Political and media establishment slander New York City high school students protesting Gaza genocide

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In an effort to defame young people opposed to Israel's genocide in Gaza, New York City's political establishment and corporate media have roundly condemned a student protest that took place last week at Hillcrest High School in Jamaica, Queens, falsely characterizing it as an outburst of violent antisemitism.

On Monday, November 20 at around 11 a.m., hundreds of students at Hillcrest left their classrooms and occupied the school building's halls. The protest had been planned via social media after students discovered a photo of one of their teachers holding a sign saying, "I stand with Israel," taken at a pro-Israel rally on October 9 in Queens and posted on Facebook.

After students discovered the photo, a Hillcrest student posted on social media, "This marks, to many who are Muslims and in support of Palestine a sign that our own community has failed us." It must be stressed that nearly a third of the 2,500 students at Hillcrest are Muslim.

The student's post added, "Amid the international war crimes Israel is committing, [our teacher] had the audacity to show her support for tyrannical rule and the blatant ethnic cleansing of a people. … This is not only a sign of oppression, but a sign that we are unsafe in our own educational walls."

On Saturday, the *New York Post* published an article that characterized the protest in sensationalist terms like "mob," "mayhem" and "ran amok," and called it "one of the most frightening incidents of antisemitism in New York schools and colleges since the Hamas massacre in Israel Oct. 7 sparked the Jewish state's war with Gaza."

The "Hamas massacre" on October 7 was in fact a popular uprising of Gazans against Israeli oppression, and the "Jewish state's war with Gaza" is not so much a war as it is a war crime—a full-scale genocide against the Palestinian people that has killed 20,000 people, including 8,000 children, comparable only to the crimes of the Nazis.

The *Post* claimed that many students "tried to barge into the teacher's classroom," implying that students had barricaded the Jewish teacher into her classroom and aimed to assault her.

But school administrators and police officers had in fact moved the teacher to a locked office on a different floor of the building when the protest began, and she was never in any danger.

New York's City's right-wing Democratic Mayor Eric Adams reposted the *Post*'s article on Twitter/X with the statement, "The vile show of antisemitism at Hillcrest High School was motivated by ignorance-fueled hatred, plain and simple, and it will not be tolerated in any of our schools, let alone anywhere else in our city."

On Sunday, Republican city councilwoman Vicki Paladino, in an extended post on Twitter/X, wrote, "Hillcrest High School must be shut down pending a full and thorough investigation, and the administration must be held accountable."

Dredging up an incident five days before the protest in which a handful of students assaulted a school safety officer, Paladino made a fascistic appeal for "order and discipline," writing that "the administration of Hillcrest is totally compromised."

Prior to giving his warmongering speech promising further crackdowns on anti-war protests under the guise of combating "antisemitism," on Wednesday, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (Democrat-New York) wrote in a guest essay for the *New York Times*: "What happened last week at the Queens high school is an example of crossing that threshold" from "legitimate criticism of Israeli policies" to "something darker."

"Walking out of school to march in support of Palestinians is completely legitimate," Schumer wrote. "But forcing a Jewish teacher to hide because she had attended a rally in support of Israel is antisemitism, pure and simple." In his speech from the Senate floor, given hours after his *Times* column was published, Schumer doubled down on his

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denunciations of the Hillcrest students, accusing them of running "rampant in the hallways."

On Tuesday, the federal Department of Education revealed that the New York City Department of Education and Harvard University were the latest additions to a growing list of universities and school districts that are being investigated over alleged incidents of "antisemitism" and Islamophobia since October 7. Presumably this is motivated by the protest at Hillcrest.

Since the October 7 uprising, imperialist governments and media pundits have transformed "antisemitism" into a swear word to be thrown at any opponent of Israel's genocide in Gaza. But the slandering of high school students taking a stand against genocide is a new low that signifies the ruling class's growing desperation to quell social unrest.

Certain establishment figures have made a half-hearted effort to quell the sensationalism of the press. "To speak of every child in this school as antisemitic is simply wrong," Queens borough president Donovan Richards said. Because the Department of Education had not yet addressed the genocide, he said, "you had this powder keg waiting to explode."

In a meeting held at Hillcrest on Monday, New York City schools chancellor David Banks said that the "notion that these kids are radicalized" is irresponsible, but he still condemned the protest for targeting a teacher for "expressing her Jewish identity." Banks also pledged to ensure the pro-Israel teacher's safe return to teaching at Hillcrest.

What no one is asking is: Why were hundreds of students at Hillcrest High School moved to take action against the Gaza genocide, and why did the protest take the form that it did? What conditions and experiences have shaped their view of the world?

This is the experience of a high school senior at every four-year high school in the United States:

- **Freshman year**. Throughout 2020 and continuing thereafter, governments around the world have allowed COVID-19 to kill and disable millions of people.
- **Sophomore year**. In 2021, former president of the United States Donald Trump launched a coup to establish a presidential dictatorship that just barely failed to accomplish its objectives.
- **Junior year**. In 2022, the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine broke out, risking nuclear war between the United States and Russia.
- **Senior year**. In 2023, the imperialist powers openly back Israel's genocide in Gaza. A World War III between nuclear-armed powers draws into view.

Under these conditions, is it any surprise that young people are disgusted with the present social order? And, furthermore, is it any surprise that, as they are only just becoming conscious of that disgust, that they first associate it with their school environment and the authority figures closest to them?

School buildings are dilapidated and Mayor Adams announced nearly a half billion dollars in cuts to the Department of Education earlier this month. The number of homeless students in New York City public schools is now at an all-time high of 104,000. Schools are major vectors of COVID-19 transmission, but children are forced to attend in-person learning, regardless of ongoing risks to their health, so that their parents can go to work and profits can keep flowing to the rich.

Everything that working class young people experience in the schools has its own way of saying: "The people in power don't care about you." Young people hear that message loud and clear, and they are beginning to respond. This is the real significance of high school students' widespread identification with and defense of the people of Gaza.

The global wave of high school student protests against the genocide in Gaza has produced immense nervousness in the ruling class. In advance of planned high school student walkouts on November 9, Chancellor Banks warned educators to keep their political beliefs out of the classroom in an email to school staff. Even out-of-school political activity, he wrote, can violate city rules if it "disrupts … the school environment."

New York City educators defied Banks's instructions and held a protest on November 20 to demand that the United Federation of Teachers, the organization that claims to represent their interests, pass a resolution calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

Students and young people have a tremendous opportunity to transform the situation, but they need a perspective and program to do so. Students and youth should turn to the international working class, which has the power to disrupt the government's backing of Israel's genocide through a general strike. For high school students, this includes in particular, their educators, many of whom are outraged at the slaughter in Gaza but prevented from speaking out by censorship in school districts.

To become leaders in this struggle, students and youth should study the history of Trotskyism and take up the fight for socialism by joining the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.

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