

Columbia University latest target in state-led McCarthyite campaign against anti-genocide protests

Elliott Murtagh
15 March 2024

On Monday, the US House Committee on Education and the Workforce announced that Columbia University in New York City will be the focus of an April 17 hearing entitled, “Columbia in Crisis: Columbia University’s Response to Antisemitism.” In a post on Twitter/X on the hearing, the House Committee stated that Columbia President Dr. Nemat Shafik and Columbia’s Board of Trustees Co-Chairs will “answer for how they have mishandled antisemitic incidents on their campus.”

This is only the latest development in the US ruling class’s McCarthyite witch-hunt and propaganda campaign, which has nothing to do with combatting genuine antisemitism. The state is seeking to suppress and shut down wide-spread left-wing opposition on campuses to Zionism and Israel’s ongoing genocide in Gaza by falsely and explicitly equating all expressions of anti-Zionism with antisemitism. It is part of a massive attack on academic freedom and democratic rights on college campuses aimed at silencing all opposition to war and the crimes of imperialism.

In December of last year, the House Committee held a hearing chaired by New York Republican Elise Stefanik, who is a proponent of the anti-immigrant and antisemitic Great Replacement conspiracy theory claiming that Jewish people, immigrants and left-wing groups are “invading” the US and seeking to “replace white people.” Stefanik’s hearing targeted the presidents of Harvard, MIT and the University of Pennsylvania, claiming they allowed “rampant antisemitism” on their campuses by not sufficiently cracking down on pro-Palestinian protests. This resulted in the subsequent ouster of both UPenn President Liz Magill and Harvard President Claudine Gay.

After the hearing, House Committee on Education chair and far-right North Carolina Republican Virginia Foxx announced the opening of a “formal investigation into the learning environments at Harvard, UPenn, and MIT and their policies and disciplinary procedures.” Menacingly, Foxx added that “other universities should expect investigations as well, as their litany of similar failures has not gone unnoticed.”

Foxx’s press release this week on the upcoming April 17 Columbia hearing states that “some of the worst cases of antisemitic assaults, harassment, and vandalism on campus have occurred at Columbia University.” The brief press statement quotes Columbia undergraduate Eden Yadegar—who is Students

Supporting Israel (SSI) Columbia chapter president and campus liaison for the right-wing American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)—who was invited to speak at a February 29 House Committee “roundtable,” saying, “We have been attacked with sticks outside of our library. We have been surrounded by angry mobs.”

Yadegar has been prominently featured by mainstream news outlets, including CBS’s 60 Minutes, saying she fears for her safety on campus because she sometimes has to walk past not one, but two anti-genocide pro-Palestinian protests!

Foxx’s press release turns reality on its head.

What has been the reality facing Columbia students sickened by the US-funded genocide of over 32,000 Palestinians and expressing their right to protest? What has been the reality facing Palestinian students or anti-Zionist Jewish students?

In November, Columbia University made a sweeping attack on academic freedom and democratic rights by banning the campus chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) due to “unauthorized” peaceful protests. This week, the New York Civil Liberties Union and Palestine Legal sued Columbia over this unlawful and targeted suspension.

On January 19, a large peaceful pro-Palestinian protest at Columbia attended by students—including Jewish students—and faculty was attacked by a chemical “Skunk” weapon by two students who were former Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers, hospitalizing dozens in attendance. Skunk, which smells like a putrid mix of rotting corpses and sewage, has been used by the Israeli military on Palestinians for “crowd control.” It is extremely difficult to get off clothing and can cause severe nausea and vomiting.

In response, Columbia blamed the student victims, calling the protest “unsanctioned” and merely stated that the NYPD was leading an investigation. Almost two months on, Columbia has not issued any statement on what occurred at the protest or the results of the investigation, and no charges or arrests have been made.

In February, Barnard College banned all dorm decor on room doors and windows following widespread pro-Palestinian signs and banners, citing “isolating those who have different views and beliefs.”

A Columbia student who previously spoke to the World Socialist Web Site, stated, “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.”

