, President of the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law. “We gave UIUC seven months since the complaint was filed to address the ongoing harassment. In the face of continuous stall tactics and almost no action from the university, we decided to publicize our efforts. We hope public awareness of this dire situation will prompt the university to finally acknowledge and address the egregious anti-Semitic harassment it has swept under the rug for far too long.”

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin in educational institutions that receive federal funding. Title VI forbids

discrimination against Jews on the basis of their actual or perceived shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics. After being placed on notice of a hostile environment, an educational institution that receives funds covered by Title VI must take prompt and effective steps reasonably calculated to end the harassment and prevent it from recurring. As recently clarified in Executive Order 13899, Title VI is to be enforced “against prohibited forms of discrimination rooted in anti-Semitism as vigorously as against all other forms of discrimination prohibited by Title VI.” The Executive Order references the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism, which makes clear that denying the Jewish people’s right to self-determination in their historic homeland—i.e., anti-Zionism—is a contemporary form of anti-Semitism.

The UIUC Title VI complaint alleges that, despite repeatedly being placed on notice of the developing hostile environment on UIUC’s campus, the UIUC administration has failed to take the measures necessary to provide Jewish and pro-Israel students with a discrimination-free academic setting. That failure to act when Jews are harassed because of their Jewish identity or because of their belief in Israel as the Jewish Homeland stands in marked contrast to the vigorous steps that UIUC has taken in the face of discrimination or harassment aimed at other groups.

“Being a Jew at UIUC comes with immense hate and hostility” said Ian Katsnelson, a UIUC student majoring in Biology and Political Science. “First, as a senator on student government I’ve experienced shocking examples of anti-Semitism firsthand. I’ve been called a genocide supporter, a white supremacist, and harassed; all for being publicly Jewish. And all of this in front of the administration—who did nothing. Second, as a student, I’ve seen the effect that the hostility has on my friends—they’re afraid to wear Jewish stars, Hebrew writing, or even Jewish Greek letters. This is my third year at U of I and I can tell you . . . it’s exhausting.”

In some instances, as described in the complaint, UIUC employees have been *complicit* in fostering a hostile environment. These employees include peer advisors who organized a presentation at a mandatory staff development meeting in September 2019 declaring Zionism to be a form of racism, and a Vice Chancellor who openly admitted that she removed a Jewish student from the UIUC Campus Student Elections Commission because “she’s Jewish.” Occasional attempts by the university to address the anti-Semitism at UIUC (such as the email circulated by UIUC’s Chancellor after the September 2019 staff development meeting), have done little to ameliorate the hostile environment on campus.

Lauren Neshor, a UIUC student majoring in Interdisciplinary Health Sciences, explained, “Once I became a leader in the pro-Israel Jewish community on campus, I was immediately targeted. I was even publicly singled out by a professor on social media. While there are faculty who are supportive, it can be really hard to be publicly Jewish. I constantly worry about how people will react when they find out I’m Jewish or that I support Israel.”

The complaint also makes clear that UIUC can comply with Title VI—and protect those who are the victims of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism on its campus—without running afoul of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

“Since it’s common for the perpetrators of the anti-Semitism on campus to attempt to hide behind the First Amendment, it’s critical we be perfectly clear,” stated Lewin. “The purpose of this complaint is not to ‘shut down’ anyone’s speech,” she continued. “To the contrary, its goal is to protect Jewish pro-Israel students at UIUC who are being discriminated against, harassed and excluded on the basis of their identity, behaviors not protected under the First Amendment, and to ensure that they can participate in campus life on an equal basis with other students. Anti-Semitism has plagued UIUC for years. Despite being put on notice by students, and years of advocacy by JUF, Hillel, and the Brandeis Center, UIUC’s administration failed to adequately address the problem, making it necessary to file this civil rights complaint and make it public now.”

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The UIUC students on whose behalf the complaint was filed are legally represented by Baruch Weiss and Avishai D. Don of Arnold & Porter Kaye Scholer LLP.

#### ***About the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law***

The Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law (“LDB” or “Brandeis Center”) is an independent, non-partisan institution for public interest legal advocacy, research and education. The Center’s mission is to advance the civil and human rights of the Jewish people and to promote justice for all. The Brandeis Center is not affiliated with the Massachusetts university, the Kentucky law school, nor any of the other institutions that share the name and honor the memory of the late U.S. Supreme Court justice.

#### ***About the Jewish United Fund***

JUF amplifies our collective strength to make the world a better place—for everyone. Community powered, we consider the totality of local and global Jewish needs and how to address them, providing assistance that transforms daily life for over 500,000 Chicagoans of all faiths; supporting Israel and the Jewish people worldwide; advancing Jewish learning; and cultivating Jewish identity and connection.

#### ***About Hillel***

Founded in 1923, Hillel has been enriching the lives of Jewish students for more than 90 years. Today, Hillel International is a global organization that welcomes students of all backgrounds and fosters an enduring commitment to Jewish life, learning and Israel. Hillel is dedicated to enriching the lives of Jewish students so that they may enrich the Jewish people and the world. As the largest Jewish student organization in the world, Hillel builds connections with emerging adults at more than 550 colleges and universities and inspires them to direct their own path. During their formative college years, students are challenged to explore, experience and create vibrant Jewish lives.