

Pro-Palestinian student group suspended following University of California-Berkeley protest

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On April 9, the University of California-Berkeley arrested 79 people, including 41 students, for participating in a sit-in sponsored by the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). In addition to the criminal and student conduct charges faced by many of those who participated in the peaceful sit-in at Wheeler Hall, SJP's status as a campus organization has been temporarily suspended pending an investigation.

The April 9 protest was part of a National Day of Action at campuses across the country to commemorate the massacre of 100 Palestinians at Deir Yassin by Israeli troops in 1948. The SJP rally, attended by several hundred people, was called as a show of solidarity with the plight of the Palestinian people and to demand that the University of California divest all its assets from Israel.

At an arraignment hearing held last Tuesday, all of those arrested were charged with unlawful occupation, which carries a sentence of up to 90 days in jail if convicted. In addition, seven others are to be tried for resisting arrest. One man, who allegedly bit a policeman during the sit-in, will be charged with assault. If found guilty, those accused of resisting arrest and assault could be incarcerated for up to one year.

Volunteers from the National Lawyers Guild are representing the protesters arrested. They are asking that all charges be dropped, claiming that they are intended to challenge the Free Speech Movement on US college campuses.

The temporary suspension of SJP's status as a campus organization amounts to political censorship by the university administration. The group's right to organize, hold meetings, sponsor events and set up tables on university property has been revoked.

However, under free speech rights extended to the public at large, they can still leaflet and speak with passersby. Depending on the judgment handed down by the university, the group could be permanently banned. The Office of Student Life at Berkeley has reportedly stated that several participants may face suspension from the school for a period of up to one year.

According to SJP, the basis of the university's action against the group is a "zero-tolerance" policy instituted by the Chancellor's office just days prior to the April 9 rally. SJP is facing punishments far more severe than anything meted out to similar non-violent civil disobedience actions held by other campus groups in recent years, despite the fact that Berkeley professor John Searle was quoted in the *Washington Post* as saying that the "rally was no big deal and had little in common with the famous protests of the 1960s."

On May 1, the chancellor of the school, Robert Berdahl, issued a press release defending the university's actions. Asserting that this was not "an issue of free speech, nor of the right to hold demonstrations on the campus," Berdahl stated that the reason for the crackdown on SJP was its "occupation of an academic building" and "interfering with the rights of other students to continue their education." According to the university, the SJP's chanting and use of bullhorns in Wheeler Hall disrupted students in a nearby auditorium while they were taking a midterm examination.

"The campus has had in the past numerous demonstrations that have broken rules; it has had sit-ins that have disrupted activities of the University. But SJP is the first student organization that has deliberately sought to disrupt the conduct of classes in so substantial

a way,” Berdahl commented.

However, an appeal issued by SJP states that they believe the university’s response “is a systematic attempt to silence pro-Palestinian voices on campus and to intimidate students from being activists.” SJP further claims that the timing of the implementation of the zero-tolerance policy was designed “to make SJP subject to higher standards and harsher consequences” than any other student organization previously.

The mission statement of SJP lists the demands of the organization as the complete “decolonization” of Palestinian lands under Israeli occupation, the granting of the right of return to Palestinian refugees, and an end to US aid to Israel. According to the group, its strategy is to pursue these aims through rallies, marches and other demonstrations whose primary demand is divestment from Israel. At a February conference involving the national network of clubs across the country, the SJP also issued a statement expressing solidarity with those opposed to the Bush administration’s “war on terror”.

SJP’s actions have provoked the ire of pro-Israeli groups on the Berkeley campus and the organization has been accused of anti-Semitism. SJP, however, does not advocate religious, ethnic or cultural exclusivism and has ties with numerous other protest groups, including Jewish organizations that also oppose Israel’s actions.

SJP has begun to defy the university’s ban on their activities by setting up tables at one of the campus’s central plazas. The Office of Student Life issued a letter to the organization reprimanding their actions, but taking no additional measures.



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