

Over 1,000 students protest against the Gaza genocide and new anti-democratic policy at University of Michigan

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Over 1,000 students at the University of Michigan (U-M) in Ann Arbor demonstrated Thursday against the genocide in Gaza and growing attacks on democratic rights by the campus administration.

The protest was a significant expression of the intense and ongoing opposition, in particular among young people, to the US-backed Israeli genocide of the Palestinians, which has been ongoing for nearly six months. With over 30,000 Gazans slaughtered by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the population facing the highest levels of famine of any territory in the world, the fascistic Netanyahu regime is determined to press ahead, with plans for a full-scale ground invasion of Rafah in the coming days.

Among students, faculty and staff at U-M and university campuses internationally, there is intense hatred for those responsible for this genocide, including many leaders of these academic institutions. As with college campuses across the US, the University of Michigan is deeply embedded in the American imperialist war machine and the IDF, with hundreds of millions of dollars of endowment funds invested in firms that manufacture and sell drones, surveillance technologies and other weaponry.

Since the beginning of the Gaza genocide last October, U-M students have protested repeatedly and come under attack by the administration, including U-M President Santa Ono, whose annual salary stands at over \$1 million.

Over the past week, the administration's attacks on democratic rights significantly deepened, with Ono and Vice President for Student Life Martino Harmon each issuing campus-wide emails denouncing protests and threatening students with expulsion and staff with firing.

This was largely in response to a protest Sunday that disrupted a speech by Ono at a ceremony, video of which went viral on social media, as well as a popular campus-wide referendum calling for the divestment of the university from the US and Israeli militaries and the dropping of charges against anti-genocide protesters from last fall.

On Wednesday evening, U-M's assault on the First Amendment rights to free speech and assembly qualitatively deepened with the release of a draft "disruptive activity policy," which the administration aims to rubber-stamp into effect starting April 3. The policy gives the university carte blanche to ban virtually any activity on campus, and will be used to ruthlessly crack down on protests going forward.

At the rally, members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at U-M distributed copies of a statement opposing this policy and the administration's broader attacks on democratic rights. The statement notes:

The new policy is clearly aimed at intimidating and suppressing all opposition on campus, with explicit threats of "expulsion" for students, "termination" for faculty, and the application of "state trespass law" for visitors who are deemed to have violated the policy. Accused students would be granted a "hearing" for their charges, at which a university-appointed "hearing officer" will unilaterally determine their fate. If the student disagrees with the decision, another university-appointed "appeal officer" can arrive at the same preordained sentence, with their decision being "final."

The document concludes ominously by declaring this the new law of the land, noting, "In the event of a conflict with another University policy, this Policy shall apply."

Almost every protester at the demonstration took a copy of the statement, with many speaking with IYSSE members and reporters with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Zoe said the campus policies were "so quickly written and so unclear that they take down every form of protesting,

even peaceful protesting. It is based on their own subjective perspective on what's allowed and what's not, and what's stopping traffic and what's not. But there are things that the university does that inhibit the flow of traffic as well, so I just think that it's very one-sided from their perspective."

Madisen said she felt that economics were a primary factor driving the genocide in Gaza, noting, "I think the US and Israel are both big players in the global economy and it just stuns me every day how they just can continue killing and displacing and starving people."

Zoe added, "I just want to see the value of people placed over the value of profit. I still feel like the root of all of it is money and maintaining allies, as many allies as they can. I don't know why, because all countries could just remain peaceful and not every issue needs to end in people's lives ending."

A WSWS reporter explained that as socialists, we see the solution as ending capitalism and creating a socialist federation in the Middle East and globally, based on the international unity of the working class. Zoe commented, "I'm hoping to see change for the better in the future. Karl Marx laid it out in the *Communist Manifesto* that capitalism will fall eventually and the people will rise up for socialism or communism."

Another student, who declined to have a photograph taken for fear of retribution, commented:

I think if [the new rules] were to be adopted it would be just insane hypocrisy; to say in one breath that they support freedom of speech and people's right to protest, especially students on campus, and then in the next to say if you do any sort of disruptive protest there will be action taken against you.

I think money is behind this, a lot of money. I definitely think people are being influenced by economic interests and you know people that are providing money to the school that obviously want to keep their investments in Israel and not pull out.

Socialist Equality Party (US) presidential candidate Joseph Kishore and vice presidential candidate Jerry White participated in the protest, with Kishore stating in a video:

The U-M administration is deeply connected to the Democratic Party, which is waging this war on democratic rights of students. It has to be opposed through the development of a movement to defend democratic rights through the mobilization of the

working class. The working class is the social force that must be mobilized to defend democratic rights and to oppose imperialism.

That is what the Socialist Equality Party is fighting for. We're fighting for an orientation to the development of a movement in the working class, a break with the Democratic and Republican parties, and the fight for a socialist opposition to imperialism and war.

The protest and march were organized by the TAHRIR Coalition, which includes a broad range of over 80 student groups opposed to the genocide in Gaza. A media representative from the coalition refused to allow Kishore to address the rally.

The speeches given were politically amorphous, while largely omitting the central role of the Biden administration and the Democratic Party in orchestrating the genocide in Gaza. The anti-democratic measures of the U-M administration were only briefly referenced, with no serious examination of their far-reaching implications for students, faculty and staff at U-M, across the US and internationally.

Among the groups playing a leading role in the TAHRIR Coalition is the Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA), which also largely controls the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) union, and played a central role in the betrayal of the graduate students' strike last year.

The role of the DSA is to block any challenge to the Democratic Party, while preventing the development of any broader movement extending outside the U-M campus and independent of the Democratic Party. DSA member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a representative in Congress, has insisted that young people and students support Biden, who has led US support for the genocide in Gaza.

After the rally at the Diag, protest organizers led demonstrators on a march through part of the campus, including two brief occupations of the Ross School of Business and the Michigan Union buildings. While political discussion and debate were drowned out with chanting and marching, members of the IYSSE and SEP found a strong response to the revolutionary socialist program they advanced.



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