

Florida Governor declares state of emergency ahead of speech by white supremacist

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Florida's Republican governor Rick Scott has declared a state of emergency in advance of a planned speech by white supremacist Richard Spencer at the University of Florida in Gainesville on Thursday.

The emergency declaration, usually reserved for natural disasters such as hurricanes, was issued by Scott on Monday in response to a request by Alachua County Sheriff Sadie Darnell.

The governor's declaration puts the state Division of Emergency Management in charge of the event. It also places the Florida National Guard on standby, suspends restrictions on how public agencies use their funds, and enables any law enforcement officer who comes from outside of Alachua County to make arrests. It also allows for the imposition of curfews.

The University had initially rejected the request by the National Policy Institute, the far-right group that Spencer leads, to hold a meeting on campus in September. Administrators cited safety concerns in the aftermath of the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August that saw one protester killed by one of Spencer's supporters and 14 others injured. However, the university rescheduled Spencer's speech under threat of a federal lawsuit.

The decision of Scott to declare a state of emergency does not stem from any opposition on his part to the politics of Spencer and the so-called Alt-Right. Scott is a supporter of President Donald Trump, who infamously insisted that there were "fine people" among the white supremacists who rampaged in Charlottesville. He was brought into office in 2010 as part of the corporate-backed Tea Party movement, whose pseudo-populism was a blend of the nationalist and racist demagoguery that is the centerpiece of far-right ideology.

The Sheriff's Department has stated that more than

500 police officers will be on hand for the event, at an estimated cost of \$500,000 dollars. There are expected to be a large number of protesters, likely exceeding the number of white supremacists. As at past protests, the police can be expected to use any pretext to attack and arrest demonstrators. Those arrests will then be used as further justification to crack down on students' free speech rights and place further restrictions on the ability of students to organize politically on campus.

The presence of a phalanx of police officers on the campus will hardly be a guarantee against violence on the part of the far right.

At the rally in Charlottesville the police allowed groups of armed Nazis to fan out across the city, taking up positions at intersections and other key points in a military-style occupation, before the bulk of the right-wing protesters took to the streets. When confrontations ensued, police officers were seen on video standing by while counter-protesters were attacked by the armed right-wing mob. In statements made to the media after the event, Spencer confirmed that his organization had been coordinating with the police in the months leading up to the event.

The University of Florida has a diverse population of students, drawn from around the US and internationally, and there are no indications of any substantial support amongst the student body for Spencer's brand of far-right politics. There are, to be sure, some who would give political support to Spencer, such as the fascistic Turning Point USA organization, which has a student club on the campus. Their numbers are small, however, and do not reflect the views of the overwhelming majority of students and faculty.

In fact, Spencer's appearance on campus has been widely condemned by multiple student organizations,

who have organized protests in advance of the speech. More than 3,500 people have signed a petition online urging the university to cancel Spencer's appearance.

On Monday, a rally was held by students and members of the community in opposition to the event, followed by a march to the school's administration building where calls were made for university president Kent Fuchs to resign. Students activists have stated that many plan to skip classes on Thursday to protest the event.

Spencer's organization has also failed to find support amongst the broader community. The National Policy Institute was compelled to directly take control of the distribution of the 800 tickets for the event after they learned that Gainesville area businesses and organizations were encouraging locals to buy tickets and then not attend the event.

It is clear that Spencer and the National Policy Institute have no base of popular support. At their rally in Charlottesville, they were only able to mobilize a few hundred people from across the country, despite months of advance planning. At all of Spencer's public appearance, his supporters have been outnumbered by protesters.

The ultimate aim of Scott and the interests he represents is to use Thursday's planned event as a pretext to create a permanent police-state atmosphere on campus and set a precedent whereby mobilizing the police, with the National Guard on standby, to crack down on left-wing political opposition amongst students becomes the accepted practice.

Just as at the University of Berkeley in California in the wake of a fraudulent "Free Speech Week" protest by alt-right figures that did not occur, Scott and the administration at UF will seek to use Spencer's appearance as a pretext to militarize the campus and establish ever more restrictive rules for how students can organize and hold meetings.

Universities have historically been centers of opposition to the political establishment. In the present atmosphere of rapidly growing social inequality, widespread hostility to the policies of the Trump administration and, above all, the threat of a nuclear world war, millions of students will be drawn into the struggle against the capitalist system and the fight for socialism. It is within this political context that the state of emergency has been declared.

Notably, the University of Florida has a history of curtailing socialist political discussion on campus.

In the lead-up to a Socialist Equality Party presidential election campaign meeting last year hosted by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality at UF, university officials moved the designated meeting place at the last minute and mandated that a campus police officer be present at the meeting. The University also removed dozens of posters around the campus advertising the event in advance of the meeting.



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