

“You can’t really change the system from within”

Opposition to crackdown on pro-Palestinian student organizations mounts at Columbia University

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A wave of backlash has swept the campus of Columbia University (CU) following the November 10, decision by the administration to disaffiliate two of its leading pro-Palestinian campus clubs, Students for Justice for Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP).

On Tuesday evening and Wednesday afternoon last week, hundreds of CU students and faculty demonstrators rallied on CU's Morningside, Manhattan campus to protest the ongoing suppression of political opposition to the Israeli state within the institution. At the Wednesday event, over 1,000 students, academics and youth also demonstrated outside of the campus on nearby sidewalks to show support for the campus protest.

The opposition by students and faculty to the suppression of free speech on university campuses is beginning to take on an ever more political character. Students, in particular, are expressing growing hostility toward the Democratic Party and US imperialism. A WSWs reporting team interviewed participants at Wednesday's protest outside the CU Morningside campus. Andrew, an international student who studies architecture at CU, said the following:

“I’m here to protest and fight against the brutal Israeli occupation. Also I want to show Columbia University that we can’t be silenced by shutting down our clubs. Columbia University is one of the most important place to protest, as it is the beacon of the Democratic Party.”

Referring to the “March for Israel” event on Tuesday which was staged by pro-Israeli elements of the American state, Andrew said, “[i]t’s crazy that this pro-Israel protest on [Tuesday] in Washington D.C. was led by a guy who was himself an antisemite!” He was referring to John Hagee, one of the featured speakers, a Christian fundamentalist pastor.

I’m also aware of the fact that the Canadian Parliament gave a standing ovation to a former S.S. member. Canada is one of the few countries that has been vetoing all diplomatic proceedings that in any way support Palestine.

It’s shocking to me that Bernie didn’t support a ceasefire. Sanders used to be the one person who used to give me hope. But now, he, and the rest of the opposition within the establishment, they all say nice things, and of course, I agree with the nice things that they say. But they are all part of the system. They are part of Washington D.C. They are one minor voice that is part of the machine. This international protest movement, on the other hand, has much more powerful potential to change things.

Christina, a Columbia alum who studied sociology, also spoke to the WSWs about the actions of the former women’s college, Barnard College, a unit of Columbia..

I was following the response of Barnard to this situation, and their creation of their antisemitism task force. I guess I support that, but what about the need for an Islamophobia task force? These forces are interlinked. It’s not like one is against the other.

The charge that anti-Zionism equals anti-Judaism is the Israeli propaganda machine trying to conflate two things that are not the same. They do it because if they push that claim, then no one would want to come out as anti-Israel out of fear of being branded as antisemitic.

People are calling Biden ‘Genocide Joe.’ I think that what is happening really shows that the position of the American president, no matter who you are, you’re going to end up being a war criminal. Because the US president has to uphold American imperialism.

You can’t really change the system from within. No matter who the leaders are, no matter how liberal they all claim to be, empty promises will be made, and the people will be betrayed.

Biden claims he’s a president for all the people... but then, clearly with his support of Israel, he’s really trying to do damage control. He’s sending billions of tax dollars over there... It’s this age-old conversation, we always have money for war, but we don’t have money for healthcare, for housing, for education, and all of these other social problems.

There’s also this idea that politics in the US will always be within the binary, two-party system, but that’s kind of what the oppressors want you to think. Governments are not going to concede anything without the power of the people and mass movements.

Another participant at the demonstration told the WSWs, “I was here in 1968. The university suppressed antiwar speech then, and they’re doing the exact same thing now.”

The protest on Wednesday hosted approximately 200 faculty members from Columbia, Barnard College, and Teachers College—two CU-affiliated institutions located adjacent to the Morningside Heights campus. Faculty members spoke to a crowd of hundreds of students and distributed leaflets containing demands issued to the university administration,

including the reinstatement of the student groups and an explicit commitment to the protection of freedom of speech and assembly.

