

UC Berkeley mobilizes police for “Free Speech Week”

David Brown
3 October 2017

The University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley), maintained a massive police presence for “Free Speech Week” last week. This mobilization cost an estimated \$800,000 and points to the advanced plans the university has for the violent suppression of student protest.

Hundreds of police in squads of 20 to 30 with riot gear and automatic weapons marched through campus, snipers were positioned on the rooftops, and undercover informers photographed students while gathering information on passersby. Noticeably absent were the demonstrations and counter-demonstrations the police were allegedly controlling.

Free Speech Week had been called as a provocation by the small right-wing student group Berkeley Patriot, inviting notorious far-right speakers like Milo Yiannopoulos, former White House Chief Strategist Stephen Bannon, Ann Coulter and David Horowitz to speak on campus between Sunday, September 24, and the following Wednesday.

The week of protest completely evaporated, culminating in Yiannopoulos speaking behind a police cordon for 15 minutes Sunday, singing the national anthem, signing condoms, and then going home. The police locked down Sproul Plaza, the main thoroughfare on campus, letting people in only after they passed through a metal detector. A little more than a hundred right-wing supporters came, many driving long distances.

E-mails obtained by the Bay Area News Group between one of the right-wing speakers who withdrew, Lucian Wintrich, and UC Berkeley spokesman Dan Mogulof, show that Free Speech Week was a provocation never intended to go forward. The Berkeley Patriot failed to file paperwork to actually request venues for their speakers, nationally known

figures never intended to show up, and several other speakers were added to the event without their consent.

The university administration used the provocation as a pretext for mobilizing police on campus and did everything it could to make Free Speech Week appear credible. They prepared venues for the fictitious speakers, arranged security and told professors to consider canceling their classes that week.

Yiannopoulos had planned to have the event “canceled” by the university or “shut down” by counter-demonstrators to depict himself as a victim of censorship. When neither happened and very few of his supporters showed up, he found himself with nothing to say. The university pushed ahead with its plans, and Chancellor Carol Christ e-mailed students to expect police barricades to remain up during the week.

Berkeley has become a popular testing ground for far-right provocations, for the growing militarization of the police, and for the anarchist group Antifa’s efforts to channel left-leaning students into the political dead-end of violent confrontations.

In February, Yiannopoulos had a speaking arrangement at UC Berkeley canceled in response to protesters. The university spent \$200,000 for police at that event. In April, conservative commentator Ann Coulter canceled her appearance on campus after two conservative student groups withdrew their sponsorship. Despite Coulter’s cancellation, the university spent \$600,000 on police for the non-event. Earlier in September, conservative writer Ben Shapiro spoke on campus and the university spent another \$600,000.

The pseudo-left has responded to these provocations by appealing to the university administration to ban far-right speakers and supporting violent confrontations with right-wing demonstrators and vandalism under the

guise of Antifa.

Mark Bray, in his book *Antifa : The Anti-Fascist Handbook*, sympathetically describes how their vandalism was an appeal to the campus police to ban Yiannopoulos: “In the days leading up to the event, students had met with the chancellor, written op-eds, amassed a petition—all to no avail.

“On the night of Yiannopoulos’s speech, shortly before it was scheduled to begin, black-clad anti-fascists arrived at the larger ongoing demonstration and started to pull down police barricades, launch fireworks, smash windows, and spray-paint graffiti, causing what was later estimated to be \$100,000 worth of damage. And what weeks of advocacy, argumentation, and public dialogue could not accomplish was instead achieved in about fifteen minutes, as the police quickly announced the cancellation of the event, citing security concerns.”

All told, the university has spent \$2.2 million this year on the four events, only one of which actually occurred. The UC administration is using that expense as a pretext for future censorship of controversial views.

UC President, and former head of the Department of Homeland Security, Janet Napolitano, told the *Los Angeles Times* that the position “that we will have these speakers and pay for the security costs associated with that—may not be sustainable.”

On August 14, UC Berkeley implemented a draconian Interim Policy on Major Events, which has gone unreported in the press. It provides for censoring any meeting at the discretion of the UC Police Department (UCPD). Any event where more than 200 attendees are anticipated or where the UCPD determines campus security could be affected are considered major events. Any non-departmental major event-i.e., one sponsored by a student group—“must agree to reimburse the costs of basic event security provided by UCPD.”

On page eight, the document allows the administration or UCPD to end an event if “an imminent threat to safety or property arises.” Throughout the document, the UCPD is constantly given discretionary power to directly censor meetings or throw so many expenses at student groups as to make a meeting impossible.

While Antifa seeks to pressure the university

administration to censor right-wing speakers, the university is actually seeking pretexts to censor left-wing oppositional speech.

Napolitano was appointed UC president in 2013 even though she had no background in education. What she did have was a background in mass deportations and organizing the nationwide crackdown on the Occupy movement on behalf of the Obama administration. Under her supervision, the UC system has installed spyware on campus computers and UC Davis has spent \$175,000 to erase from social media the infamous use of pepper spray on unresisting students by campus cops.

More recently at Berkeley, under the previous Chancellor Nicholas Dirks, the school administration tried to suspend a student-run class that was critical of Israel, but retreated after the censorship made international news.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact