Notre Dame graduates walk out to protest Vice President Pence's graduation speech

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23 May 2017

Some 100 graduates walked out in protest as Vice President Mike Pence took to the podium to make his commencement speech at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana on Sunday.

The protest, which had been planned weeks in advance, centered on the Trump administration's anti-immigrant policies as well as anti-gay marriage policies enacted by Pence during his tenure as governor of Indiana. Pence did not comment on the exit; he was awarded an honorary degree from Notre Dame after his address.

The protest was organized by student group We Stand for ND. They cite both Pence's role in the Trump administration as well as his policies as governor in their statement. "During his time as governor of the state of Indiana and now as a Vice President, Pence has targeted the civil rights protections of members of LBGT+ community, rejected the Syrian refugee resettlement program, supported an unconstitutional ban of religious minorities, and fought against sanctuary cities," We Stand for ND wrote.

In an appeal to Notre Dame's Catholic orientation, We Stand for ND's statement objects that Trump's policies do not align with Catholic doctrine. "The participation and degree-conferring of VP Pence stand as an endorsement of policies and actions which directly contradict Catholic social teachings and values."

In 2015, as governor of Indiana, Pence signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, giving businesses "who object to same sex couples" the right to refuse them services. He has previously said that gay marriage would cause "societal collapse."

As vice president, Pence is part of an administration that has brutally cracked down on immigrants. Immigrants have been accosted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents while dropping their children off at school. Just last week, an immigrant died in solitary confinement at a detainment center well known for dreadful conditions and poor treatment of inmates. Earlier in May, ICE agents were turned away from an elementary school in New York after requesting information about a fourth grade student in attendance there.

Notre Dame typically invites presidents serving their first year of office to address graduates. However, more than 2,700 Notre Dame students signed a petition opposing an address by Trump.The university invited Pence instead.

Pence's address to Notre Dame's graduates, which continued uninterrupted as the protesters exited Notre Dame stadium, disingenuously and ironically extolled the virtues of free speech on college campuses while lamenting the growth of "political correctness."

"While this institution has maintained an atmosphere of civility and open debate," Pence stated, "far too many campuses across America have become characterized by speech codes, safe zones, tone policing, administration-sanctioned political correctness—all of which amounts to nothing less than suppression of the freedom of speech." Such practices, Pence warned, would stifle academic dialogue, as well as freedom itself.

"I would submit that the increasing intolerance and suppression of the time-honored tradition of free expression on our campuses jeopardizes the liberties of every American," Pence said. He then made a call to action against protestors: "This should not, and must not be met with silence."

Luis Miranda, spokesperson for We Stand for ND, responded to these statements as he spoke to the press after the walkout. "Of course we welcome and support free speech on campus," he said. "But commencement is not a moment for academic exchange or political dialogue. It's a celebration of all of our hard work."

Miranda further explained that Pence represented an administration known for attacking immigrants. "I have family who are directly being affected by his policies, so I

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felt like I needed to stand up. And I think that's what we all felt," he said.

Miranda told reporters that the organization had expected only 50 graduates to walk out of the stadium. "If it was just five of us, we would have thought we were successful because we were doing the right thing. The fact that so many people showed up was mind-blowing."

While the growth of identity politics on college campuses is counterrevolutionary and reactionary, as a member of Trump's administration, Pence's defense of First Amendment rights is risible.

During the presidential campaign, Trump encouraged his supporters to physically remove protesters from his rallies. After a Black Lives Matter activist was beaten and thrown out of a Trump rally in Birmingham, Alabama last year, Trump told Fox News reporters, "Maybe he should have been roughed up."

Trump's administration has sought to punish judges who have blocked his executive orders. He has repeatedly threatened to break up the Ninth Circuit Court in retaliation for rulings against his racist immigration bans and his orders to withhold federal funding from sanctuary cities.

In his address on Sunday, Pence said, regarding the suppression of free speech on college campuses, "These all-too-common practices are destructive of learning and the pursuit of knowledge, and they are wholly outside the American tradition."

This subtle warning characterizes the Trump administration's attitude towards free speech. It is a nationalist dog whistle, an attempt to characterize those who dissent from Trump's policies as anti-American. In the end, Pence's remarks were part of a right-wing campaign to use the Constitution as a fig leaf to camouflage the repression of dissent by students and ultimately the working class.

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