

University of Arizona students arrested for protesting Border Patrol agents

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In a vicious attack on free speech last week, three University of Arizona (UA) students were arrested and charged with criminal offenses for verbally “disrupting” a career fair featuring US Border Patrol agents.

Denise Moreno Melchor, a 20-year-old University of Arizona student, alongside fellow students Mariel Alexandra Bustamante, 22, and Marianna Ariel Coles-Curtis, 27, have all been charged by the UA Police with a Class 1 misdemeanor for “interference with the peaceful conduct of an educational institution.” In Arizona, a Class 1 misdemeanor is the most serious misdemeanor offense. It is punishable by up to six months in jail and three years’ probation, along with a \$2,500 fine plus surcharges.

At the career fair event on March 19, a young woman, who took video footage behind a slightly opened door, is heard saying, “They allow murderers to be on campus, where I pay to be here.” She repeats this statement several times, and adds that these agents are “Murder Patrol” and “an extension of the KKK.” She goes on to question these agents with a tone of indignation and anger: “How about you talk about slashing water? How about you talk about taking the shoes off migrants, letting them walk through the desert barefoot? How about you talk about all the graves of unidentified folks?”

There are in fact mass graves of hundreds of migrants who have died of starvation and exposure in attempts to cross through the border desert. Border agents have also been documented deliberately destroying water caches left in the border region to increase the chances that border crossers would die en route. Immigrants are now also dying in Border Patrol custody, including a 7-year-old boy and 8-year-old girl, both from Guatemala, who died within three weeks of

one another in December. The nickname “Murder Patrol” is an apt one.

The arrest of the three women coincides with an intensification of the Trump administration’s attack on immigrants. Since assuming office in 2017, the Trump administration has presided over a large-scale militarization of the border, including through the imposition of an emergency declaration which diverts billions from the Department of Defense to build more than 400 miles of additional border fencing. The president has also deployed troops to the border against the alleged “invasion” of a caravan of impoverished Central American workers. President Donald Trump himself lamented that the troops could not fire live rounds at the asylum seekers, “at least not yet.”

The latest repressive activities at the border are only the culmination of a long history of terror and thuggery under Democratic and Republican administrations alike.

The formation of the Border Patrol coincided with the 1924 Immigration Act, which effectively eliminated immigration from Asia and sharply reduced arrivals from Southern and Eastern Europe. Before 1924, the United States had an open border with Mexico. However, a series of supplementary laws, including one that made it a crime to enter the US outside official ports of entry, gave border agents authority to determine on the spot who could enter the country.

Initial recruitment for the US Border Patrol consisted of men who either had prior military experience, were transfers from border-town police departments, or were members of the Texas Rangers. The patrol was initially only a few hundred agents, but as it expanded it began to recruit far-right elements, including from members of the Ku Klux Klan.

From the 1950s on, the Border Patrol began a process

of intensified militarization. Senior Border Patrol agent John P. Longan was called to run Operation Wetback, a mass deportation scheme in 1954. The “interrogation” and military intelligence techniques developed through this operation were used to train foreign police through CIA-linked “public safety” programs. The Border Patrol had transformed into such a militaristic organization that in the 1970s, the US government used the Border Patrol Academy in Los Fresnos, Texas, to train puppet Latin American “security forces.”

Investigative journalists like John Crewdson had reported on Border Patrol abuse in the 1980s. He had found that Border Patrol agents “regularly engaged in beatings, murder, torture, and rape, including the rape of girls as young as 12.” Migrants were “handcuffed to cars and made to run alongside the border,” agents “pushed immigrants off of a cliff so as to make it look like an accident,” and other acts of savagery were commonplace.

The trend of militarization continued after the 1993 signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement and years later with the creation of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Department of Homeland Security after the 9/11 attacks.

Far from bringing civility to this barbaric organization, the Nobel Peace Prize winner Barack Obama ramped up deportations and poured billions into “border security”. Now the Border Patrol is controlled by openly fascist elements installed by PTrump, who has further increased border militarization and created torture centers called “ICE Detention Facilities,” where over a dozen immigrants have died and thousands are subject to excruciating conditions, all in the name of “border security.”

The three UA protesters have received no support whatsoever from campus administration. In fact, it has been quite the opposite. In a cowardly capitulation, University of Arizona President Robert Robbins came to the defense of UA Police Chief Brian Seastone, saying in an interview with the *Arizona Republic* that he feels “confident” that the police chief “exercised discretion in making these charges.” Robbins went further and said, “It was a difficult decision, but I think he weighed all the factors and made the difficult decision to charge these students based on the letter of the law.”

Enriched by the increasing costs and debt burdens on

students and parents, campus presidents such as Robbins (salary of \$1 million per year) have a financial incentive to crack down on student opposition. Trump’s signing of an executive order to “protect free speech on college campuses” on March 25, which ties federal grant money to a university’s subservience to White House dictates, gives college administrators an incentive to criminalize a left-wing student’s practice of free speech.

The incident at UA is certainly not an isolated one. Last August, the Berkeley Police Department at the University of California-Berkeley posted to its Twitter account the names, ages, photos and residences of 15 anti-fascist protesters. That event followed the announcement that all student activities on campus had to first be reviewed and approved by campus police.

In response to the arrests and the actions of the UA administration, over 300 faculty members have supported a call for the university to protect the accused students. On April 4 dozens of students at Arizona State University protested the presence of immigration enforcement agents in solidarity with the students of UA.

As the rallies held by the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality in defense of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange and whistleblower Chelsea Manning show, there is great support within the working class and among students for the defense of social protest.

The defense of the UA students and all those opposed to the repressive activities of the Border Patrol and their bosses in the Democratic and Republican parties requires the independent mobilization of the working class and student youth on a socialist and internationalist program.



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