

UC Berkeley reinstates class on Palestine after protests

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On Monday, the UC Berkeley administration retreated from its attempt to politically censor a student run class on Palestine. The course, entitled “Palestine: A Settler Colonial Analysis,” was suspended after its first class on spurious procedural grounds. The suspension occurred on September 12, the same day that a petition signed by 43 pro-Israel organizations was presented to the administration calling for the class to be suspended because it was “political indoctrination.”

Without consulting the student leading the class or its faculty advisor, the administration immediately suspended the class, falsely claiming that they had not followed the proper procedure in submitting the course syllabus for review before the semester began.

After complaints by students and faculty over this suppression of free speech reached international news, the university reversed its position, allowing the course to resume after cosmetic changes were made to the course description. In the letter rescinding the suspension, Carla Hesse, the Executive Dean of the College of Letters and Sciences, explained that the course was allowed to resume because she was reassured that exploring “the possibilities of a decolonized Palestine” did not cross “the line from teaching to political advocacy,” and that criticism of Israel did not in this case violate the University policy on intolerance.

This is not the first time that the California university system has sought to suppress criticism of Israel, or the first time that opponents of the Israeli occupation have been subjected to anti-democratic provocations. In January, the UC Regents proposed a policy that would treat all opposition to Zionism as anti-Semitic. After a public outcry, it revised their policy statement to read, “Opposition to Zionism often is expressed in ways that

are not simply statements of disagreement over politics and policy, but also assertions of prejudice and intolerance toward Jewish people and culture.” Their phrasing still allowed administrators to label criticism of Israel anti-Semitic at their discretion.

Hesse’s letter cites concerns over this precise policy of the regents as one of the reasons for the suspension of the class.

Emboldened by the Regent’s resolution, the ultra-right David Horowitz Freedom Center staged anti-Palestinian provocations at universities across the state, including UC Berkeley. Posters listing students and faculty who criticized Israel by name, and calling them genocidal, terrorist sympathizers, were plastered all over campus in April.

The specific target of these provocations is the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) Movement led by the student group Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). The SJP acts as a pressure group on the Israeli government, asking universities and businesses to avoid investing in Israel or selling Israeli products until Israel recognizes the rights of Palestinian refugees to return, ends the occupation of Palestine and grants equal rights to Arabs within Israel.

The initial petition against the class specifically cited the student coordinator and faculty advisor’s longstanding participation in BDS as proof of extremism and anti-Semitism, and it found a receptive audience in UC Berkeley’s Chancellor, Nicholas Dirks.

Dirks has a long history of opposing criticism of Israel. When he was Vice President for Arts and Sciences at Columbia University in 2004, he supported an investigation into spurious allegations of faculty anti-Semitism. After beginning to work at UC Berkeley, he maintained that students at Columbia had difficulty finding “safe spaces in which to talk about Israel”

outside an “anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic” context, despite the investigative committee’s report that completely cleared the accused professors.

In 2014, he sent an e-mail to the Berkeley campus in support of the dismissal of Steven Salaita from the University of Illinois for his statements in opposition to the Israeli invasion of Gaza.

Although the current target of the UC administration is criticism of Israel, the goal is to roll back the right of students to study politics and politically organize on campus. The attempt to suspend a class for being critical of Israel was a test case. Although it has retreated for now, the university administration will not hesitate to use the same accusations of political partisanship and “intolerance” to suppress oppositional sentiment in the future.



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