

Columbia University blames student victims hospitalized after Zionist chemical attack

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At least 10 students at Columbia University in New York City have been hospitalized following a chemical attack on a pro-Palestinian protest held on campus last Friday.

The two individuals who sprayed students with a chemical believed to be a military weapon called “Skunk” have been identified as General Studies students at Columbia and former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers. Earlier in the protest, the attackers called Jewish students present “self-hating Jews” and other students “Jew killers” and “terrorists,” according to those present.

Skunk has been used by the IDF on Palestinians as a “crowd control” device and as a form of collective punishment. It creates an extremely putrid smell likened to rotting corpses and sewage. It is very difficult to get off clothing and can cause severe nausea, vomiting and burning in the eyes.

After students reported the attack to university officials following Friday’s protest, Columbia remained silent for two days. It was only on Sunday, well after news of the attack went viral on social media, that it released a brief “update” from its Department of Public Safety. The update tersely stated it was “investigating incidents reported in connection with Friday’s protest that are of great concern” and working with “local and federal authorities in this investigation, with the NYPD taking a lead role.”

On Monday morning, Interim Provost Dennis Mitchell sent an email to the university community which did not address the attack but instead called for a “renewed focus on our core mission of education, research and service.”

Mitchell advanced the “Dialogue Across Difference initiative,” which he said “provides students, faculty and staff tools to navigate challenging conversations and additional opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives.”

Ludicrously, Mitchell then wrote that “Columbia University is committed to defending the right of all members of our community to safely exercise their right to expression and to invite, listen to, and challenge views, including those that may be offensive and even hurtful to many of us.” The email concludes by emphasizing the Rules of University Conduct and what acts are considered violations.

This was paired with university officials on Monday telling multiple news publications that “Friday’s protest violated University policies and was therefore unsanctioned” and that “these policies exist to maintain personnel on scene for the safety of the community.”

This vile attempt by the university to victim blame pro-Palestinian students comes after it banned Columbia’s Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) chapters last semester. It is part of the broader state-led propaganda campaign,

concentrated on campuses, aimed at falsely equating all opposition to the ongoing genocide in Gaza, which has officially killed over 25,000 civilians, as “antisemitic.”

Columbia’s response has emboldened figures like Columbia Business School Assistant Professor and prominent Zionist Shai Davidai, who has called for the “eradication” of pro-Palestinian student organizations who “cheer on terrorists” at US universities. In response to a planned SJP-JVP protest tomorrow against the attack, Davidai used the university’s terminology of an “unauthorized protest” to denounce it on Twitter, adding, “The leaders of Columbia have lost control of campus.”

As Zionist professors and right-wing elements agitated against students’ democratic rights, on Monday, the Columbia SJP and JVP chapters posted on Instagram photos of students in hospital beds with the caption:

Two other students, the co-president of [School of International and Public Affairs-Palestinian Working Group (PWG)], and a Columbia JVP member, have been rushed to the hospital in an ambulance. The co-president of PWG required a chest x-ray, nebulizer and EKG due to toxic chemical inhalation. The JVP member is experiencing a persistent, debilitating headache and nausea. As we are writing this, more students are reporting that they are vomiting and returning to urgent care after having already visited. Meanwhile, @columbia and @barnardcollege are still dead silent about an act of chemical warfare that occurred on their campus and against their students.

Rising social anger at the university’s indifference to the students’ health compelled Provost Mitchell to issue another email to the Columbia community Monday evening focused on damage control. He noted “what appear to have been serious crimes, possibly hate crimes” at a protest, but he did not comment on the character or purpose of the protest. The email stated that the two students/former IDF soldiers responsible for the assault were banned from campus during the ongoing investigation.

“We condemn in the strongest possible terms any threats or acts of violence directed toward anyone in our community. The University is committed to taking urgent action with the appropriate authorities in any such cases. The safety of every single member of this community is paramount,” the email concluded.

The Columbia chapter of the SJP powerfully responded, writing:

We want to make it clear that Columbia University facilitated the chemical attack on Friday through sustained negligence and emboldenment of Zionist hatred for months. While the school is currently ignoring the emails of students begging for guidance as they are rushed to the hospital, their Instagram is quick to delete death threat comments on its posts rather than hold the commenter accountable—just as they are doing now with the perpetrators of Friday’s attack. Their silence and facilitation is going to put more of us in danger precisely because people see that they can get away with this. We warned Columbia that we were facing threats and unrelenting harassment for months and they did nothing. It seems that they still do not care.

Palestinian and anti-Zionist students are still not safe from Israeli soldiers on American college campuses.

Shortly following this post on Monday, the Columbia SJP and JVP released a joint press statement:

We are outraged and horrified that eight [now ten] Columbia students have been hospitalized and dozens more have sought urgent medical attention after two former Israeli military soldiers violently attacked a peaceful campus protest with an illegal chemical-based weapon. Students are traumatized, sick, and have hospital bills to cover on top of schoolwork. This is unacceptable.

... US elected officials—who were quick to haul university presidents before Congress in McCarthyite hearings intended to smear and silence Palestinian student advocacy—so far have nothing to say of the two former Israeli soldiers who just attacked dozens of US students on an American college campus with an illegal chemical-based weapon. The double-standard is clear. Who will protect students who are advocating for safety and freedom for Palestinians?

Columbia must do more to not only hold these former Israeli military soldiers responsible for their targeted assault on Columbia students, but to also ensure that all students on campus are able to speak freely and safely—including the right to advocate for a ceasefire and an end to Israel’s brutal, decades-long oppression of Palestinians.

Columbia SJP also commented on Monday: “Where is the Special Committee on Campus Safety now? Where are you??? Students were hospitalized after a hate crime on campus committed by fellow students and the school was silent for two days! Is this “Safety” Committee only useful for suspending our student groups and putting us at risk in an already hostile environment?”

As these students correctly note, the problem is not only Columbia’s failure to act to protect academic freedom, democratic rights and personal safety on campus. Columbia’s response takes place within a broader campaign led by both right-wing, pro-war capitalist parties in the US, which have whipped up an atmosphere that actively encourages and incites this type of far-right violence. The chemical

attack at Columbia is the outcome of open and aggressive support for the genocide of Palestinians at the highest levels of the US state, backing the fascist Israeli regime.

As the WWSWS recently wrote:

The physical attack at Columbia University marks a dangerous new stage in the assault on the democratic rights of the working class more broadly. The fact that former IDF soldiers appear to have deployed the same weapons against student protesters in the US that they previously deployed against Palestinians under military occupation underscores the intrinsic link between the crimes of US imperialism and its allies abroad and the attack on democratic rights at home.

We therefore call for the broadest possible support for the students under attack at Columbia University by workers and youth across New York City and beyond. They must demand that the Columbia University administration investigate and punish those responsible for the attack—including those who have incited violence against opponents of the genocide. The club status for the SJP and JVP must be immediately reinstated, with no conditions attached, and their right—and that of the entire student body and faculty and staff—to freedom of speech must be ensured.

Student organizations at Columbia are calling for a student walkout across campus today (January 24) at 2:00 p.m. for an emergency protest against the Zionist attack and Columbia’s response. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in New York strongly supports this action and calls on students and workers throughout the city to rally in support of Columbia students as part of a counteroffensive against attacks on academic freedom and the genocide in Gaza.

But in order to combat and defend against such attacks, students should not put their faith in appealing to Columbia University, the NYPD or the politicians responsible for this violence. The only social force that can actually put an end to attacks on democratic rights, genocide and world war is the working class, in New York City, throughout the US and internationally, armed with a socialist perspective and program against the capitalist system.



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