This week, the SJP leaked audio of Columbia Vice President Gerry Rosberg justifying the crackdown on pro-Palestinian speech, absurdly stating, “I could imagine... that an Israeli student being told that their state is an apartheid state, a racist state committing genocide seems to them like an incitement of violence against them.”

Columbia’s responses have only emboldened far-right figures like Columbia Business School Assistant Professor Shai Davidai, who calls for the “eradication” of pro-Palestinian student organizations.

The use of a chemical weapon on peaceful pro-Palestinian students at an elite university on American soil has not merely been met with silence and cover-up by both Columbia and the state, but triggered Representative Foxx to double down and send Columbia a summons only a few weeks after the January 19 attack.

This February 12 Committee letter addressed to the Columbia and Barnard administration is a sweeping and exhaustive attack on academic freedom by the US Congress. In addition to requesting “all records of requests to conduct protests at Columbia, including their disposition, since October 7, 2023” and Jewish enrollment numbers since 2003, the letter requests:

All documents and communications...referring and relating to:

a. The activities of Columbia Students for Justice in Palestine, Columbia-Barnard Jewish Voice for Peace, Columbia University Apartheid Divest, Columbia Law Students for Palestine, and/or Columbia Social Workers 4 Palestine since October

7, 2023;

b. Posts by Columbia students, faculty, staff, and other Columbia affiliates on Sidechat and other social media platforms targeting Jews, Israelis, Israel, Zionists, or Zionism;

c. Anti-Israel protests at Columbia since October 7, 2023, and any assaults, harassment, and other disruptions to education and student life related to them;

Columbia SJP posted on social media that Columbia’s internet services were also being surveilled to provide evidence for the Congressional investigation, without any notice to students.

Attempting to justify these requests, the letter cites dozens of “numerous incidents of antisemitic assaults, harassment, and vandalism at Columbia.” Citing a handful of examples gives a clear idea of how the House Committee is smearing all anti-Zionist actions as “rampant antisemitism.”

• On October 19, 2023, Student Workers of Columbia –

United Auto Workers Local 2710, which represents over 3,000 undergraduate and graduate student workers at Columbia, issued a statement saying, “we stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people” and “affirm their right to self-determination and freedom from apartheid.” The statement condemned what it called “75 years of Israeli settler-colonial rule” and “dehumanizing, unsupported claims of Israeli victimhood.” The union represents teaching assistants and instructors in positions of authority over Jewish and Israeli students.

• At an October 12, 2023, anti-Israel protest by Columbia’s chapters of SJP and JVP, students chanted “from the river to the sea” and held a “die-in.” Following the rally, the crowd of protestors moved toward the university’s Kraft Center for Jewish Life, causing the building to be locked down and Jewish students to shelter inside. During the protest, a Jewish student wearing an Israeli flag was yelled at and called a “murderer,” while another Jewish student leaving the protest had an Israeli flag he was wearing torn off and thrown down a subway staircase.

• On January 31, 2024, posters appeared across campus with an image of a blue and white skunk with a Star of David on its back and the captions “Beware! Skunk on Campus” and “brought to you in collaboration by Columbia University and the IOF [Israeli Occupation Forces].”

• On December 8, 2023, in violation of their suspension, SJP used a table reserved by another group to distribute anti-Israel pamphlets saying “[f]rom the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”

• On November 16, 2023, members of the Columbia Law Coalition for a Free Palestine occupied Columbia Law School’s lobby for nearly three hours in an anti-Israel protest in violation of multiple university policies, disrupting classes using a megaphone.

The House letter wholly avoids any mention of instances of Islamophobia or the January 19 Zionist attack.

This Orwellian propaganda campaign, taking place amidst the beginning stages of a new world war, must be strongly opposed and Columbia students under attack defended. This requires a turn to the the working class—the only social force capable of fighting against war, fascism and attacks on democratic rights—armed with a socialist program. This is the perspective the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and the Socialist Equality Party’s presidential candidates, Joseph Kishore and Jerry White, fight for.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact