

Police arrest five, carry out arbitrary searches at UC Berkeley

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Hundreds of police officers cordoned off Sproul Plaza, the main thoroughfare at the University of California Berkeley (UCB), Thursday afternoon, claiming the move was necessary to prevent violence between pro- and anti-Trump protesters in the wake of a canceled speech by right-wing media figure Ann Coulter. The officers were prepared for mass arrests, though no significant protest materialized on either side.

Coulter had been invited to speak by a student club, the Berkeley College Republicans, but the university administration insisted the speech be rescheduled due to security concerns. Instead, Coulter canceled the meeting on Wednesday.

About 150 pro-Trump protesters demonstrated a few blocks from the campus. Among them were several small alt-right groups hoping to provoke a street fight with anarchists, as they had at protests on February 1 and March 4.

The UCB Police Department (UCPD) issued an alert at 12:50 p.m. warning students that there would be a large police presence “actively looking to arrest people committing violence or other crimes.” An hour later, when around a dozen anti-Trump protesters gathered outside Sproul, the UCPD announced it had designated Sproul Plaza an “event area” with restricted access.

Police posted a list of banned items, including weapons, frozen fruit, water bottles, balloons, tobacco products and explosives. Most significantly, stuck in the middle of the list, was a ban on banners and signs.

Police announced that they arrested five people, including two for suspicion of resisting arrest and one teenager for suspicion of possessing a controlled substance. Video footage shows police arresting a Berkeley student on charges of obstructing officers and wearing a mask to evade police. The protester had

declined to identify himself and be photographed by the police after being detained for holding a sign larger than the limit arbitrarily set by police on Thursday.

Sproul Plaza has been a location for unregulated speech at UCB since the Free Speech Movement in the 1960s. The center of the plaza has for decades been a place where anyone, whether they are associated with the university or not, can address students or hand out leaflets. That Sproul was barricaded by police despite the absence of even a modest protest has all the hallmarks of a premeditated police provocation. The effort to curtail free speech at this historic location presages efforts to restrict political activity more broadly at public universities across the country.

Nicholas Dirks, the UCB chancellor, defended the massive police crackdown. In a message distributed to students and staff on Wednesday, Dirks claimed an “obligation to heed our police department’s assessment of how best to hold safe and successful events.” He affirmed a UCPD veto on any event in a venue “that our police force does not believe to be protectable.”

Dirks cited past clashes of protesters in Berkeley to support his position, especially the February 1 protests that caused right-wing provocateur and former *Breitbart* editor Milo Yiannopoulos to cancel his planned speech. On that day, anarchists under the umbrella group Antifa (anti-fascist) sought to turn the protests into a series of physical clashes with police through vandalism and provocation. At the March 4 protests in downtown Berkeley, anarchist and right-wing provocateurs clashed.

During the February protests, thousands of students participated in a peaceful protest against Yiannopoulos, while members of Antifa carried out acts of gratuitous violence. Police provocateurs have been known to infiltrate such organizations to encourage violence and

provide a pretext for repression and anti-democratic measures.

Dirks uses the excuse of the prospect of further street fighting in relation to the Coulter speech to justify a broad attack on campus politics. In an opinion piece published Wednesday in the *New York Times*, “Berkeley is Under Attack From Both Sides,” Dirks claimed that the university “must now invest more public tax dollars in equipping campus police forces to subdue campus protests.”

This is not the first time that Dirks has sought to undermine political speech on campus. In September 2016, the university suspended a student-sponsored class on Palestine on the pretext that it constituted “political indoctrination.” After an international outcry over the effort to suppress criticism of Israel, the university reinstated the course, claiming it was reassured the class had not “crossed the line from teaching to political advocacy.” The university intentionally left open the possibility of suspending future student-run courses deemed too political.

The university administration is looking to curb political organizing on campus because it anticipates significant protests. Students across the UC system are facing a new hike in tuition, growing student debt and bleak job prospects. At the same time, the Trump administration is threatening wars abroad and carrying out massive attacks on social services.

It is under these conditions that police, under the direction of UC President Janet Napolitano, the former head of the Department of Homeland Security, are moving to suppress protests and free speech.



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