

Columbia University students and faculty protest ongoing genocide and further attacks on academic freedom

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On Friday, as the official death toll in Gaza rose above 25,000, Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) chapters at Columbia University in New York held a protest under the slogan, “Hands off Yemen and Gaza! No more tuition for the war machine.” The event took place outside of the Low Library on campus with around 300 students and faculty attending. It was sponsored by Columbia University Apartheid Divest, a coalition of more than 100 student groups formed in the aftermath of the proscription of SJP and JVP on campus last semester.

The rally took place amid mounting attacks on democratic rights and academic freedom on college campuses throughout the US. In the lead-up to the beginning of the semester, Barnard College at Columbia updated their student guidelines, stating, “no form of protest (vocal or silent) will be acceptable inside” campus buildings. In response to recent actions by the university, a faculty-led Columbia Academic Freedom Council was formed last week.

The suppression of protests on campus is not being limited to the indoors. At the start of the Friday rally, a Columbia administration representative ordered the students gathering outside the protest to disband, warning them that the action was “unauthorized” by the university. The representative handed out flyers warning students that they could be suspended for the rest of the semester if they did not comply. Students courageously ignored this shameful attempt to shut down their protest.

In their chants and speeches, protesters, including students and faculty, condemned the ongoing Israeli genocide in Gaza, US imperialism and the attacks on Yemen, all border walls and apartheid, and Columbia’s actions and investments supporting genocide. Other chants highlighted the radicalization of students over the genocide: “The revolution has begun/Your students have woken up.”

“We are reading the names of colleagues of ours at the universities in Gaza—every single one of which has been destroyed—who were killed between the 7th of October and the 7th of January,” a representative from the Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine at Columbia, Barnard, and Teachers College said.

A student speaker commented on the attacks on democratic rights on college campuses by right-wing forces. “It is incomprehensible that we are being manipulated into distracting arguments over the respectability politics of our chants and slogans while Israeli officials openly call for genocide. ... We want you all

to know, we do not care about the feelings of oppressors. We will not water down our rhetoric to be passable to genocide-apologists and colonizers. To Zionists, the issue is not how we demand liberation, it is the fact that we dare to demand it at all.”

A small counter-demonstration of 30 Zionists attempted to disrupt the protest and antagonize students with noisemakers and music.

Following the speeches, anti-genocide protesters marched and chanted around campus and then reassembled at the library steps for concluding speeches. It was during this time that two Columbia General Studies students and former IDF soldiers sprayed the crowd with something resembling a chemical spray called “Skunk.”

Skunk is a foul-smelling chemical which has been described as a mix of sewage and rotting corpses that can cause severe nausea, skin and eye irritation. The IDF claims to use it for “crowd control,” but in reality, it is deployed to harass and inflict collective punishment on Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) strongly condemns this attack on students’ democratic rights.

A delegation from the IYSSE attended the Columbia rally and spoke with Robin, a student, about the situation at Columbia. Their name has been changed to preserve their anonymity. This interview was conducted before the Skunk attack took place.

Last semester, [Columbia] sent me a conduct notice for talking about my dead family in Gaza. I spoke about how 14 of my family members were bombed and they sent me a disciplinary notice. And when I tried to appeal it with the administration, they couldn’t find anything that I did wrong. But they still sent a conduct notice to intimidate me.

Students here are overwhelmingly pro-Palestine and that scares donors. The donors do not like seeing the protests, so Columbia is clamping down on student speech and student expression by intimidation, sending people conduct notices, trying to get people in trouble, academic sanctions, etc. I went to [a state school] for my undergrad and I had

significantly more freedom of speech there compared to Columbia.

Robin also spoke about reports showing that the Israeli government has been engaged in an influencing campaign on college campuses.

“They’re trying to get people [fired]. They are naming and shaming. You can see that from websites like Canary Mission. They’re paying influencers and speakers to show up on campus who represent the Israeli occupation. A lot of the Zionists here, a lot of them are former IDF. General Studies College at Columbia has an exchange program with the IDF.”

Robin then addressed the role of Columbia Business School Assistant Professor and far-right Zionist Shai Davidai, who called for the “eradication” of pro-Palestinian student organizations at US universities.

He’s been harassing us for months, calling us pro-terror, all kinds of stuff and he doesn’t face any kind of consequences. The school has done nothing. I’ve reported him to university administration. Other faculty have tried to talk to him about his behavior. I even tried to meet with him and he wanted to argue with me over email. Columbia lets people like that teach and if there’s no consequences, frankly, it’s just really disappointing. I am taking out student loans to be called a terrorist every day. And, frankly, if I wasn’t halfway through my program, I would transfer. It’s been an extremely frustrating experience as a Palestinian-American student.

The day after Friday’s protest, Davidai took to social media to complain about the doxxing of one of the individuals responsible for the chemical attack, ludicrously stating, “Please share to let the world know how little Columbia cares about Jewish and Israeli students, faculty and staff.”

An IYSSE member spoke of the need to orient the growing anti-war movement towards the working class internationally, not towards the Biden administration and asked for Robin’s thoughts about this perspective.

A lot of Americans are frustrated with how the Biden administration is handling the situation and understandably so. People are struggling to pay their bills. They’re worrying about how they’re going to cover rent, people are getting second and third jobs. And the US is like, “Oh, we can’t help you with that. We can’t send out another stimulus check. But we can send \$14 billion to the Israeli occupation in order to bomb Palestinians.” It’s horrifying.

I’m not necessarily surprised, given how much our government has invested in the military industrial complex. And how many people in Congress personally benefit, their stocks personally benefit from war, from these weapons

manufacturers.

The day after I found out about my family members dying in Gaza, Biden doubted the death toll. So that’s not something that’s easily forgivable.

I’m far from the only Palestinian student who’s experienced loss in their family. One of my Palestinian friends here, they lost 20 family members. All the cousins on their mom’s side are dead. Biden doesn’t care. They don’t care. They don’t see us as human. You can see that by how they talk to us. You can see that by the messaging that they use. They don’t see our lives as a value. And so a lot of us are really done with Joe Biden, a lot of people are really done with the Democratic Party. I think we’ll see a lot of people registering as independent voting for third parties or maybe just staying home, you don’t know.

When the IYSSE raised Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders’ support for “Israel’s right to defend itself,” his refusal to call for a ceasefire and his recent backing of the US bombing of Yemen, along with the refusal of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) to issue a single statement opposing the attacks on democratic rights on campuses, Robin said, “No, they haven’t. I’m not really surprised.” They added:

To be honest, I don’t really have faith in our institutions, I have faith in the people. I mean, the amount of students who are out here in the snow, in the cold—it’s really inspiring. We are going to win. I believe that in my heart, I really, really do.

I know that time is on our side. This is not sustainable for them. As a Palestinian, I’ve never experienced this type of support for Palestine in my life, ever. I really do believe we are at a turning point.

After the protest was over, Robin commented on the Zionist skunk attack on students, stating, “The people who did this were Columbia students who served in the IDF. This was premeditated and done with the aim to hurt students. Columbia needs to take immediate action; this behavior is unacceptable on a college campus.”



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