

Pro-Palestinian sit-in forcibly removed by Vanderbilt University police, reporter arrested

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A group of 25 students who occupied a Vanderbilt University building in Nashville, Tennessee, to protest the university administration's suppression of pro-Palestinian voices was forcibly removed by campus police on Wednesday.

According to a report in *The Vanderbilt Hustler*, Vanderbilt's student newspaper, the students have been placed on interim suspension by the university administration and four were arrested by campus law enforcement and later released.

On Tuesday morning, the students entered Kirkland Hall, an administrative building, to carry out a sit-in. The sit-in was organized to oppose the blocking of a student vote on a resolution supporting a Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) measure by the Vanderbilt Student Government.

If passed, the BDS resolution would have amended the student government constitution to prevent student government funds from going to businesses that support Israel. The Vanderbilt University administration denied the right of students to vote on the resolution by unilaterally removing it from the ballot taking place this month.

The suppression of the resolution as well as the forcible removal of the sit-in protesters from Kirkland Hall shows that the Vanderbilt University administration fears the widespread support that exists among students for an end to the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Vanderbilt is a private research university that has an endowment of more than \$10 billion. The university has deep ties to the US military, with more than \$23 million in direct Defense Department funding for electronics, software and cyber technology research.

On Tuesday, more than two dozen students entered Kirkland Hall and occupied the hallway outside of Vanderbilt Chancellor Daniel Diermeier's office at 9:00am. Another 30 students occupied the steps outside of the building.

The student occupation continued for 24 hours before the police intervened and removed the group from the building. Sam Schulman, a sophomore at Vanderbilt and member of the protesting group, told *The Tennessean* the sit-in students "were denied access to the building's restrooms, forcing them to urinate in water bottles."

Schulman also said that all those who went inside to occupy the building have been sent an interim suspension letter by the university. This means they are barred from reentering the campus pending an investigation.

At the time of this writing, the university had not issued a statement on the forced removal of the protesters. On Tuesday, the university said Student Affairs attempted to "de-escalate the situation" after the students had "breached" the building and pushed a staff person out of the way.

When asked by *Nashville Scene* what happened, a Vanderbilt representative said, "some students physically assaulted a Community Service Officer to gain entrance and proceeded to push staff members who offered to meet with them." However, a video posted by the university shows the security guard opening the door and then attempting to stop the students from entering. The group simply overpowered the officer as they entered in a peaceful and organized manner.

The administration said the students were asked to

leave but refused. Then, “staff made them aware their actions violated university policy and that they would be subject to disciplinary action. After several hours, the university began issuing interim suspensions.”

Vanderbilt Student Government president Sam Sliman told the *Scene* the university’s action against the protest were “pretty absurd” given the administration’s claim to embrace “an open dialogue and free speech.” Sliman said, “This is very much in line with how they like to handle things. ... This is just what we’ve come to expect from them at this point.”

In further blatant attack on First Amendment rights, *Scene* reporter Eli Motycka was arrested by Vanderbilt University police while reporting on the protest event on Tuesday. The arrest was captured on video by *Scene* staff member Scott Masters. The video shows officers claiming that the reporter was warned that he was illegally trespassing on campus property. As he was being led away in handcuffs, Motycka explained he has been covering the protest and was never warned by anyone.

Less than one hour after his arrest, Motycka was released and returned to the campus by the arresting officer. According to the *Scene*, “He was not charged with a crime. Public Defender Martesha Johnson Moore tells Motycka that Judicial Magistrate Timothy Lee did not find probable cause to hear Vanderbilt’s charges against Motycka.”

A statement signed by 25 Vanderbilt faculty members and circulated on Monday denounced the university’s suppression of the student referendum. The letter says that the signers are “deeply troubled” by the effort to prevent students from voting on the constitutional amendment.

The letter explains, “The proposed amendment, initiated by the Vanderbilt Divest Coalition and supported by over 1,000 Vanderbilt students, would bar the use of student government funds on a list of corporations connected to Israeli human rights violations.”

The faculty members also reported that the student government had revealed that the university’s Office of the General Counsel urged that the BDS referendum be blocked. “We are gravely concerned that Vanderbilt’s removal of the referendum from the ballot uses legality as a facade to quash student activism for Palestinian liberation,” the letter states.

The faculty members compare the suppression of the BDS resolution to the 1960 expulsion of civil rights activist James Lawson for his role in organizing Nashville’s famous lunch-counter sit-ins. And they note that, in February 1978, Vanderbilt defied demands for a cultural boycott of apartheid South Africa, despite significant outcry.

The faculty members conclude their letter, “We condemn this suppression of student democracy and demand that the ballot referendum be reinstated.”



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