

Targeting opposition to Gaza genocide, University of Michigan proposes policy to suppress protests

Tom Carter
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On Wednesday, the University of Michigan unveiled a proposal for a new administration policy that could be used to effectively prohibit public protests on campus, as part of an escalating nationwide and global crackdown on opposition to Israel's genocide in Gaza.

The policy document states:

No one has the right to infringe on the exercise of others' speech and activities by disrupting the normal celebrations, activities, and operations of the University ("University Operations").

Students who are determined to have violated this policy will be subject to disciplinary action, including expulsion.

This attack on free speech follows a public condemnation from university president Santa Ono of a March 26 protest against the Gaza genocide. Ono declared:

We all must understand that, while protest is valued and protected, disruptions are not. One group's right to protest does not supersede the right of others to participate in a joyous event.

The banning of protest in the guise of preventing "disruption" of "public order" and "economic life" is the stock in trade of every authoritarian regime in modern history. For that reason, from a democratic legal standpoint, the permissibility of "disruption" has always been understood as essential to freedom of speech and expression.

As the United Nations Human Rights Committee has explained:

Private entities and the broader society ... may be expected to accept some level of disruption, if this is required for the exercise of the right of peaceful assembly.

According to the draft text circulated Wednesday, inviting "feedback" through April 3, the new policy would ban any actions that "disrupt" university activities of any kind, including by

"obstructing lines of sight, making loud or amplified noises, projecting light or images, or otherwise creating substantive distractions." It would also be a violation of the policy to "prevent or impede the free flow of persons about campus," or to refuse to leave the campus when ordered to do so by a university official.

Does a picket by striking workers "prevent or impede" pedestrian traffic? Does holding up a banner outside an event "obstruct lines of sight"? Does yelling "boo" instead of applauding when a war criminal takes the stage constitute a "substantive distraction"?

The vagueness of the policy is deliberate. The intended effect is to give the university a license to ban any protest whatsoever, since all protests by their very nature involve "substantive distractions."

The policy also provides that in the event of an alleged violation, students will summarily be given notice of charges and encouraged to "voluntarily accept responsibility" or else face a one-sided university-controlled "process" to determine their punishment. The policy also threatens to refer students to the police and local prosecutors by making "requests for misdemeanor charges under Article XII of the Regents' Ordinance and state trespass law."

The university's threat to involve the police and prosecutors is directed particularly against the university's many international students, whose visa status is often precarious and can be revoked for any number of reasons, or for no reason at all.

In addition to students, the new "disruption" policy also expressly applies to staff, faculty and visitors. Students who violate the policy can face "expulsion," while faculty members can face "termination." The policy also purports to override all other "conflicting" policies to the contrary. This presumably includes the Statement of Student Rights, which upholds the "long tradition of student activism and values freedom of expression, which includes voicing unpopular views and dissent."

The University of Michigan, in fact, was a center of student protests during the Vietnam War and Civil Rights periods. The new proposed policy, if it had been in effect at that time, would have virtually criminalized entire graduating classes of the student body.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality at the University of Michigan issued a statement Thursday condemning the "latest moves by the administration to intimidate and silence opposition to the US/Israeli genocide in Gaza."

The IYSSE stated:

We unconditionally defend all students, faculty and staff

who are targeted by the university thought police and victimized for the “crime” of protesting against an ongoing genocide that recalls the Nazi Holocaust.

Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Joseph Kishore spoke to many students and issued a statement to those attending a 1,000-strong rally against the university administration in Ann Arbor yesterday. He called the proposed policy an “outrageous attack on democratic rights and the right to protest.”

Kishore continued:

It is a continuation and escalation of the efforts to criminalize and to smear protests against the genocide in Gaza. This is a response of the ruling class to growing opposition among workers and among young people to the horrific crimes that are being carried out with the active support, with the financial support, with the political support of the Biden administration and the Democratic Party.

The present crackdown occurs as sentiments in the US population have shifted sharply—from 45 percent disapproval of Israel’s actions in Gaza in November to 55 percent disapproval in March, according to a Gallup poll published Wednesday. Among students and young people, who are more exposed to direct reporting from Gaza on social media, the shift has been even more overwhelming. On Facebook, TikTok and Instagram, hashtags critical of the Israeli government regularly outpace pro-Israel hashtags by ratios of twenty to one, thirty to one, and more.

The response of the university authorities, corrupted by innumerable ties to the ruling capitalist political parties and the military-intelligence apparatus, has generally been heavy-handed repression.

The U-M administration unveiled its new policy against “disruption” the same week that some two dozen students and a journalist were victimized in connection with an anti-genocide demonstration at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee. That protest was called after the administration blocked a vote on a resolution that would have prevented student government funds from being spent at businesses that support Israel.

These crackdowns are only the latest manifestations of an accelerating process. Since the onslaught against Gaza was launched last October, demands for the repression of campus protests have been issued from top levels of both the Democratic and Republican parties under the phony guise of combating “antisemitism.” As part of this campaign, university presidents were hauled before inquisitorial hearings in Washington, during which legislators harangued them for failing to do more to censor student speech, leading to the resignation of former Harvard president Claudine Gay.

More recently, the Democratic Party announced that it would wage an “all-out war” on third parties and independent candidates this year, specifically in an effort to prevent them from obtaining ballot access. This process is mirrored throughout the world, including in Rishi Sunak’s new “extremism” legislation in the UK and the ban on demonstrations related to Algeria in Paris.

These increasingly desperate efforts at censorship and repression are not hallmarks of a stable, self-confident social order. They are a sign of weakness, a function of the crisis of world capitalism and all of its

traditional institutions, especially in the United States, which is boiling over with unresolved social grievances.

Unable to attract any genuine mass support for its policies, or to offer anything resembling a reform, the ruling class is turning to more direct repression. In the US, this is true of the faction headed by Trump and the Republicans no less than the faction headed by Biden and the Democrats.

The ongoing Gaza genocide occurs in the midst of a bloody escalation of global conflict that is already raging in Ukraine and that threatens to expand into other parts of Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, escalating toward the use of nuclear weapons. In this context, the Gaza genocide has exposed US-NATO imperialism for what it truly is. America’s politicians—the would-be “champions of democracy” and defenders of the so-called “rules-based international order”—stand before the world’s population as a blood-drenched pack of hypocrites and mass murderers.

The social order they represent is likewise exposed. It does not exhibit a tendency toward equality and progress, but toward repression and destruction. All the great historical problems associated with capitalism, which produced two world wars, fascism and genocide in the last century, are back with a vengeance, notwithstanding all the efforts to claim that those problems had been “solved” and would never again recur.

In this context, all of those political tendencies and individuals that have sought to sow illusions that the Democratic Party can be “pressured” and capitalism “reformed” are likewise exposed. The American president who had been hailed from these quarters as one of the most “left-wing” and “pro-worker” in history will likely be remembered by his richly-deserved nickname “Genocide Joe.”

As the democratic veneer of capitalism crumbles and its reactionary essence looms increasingly into view, the social force capable of defending and expanding democratic rights and of waging a struggle against capitalism itself—the international working class—must take center stage. This requires a turn away from hopeless appeals to all the discredited accomplices and enablers of genocide. Instead, all efforts must focus on developing the necessary collective class consciousness and organization for a struggle against the capitalist system itself.



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