The “divest from Israel” referendum at the University of Michigan and the pro-Democratic Party politics of the DSA

International Youth and Students for Social Equality at the University of Michigan
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The TAHRIR Coalition, a group of student organizations at the University of Michigan, is sponsoring a referendum this week on a resolution demanding that the university divest from companies doing business with Israel and drop charges against 40 students arrested last November for peacefully occupying university offices to protest the US/Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at U-M agrees with these demands and calls for a “yes” vote on the resolution. The University of Michigan, which has an endowment of $17.9 billion, has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in firms involved in the manufacture and sale of drones, surveillance technologies and other weapons to the Israel Defense Forces. The university is thus directly implicated in the genocide.

We warn, however, against any illusions that protest resolutions addressed to university officials—or, for that matter, politicians, parties and governments complicit in the Nazi-style slaughter of Palestinians—will halt the war crimes being carried out jointly by the fascist Netanyahu and his military supplier, “Genocide Joe” Biden.

While many involved in the TAHRIR Coalition are motivated by outrage over the genocide, a warning must be made. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and its youth arm, the YDSA, which are the dominant political forces within the Coalition as well as the graduate student instructors’ union (GEO) at U-M, are using “left” rhetoric to block the development of an independent movement against US imperialism and channel the opposition of workers and youth back behind the Democratic Party.

We will return to the role of the DSA. However, it is first necessary to understand clearly the significance of the genocide and what is producing it. Only on this basis can one develop a political strategy for stopping it.

The ethnic cleansing of Gaza is one front in an escalating global war of imperialist conquest led by Washington and directed against Russia in Europe and ultimately China in Asia. Never has the risk of nuclear war been greater. The fight against world war raises the most serious and fundamental political issues. This is already demonstrated by the more than five months of bombings, executions, and deliberate starving of the people of Gaza.

These horrors immediately provoked a wave of mass protests in every part of the world. Week after week, millions of students, youth and workers of all nationalities and ethnicities, including many thousands of Jews, have marched to demand a ceasefire. The perspective of those guiding the movement has been to pressure the governments and political parties backing Israel to shift their policy and impose a halt to the genocide.

What has been the result? Tel Aviv and Washington have doubled down on their campaign of murder in Gaza, even as the Zionist regime openly prepares an even greater bloodbath in Rafah, the last refuge of 1.5 million Gazan civilians.

Governments allied with Israel have launched a savage attack on democratic rights under the grotesquely cynical banner of opposing “left-wing antisemitism”—equating opposition to genocide against Palestinians by the apartheid Zionist state with hatred of Jews.

In the US, the Biden administration and both big business parties have joined hands with fascists and real antisemites in a McCarthyite witch-hunt against students who protest in support of the Palestinians. The aim is to intimidate, silence and criminalize opposition to war and genocide. At U-M, the administration has stepped up its repression with the threat of expulsion and criminal

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prosecution against students, faculty and staff who continue to demonstrate against the mass killing in Gaza.

In an election where the so-called "choice" is between the fascist Trump and the war criminal Biden, the latter appeals to the former to join hands in attacking immigrants, while the Democratic Party declares "all-out war" to exclude third party and independent candidates from the ballot. As always in times of imperialist war, bourgeois democracy is revealed to be a veneer for the political dictatorship of a corporate oligarchy that controls the country's wealth and its official parties.

Political conclusions must be drawn! There is no lack of popular anger and determination to fight. The mass opposition to genocide and war coincides with a growing international movement of workers against exploitation and inequality and a rebellion against the pro-corporate trade union bureaucracies. What is lacking is a viable political perspective and strategy.

This movement must be armed with a socialist, internationalist and revolutionary strategy because war, genocide, dictatorship and worsening inequality are the product of the global crisis and breakdown of the capitalist system. What is required is the unified mobilization of the social force that stands opposed to capital and, given a correct program and leadership, can overthrow it—the working class. The precondition for this is ending the subordination of the working class to the capitalist parties and capitalist politics. To end capitalist barbarism, the working class must establish its political independence from the parties of the enemy class.

The role of the DSA is to attempt to block precisely such a development, thereby strangling opposition. It does this by promoting the pro-corporate and pro-war trade union bureaucracy, of which it is a part, and assisting in its betrayals of workers' struggles. At the same time, it promotes the illusion that campus protests can turn universities such as U-M, which are fully integrated into the corporate-financial system and the military-intelligence apparatus, into islands of democracy, peace and "liberation."

The DSA is seeking to use this week's referendum to promote this kind of campus reformism and divert attention from the reactionary role of Biden, the Democratic Party and the capitalist two-party system.

The DSA is a faction of the Democratic Party. It promotes as "progressive" and even "socialist" Democratic politicians such as Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman who campaign for Biden, support his war against Russia and defend the Zionist state of Israel.

On March 12, the co-coordinator of the YDSA at U-M posted a provocative statement on Twitter/X denouncing the IYSSE hours before a lecture on the campus by David North, national chairman of the Socialist Equality Party, titled "The Gaza genocide and the death of Aaron Bushnell: What are the political lessons?" The post was an effort to preemptively disrupt the lecture and discourage students from attending.

Four days later, addressing a rally called by the U-M Lecturers' Employee Organization (LEO), this same individual hailed the "historic" UAW contract and UAW President Shawn Fain, who worked hand-in-glove with Biden to stage a "stand-up strike" that allowed the auto companies to keep production going and profits flowing, and then imposed a sellout contract that opened the floodgates to mass layoffs.

Just days before, Biden delivered a war-mongering State of the Union address at which he called for an escalation of the war against Russia in Ukraine, comparing it to World War II. He made a point of calling for a standing ovation for his guest of honor, Shawn Fain, who had previously declared his readiness to "go to war" with the US president.

In opposition to the pseudo-left, anti-socialist politics of the DSA, students at U-M who are determined to stop the genocide in Gaza and prevent capitalism from dragging mankind into nuclear war and fascist dictatorship must turn to the revolutionary force propelled into mass struggle by the capitalist crisis and capable of overthrowing the system that is the root cause of such horrors—the American and international working class.

The IYSSE urges all students at U-M who want to fight against the genocide: Turn out to the working class! Help us organize delegations to workplaces and factories to connect the developing struggles of workers against inequality and exploitation to the fight against genocide, war, imperialism and their root cause—the capitalist system.

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