

Brooklyn College students oppose NYPD spying on campus

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Students at Brooklyn College, one of the four-year colleges in the City University of New York system, expressed opposition to police activity on campus after a screening of *Watched*, a documentary on surveillance of Muslim students at BC by the New York City Police Department.

Watched, which was first shown at the Tribeca Film Festival earlier this year, details how the New York Police Department spied on BC Muslim students for four years—2011-2015. The NYPD sent “Mel” as an undercover informant, who became very close to students in the BC Muslim Student Association.

At an MSA-organized event like other “Ask a Muslim” events—where students can ask their Muslim peers questions about Islam in an open and collegial way—Mel took a declaration of Muslim faith.

Over the ensuing years, she ingratiated herself into the lives of BC students active in the MSA, even attending some of their weddings.

According to a Muslim BC student interviewed in *Watched*, Mel, unlike almost every other convert to a new religion, asked essentially no questions about how best to practice her new faith. Her first question, a year and a half in, was about suicide bombing.

This years-long, extensive surveillance of BC students has produced a chilling effect on campus, with many students concerned that similar police spying may resume—or may be continuing uninterrupted. According to the *Excelsior*, BC’s student newspaper, a student asked at the screening if “there could be an informant in this room,” to which the panelists simultaneously answered, “Yes.”

Two students attributed the recent inactivity of the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) club to police surveillance and BC administrative actions. “SJP kind of got bullied out by administration,” said one student.

Excelsior reports, “Though this incident took place over four years, ending in spring of 2015, neither the City of University of New York (CUNY) nor the Brooklyn College administration has yet to make a strong statement condemning the act of NYPD surveilling members of the community.”

At the *Watched* screening, one student expressed his opposition to any NYPD presence on campus, including for officers to use BC bathrooms. “I disagree with them being on campus,” he said. “Especially allowing them to use the building where student groups are held.” He also announced that he was drafting a petition to BC President Michelle Anderson to this effect.

The *Excelsior* confirmed that NYPD officers, as “public servants,” are allowed by BC to use the restrooms. Both Anderson and Director of Public Safety Donald Wenz made statements to this effect, with Wenz saying that BC prefers police to use bathrooms in the West End Building “rather than walking across either quad to use the bathroom.”

The *New York Post* and right-wing media outlets seized on student opposition to NYPD presence and the college’s preference that police not needlessly walk across campus to falsely claim that the BC administration does not want NYPD officers to use the bathrooms on campus.

The *Post* fumed against “cop-hating students” and quoted an NYPD officer eloquently blaming “insane” students, who added, “That protester culture is warping their f--king minds.”

The NYPD Sergeants Benevolent Association (SBA), a police union, threatened BC students, tweeting: “Active shooters, acts of terrorism on campus and now remove the police. Maybe it’s time people get what they ask for.”

SBA President Ed Mullins took to Fox News to blame “political correctness,” praise “law and order,” claim that US cops never brutalize people, lie about the undercover informant’s activities at BC and slander students by claiming that they would rather associate with terrorists than police officers.

BC students have wholly legitimate reasons to be concerned about police on their campus. BC, like other CUNY schools, has a largely working-class student body. Many BC students are immigrants or members of ethnic minorities, who are disproportionately targeted by police.

A brief run-in with the police on an unrelated matter could result in detention by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers for alleged immigration violations, as seen in the recent arrest of four Mexican nationals outside a Brooklyn courthouse by plain-clothes ICE officers in September.

Moreover, BC and the borough of Brooklyn as whole have a large Haitian population, with over 60,000 foreign-born Haitians residing in Brooklyn. BC hosts CUNY’s Haitian Studies Institute. After the Trump administration ended Temporary Protected Status for some 60,000 Haitian nationals in the US, BC students and their families who were previously protected may face deportation after July 2019.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with BC students about these issues.

Martina Tenne, a nursing student at Brooklyn College told the WSWs, “I saw the documentary film *Watched* that was shown on campus. People are talking about it. There should not be NYPD police on campus at all. Too much money is spent on security. The presence of police can make people feel threatened. The issue of the NYPD has probably been of greater interest since 9/11 because of the occupation of the Middle East. There has been a stigma against Muslims.”

A pre-med student, Abdullah Salahi, stated, “Police can make you feel safe, but the thing about watching students is it depends on their motive. Racist profiling is wrong. College should be a place where everybody should be safe. Maybe there are those who think they should have control over the college for their political purpose. Like during the Vietnam War, students rejected U.S. participation in the war. So, they want the police now to be there against similar future circumstances. It is all about economics.”

A student of Education who did not want to have her name used, said, “Since 9/11 they see Muslims as terrorists. There are so many whites and others going around making genocide. I am Palestinian. The U.S. government gave tax money to build bombs. There is a ‘domino effect.’ There is hypocrisy.”

An accounting student who was in the Marines in Afghanistan discussed the issue with us. “I agree, they don’t want people thinking about this stuff,” he said. “The NYPD story is about surveillance, especially with the digital age. You cannot have privacy.

“This country exports the most weapons by far. We are told always to fear. I am former military. I was in Afghanistan. Ninety percent of the opioids of the opioid epidemic are from Afghanistan. We are not really protecting freedom. After World War II, the US took over the role of protecting society around the world. The US has abundance, but social inequality is growing. Especially in Manhattan, there are so many people having to live out in the cold.”

Alice, whose major is TV and Radio, added, “I heard that a cop had infiltrated a Muslim group and spied on them. It’s horrible. The cop asking how to make a bomb is really disgusting—an attack on democracy.”



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