Following the suspension of the SJP and JVP, an open letter denouncing the proscription, penned by a group identifying itself as “concerned Jewish students at Columbia and Barnard,” was signed by hundreds. The letter read:

[W]e are writing this letter to unequivocally condemn the censorship of pro-Palestine speech, which has now escalated into the suspension of SJP and JVP.

We applaud the bravery of JVP, SJP and others who continue to express their views even in the face of unprecedented censorship attempts...

It continued,

To completely censor the two most prominent student organizations representing the Palestinian perspective, one of whom is explicitly Jewish in nature, is to stunt all Israel/Palestine discourse through intimidation and violation of our academic freedom... We as Jewish community members explicitly condemn the silencing of pro-Palestinian student voices because we feel this action has been unjustly taken in our names.

Another open letter addressed to CU President Minouche Shafik and written by a group identifying itself as “Jewish faculty across the United States and around the world” demanded that the university “reinstate Students For Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace and apologize to the impacted students.” It denounced the censorship of the SJP and the JVP and applauded the students opposing the genocide.

The rationale presented by the CU administration for the suppression of the SJP and the JVP was that the groups had “repeatedly violated University policies related to holding campus events, culminating in an unauthorized event” on November 9. This November 9 event was connected with the “Shut It Down For Palestine” initiative, which was part of a broad international movement, the widespread support of which was called for in a WSWs perspective on November 8.

It is now clear that the pretext for the censorship of the SJP and JVP was completely manufactured. A report by the *Columbia Spectator*, the official CU student newspaper, documented that in advance of the suspension of SJP and JVP, an initiative by the administration was already underway to revise university policies regarding campus group activity. These revisions included the procedural mechanisms through which the administration subsequently suspended the SJP and the JVP. Additionally, the revisions granted more sweeping powers to the university to sanction and discipline student groups and individuals in violation of its unilaterally devised rules of conduct.

The university administration has also seized upon the November 9 “Shut It Down” event to ramp up the policing of pro-Palestinian activity on campus. A CU student publication reported that the university had recently formed a partnership with the New York Police Department (NYPD), acting in coordination with the FBI, purportedly to “support” and “protect” students’ right to free speech and safety. In advance of Tuesday’s demonstration, the university announced that it would restrict entrances to campus, which are normally open to the public, to only those possessing official CU identification cards.

The Board of Trustees is closely tied to the Democratic Party, the military and Wall Street, and the university has long been an ideological

bastion of the American ruling class and its key ally in the Middle East. This fact is not lost on the university’s student body. On November 1, 30 students of the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) staged a walkout of a lecture given by Hilary Clinton which was part of an inaugural series sponsored by the Institute for Global Politics (IGP). The IGP is a newly-formed subdivision of SIPA, and its mission is to foster collaboration between elements of the highest levels of the US state and the Columbia student body. The president of SIPA is a former Israeli intelligence official.

The Columbia University administration is spearheading what is a state-backed, bipartisan assault on democratic rights of students and workers. On Thursday, the US Department of Education, led by Democrat Miguel Cardona, announced the launching of an investigation into six universities, including CU and UPenn, for violations of the Civil Rights Act related to alleged instances of antisemitism on campus. This initiative is part of the broader efforts by the US establishment—intensified in the weeks following October 7—to equate all opposition to the Israeli state with antisemitism.

The first US institution to ban chapters of SJP was the University of Florida system, at the instigation of far-right Republican Governor Ron DeSantis. This was followed by a similar action at Brandeis University, a private university with deep and historic ties to the Israeli government.

In October, the US Senate passed a resolution on a bipartisan basis which slandered as “antisemitic” pro-Palestinian students groups, specifically naming the SJP. Last week, the US House of Representatives moved to censure Democratic Representative Rashida Tlaib for her opposition to the genocidal assault on Gaza by the Israeli government.

Students and youth who oppose the US-funded genocide of Palestinians by Israel are beginning to recognize that they confront an entire political and economic system which is complicit. In order to wage a successful struggle, however, a decisive political turn to the working class must be made. This involves the building of organizations independent of both political parties of big business, as well their agencies within pseudo-left and the bureaucratic union apparatus. We urge those who wish to take up this fight to contact the Socialist Equality Parties (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) today.



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