

Rescinding a Human Rights Award to Angela Davis Was Cowardly and Unfair



Left: Angela Davis, an emeritus professor at the University of California Santa Cruz, is considered one of the great historical fighters for human rights and against racial discrimination. Right: Cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova, chairperson of the Soviet women committee (right) meeting with Angela Davis at Sheremetyevo Airport in 1972.

This past October, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute [announced](#) that activist, author, and scholar Angela Davis would be presented with the Fred Shuttlesworth Human Rights Award at the group's annual gala event next month. The announcement described Davis as "one of the most globally recognized champions of human rights, giving voice to those who are powerless to speak."

Davis—professor emeritus at the University of California, Santa Cruz—has long been known for her outspoken advocacy and solidarity work on behalf of oppressed peoples, particularly political prisoners, throughout the world. Her long history of solidarity work has included support for national liberation struggles in Vietnam, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and elsewhere.

The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute is a museum and research center in [Alabama](#), documenting the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. That it would choose to honor Davis is fitting. Davis is a Birmingham native, and her mother, who worked with the institute in the 1990s, was a personal acquaintance of Shuttlesworth, the prominent clergyman and civil rights activist for which the award is named.

However, on January 4, the institute [announced](#) it was rescinding the award and canceling the event. "Upon closer examination of Ms. Davis' statements and public record," the statement reads, "we concluded that she unfortunately does not meet all of the criteria on which the award is based." The institute said it acted after "supporters and other concerned individuals and organizations, both inside and outside of our local community, began to make requests that we reconsider our decision."

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The cancellation of Davis's award [appears](#) to have been prompted by her support for the Palestinians, particularly her endorsement of the international campaign of boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against the Israeli occupation.

It has been more than seven decades since the founding of the United Nations and the codification of international legal standards regarding the inadmissibility of countries expanding their borders by military force. One would think, then, that opposing Israel control of Palestinian territories seized in the 1967 war, which the international community [recognizes](#) as a foreign belligerent occupation, would not be particularly controversial. Unfortunately, it appears that the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute believes otherwise.

Undeniably, some BDS advocates do unfairly single out Israel, and may indeed be motivated by anti-Semitism. But this is certainly not the case with Davis, a graduate of the predominantly Jewish Brandeis University, where she noted, "I learned to be as passionate about opposition to anti-Semitism as to racism."

In [a statement](#) released Monday evening, she stated, "I am proud to have worked closely with Jewish organizations and individuals on issues of concern to all of our communities throughout my life. In many ways, this work has been integral to my growing consciousness regarding the importance of protesting the Israeli occupation of Palestine."

It would be particularly ironic for Davis's award to be denied over her BDS advocacy, given the importance of the tactic of boycotts during the U.S. civil rights struggle. It is also indicative of a deep anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia, even among those who profess to support civil rights.

Unfortunately, rather than acknowledge the apparent bigotry and repudiation of international law by the institute some people are blaming Jews. Birmingham mayor Randall Woodfin, who serves as an ex officio member of the institute's board, [claims](#) the decision came "after protests from our local Jewish community and some of its allies."

But it was not the co-called "Jewish community" that made the decision, but the overwhelmingly non-Jewish institute's board. Furthermore, American Jews have never been more divided regarding Israel and the occupation. As one Southern Jewish activist [tweeted](#), "Xtian zionists had the power to blackball Angela Davis and now the Jews are becoming the scapegoat here and face of that decision, shielding the evangelicals from blame."

Pressure to rescind the invitation came from non-Jewish sources as well, including former Birmingham-Southern College president [Gen. Charles Krulak](#) (retired), who served as deputy director of the White House Military Office during the Reagan Administration and later Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps. He cited Davis's former membership in the Communist Party and support for the Black Panthers.

Not only is the decision to cancel the award an injustice, it feeds into the divide-and-rule tactics of the right by sowing division between the African-American and Jewish communities. As Davis herself [noted](#), "The rescinding of this invitation was thus not primarily an attack against me but rather against the spirit of the indivisibility of justice."