



May 2, 2017

James B. Milliken
Chancellor
City University of New York
205 East 42nd Street
New York, New York 10017

Re: 2017 Commencement Address

Dear Chancellor Milliken:

I write to express my vehement opposition to CUNY's decision to host Linda Sarsour for its 2017 commencement address. Ms. Sarsour has a lengthy history of racist and sexist behavior, activities which CUNY tacitly endorses by inviting Ms. Sarsour to deliver the commencement speech.

A distinction exists between a university allowing those with alternative – even incendiary – viewpoints to express their positions free from obstruction, and actively embracing deeply controversial positions by forcing hateful rhetoric upon students who wish to attend their graduation ceremony. Academic institutions have an obligation to permit intellectual exploration, and that includes allowing speakers to peacefully express their ideas. But commencement speeches are flagship events representing the culmination of years of studies for students and their families. In my opinion, it is disrespectful to taint an otherwise celebratory event by subjecting students who wish to take part in their own graduation ceremony to such a vitriolic and disparaging speaker.

Indeed, Ms. Sarsour publicly stated that a female survivor of genital mutilation (who happens to disagree with Ms. Sarsour on many of her positions) doesn't "deserve to be a woman." In the same statement, Ms. Sarsour said she wishes she could take the victim's "vagina away." Such vile, disgusting rhetoric should be enough to disqualify Ms. Sarsour from the high honor of delivering CUNY's commencement address.

Unfortunately, her hateful speech doesn't stop there. Just last month at a Chicago conference, Ms. Sarsour expressed the "honor and privilege to be...on this stage with Rasmia [Odeh]." Ms. Odeh spent ten years of a life sentence in an Israeli prison for her role in terror attacks that killed two people. She was released in a prisoner exchange. American authorities are in the process of deporting Ms. Odeh for lying to federal authorities about her criminal past. Ms. Sarsour has also taken it upon herself to discredit women who support Israel. According to Ms. Sarsour, there is no room in the feminist movement for "people who support the state of Israel." Further, Ms. Sarsour defined as "courage" a young boy holding rocks in both hands as he watched Israeli soldiers. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict doesn't need more fuel, particularly as it relates to the children caught up in the never-ending violence.

Uncomfortable and controversial rhetoric has an important place on college campuses. Students deserve the opportunity to voluntarily expose themselves to alternative perspectives. But CUNY isn't merely permitting Ms. Sarsour to speak on campus – CUNY is bestowing an honor upon Ms. Sarsour by actively inviting her to deliver a marquee address to students whose only recourse to avoid Ms. Sarsour is to skip their graduation ceremony.

I could not disagree more with the CUNY administration's decision. It is, in my opinion, an embarrassment to the university to host a speaker with a history of derogatory, sexist, and anti-Semitic remarks to deliver the 2017 commencement address.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Daniel M. Donovan, Jr." in a cursive, slightly slanted script.

Daniel M. Donovan, Jr.
Member of Congress