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Hundreds of students protest against authoritarian policy at University of Michigan

Matthew Brennan
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On Thursday, hundreds of students and staff at the University of Michigan (U-M) protested against a new policy being imposed by the administration to effectively ban protests on campus. The policy, announced on March 26, is aimed at stifling all opposition to the ongoing US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza, but has far broader implications in its sweeping assault on the First Amendment rights to free speech and freedom of assembly.

The university’s new policy proposes to effectively ban all protest in the guise of preventing the “disruption” of “public order” and “economic life” on campus. This includes any activity “obstructing lines of sight, making loud or amplified noises, projecting light or images, or otherwise creating substantive distractions.” Students, faculty and staff who violate these rules will be subject to arbitrary disciplinary action, including expulsion or firing, while “visitors” can be charged with violating “state trespass law.”

The policy is so outrageous that the Michigan chapters of both the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) issued lengthy condemnations, with the NLG condemning the “Climate of Neo-McCarthyist Repression at University of Michigan.” The ACLU concluded its letter by insisting the university “abandon its efforts to adopt this policy at the expense of the freedom of speech.”

On Tuesday, April 2, U-M President Santa Ono issued a campus-wide email making clear his intention to carry out the authoritarian ban on campus protests. The letter was sent out to the campus before the end of a “community feedback” period in which campus members have undoubtedly expressed overwhelming hostility to the new policy.

With oily cynicism, Ono wrote that the responses thus far have demonstrated “passion and rigor” while hypocritically claiming that “we welcome dissent and the expression of the broadest array of ideas—even those perspectives that could be unpopular, upsetting, or critical of the university.”

In the very next sentence, Ono made clear the university would pursue his policy no matter what, essentially implying the proposal was already university protocol: “At the same time, no one is

entitled to disrupt the lawful activities or speech of others... [Our current] Statement of Student Rights and Responsibilities makes clear that disrupting speakers and events is not protected speech under the law and is a violation of university policy.”

The “feedback” mechanism employed by Ono and the Board of Regents is a cynical fraud, aimed at giving the authoritarian measure a democratic sheen of “consent.” The entire premise is deeply right-wing and repressive.

There is broad support among U-M students and faculty for the opposition to genocide. Ben, an undergraduate at U-M, commented to the WSWS:

To state that “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” is an obvious attempt at flipping the script on the protesters, accusing those protesting of “infringing on the exercise of others’ speech” through their protests. Threatening demonstrators with expulsion or termination is an open statement that President Ono intends to restrict free speech and the right to protest against the war. This policy essentially states that the war crimes and atrocities committed every day in Gaza are acceptable, but protests against them are not.

Thursday’s protest was the second organized in the past week by the TAHRIR Coalition, an umbrella group which includes over 90 student organizations on campus. Turnout was roughly half that of the first protest, which was attended by roughly 1,000 people. The organizers followed the same pattern of speeches, followed by marching, chanting and briefly occupying various buildings on campus.

Politically, the outlook of the TAHRIR Coalition is entirely parochial and reformist, aiming its appeals and denunciations solely at Ono and the Board of Regents. None of the speeches

given by students and staff even referenced US President “Genocide Joe” Biden or the Democratic Party, which largely controls the U-M administration and Board of Regents.

As with last week’s protest, organizers affiliated with the TAHRIR Coalition refused to allow Socialist Equality Party (SEP) vice presidential candidate Jerry White to address the audience. Instead, White spoke after the rally, raising the central political role of the Democratic Party in carrying out the genocide in Gaza and the need for students to turn to the working class as the only social force capable of putting an end to war and the capitalist system.

WSWS reporters were warmly welcomed by rally attendees, including an Ann Arbor teacher who agreed to be interviewed. Opposing the role of pseudo-left politicians associated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the teacher agreed with the central need to mobilize the working class to stop the genocide in Gaza.

The ongoing protests at U-M and campuses across the US and internationally will not succeed in forcing their administrations to divest from Israel, let alone stop the genocide, so long as they remain isolated on the campuses.

Over the past six months, Ono and the U-M administration have repeatedly made clear their ruthless hostility to students and unwavering support for the US and Israeli militaries.

In November 2023, U-M administration intervened to suppress a Central Student Government (CSG) resolution that urged the university to acknowledge the genocidal character of Israel’s war in Gaza and to divest from companies profiting from the slaughter. The resolution had already been voted on by over 10,000 students when the university stepped in to shut it down.

The university swiftly banned any further anti-genocide resolutions from the CSG. It also did nothing to defend two pro-Palestinian students who were doxxed by Zionists and falsely accused of violating election email rules, which was the fraudulent pretext used by the university to shut down the resolution vote.

That same month, university police arrested 40 student protesters for staging a peaceful sit-in to demand Ono and the Board of Regents divest from and take a clear position against genocide.

In March, the TAHRIR Coalition organized a “People’s Referendum” to put forward a resolution to call for U-M divestment from companies doing business with Israel and dropping the charges against the 40 students.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality at U-M issued a statement of support calling for a critical “yes” vote on the resolution, while warning “against any illusions that protest resolutions addressed to university officials will halt the war crimes being carried out jointly by the fascist Netanyahu and his military supplier, ‘Genocide Joe’ Biden.”

The IYSSE also warned about the dominant role of the pseudo-left organizations in the coalition, such as the DSA and its youth arm, the YDSA, who use “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.

The “People’s Referendum” took place parallel to the March 27-28 CSG elections and drew over 4,200 votes of support. In

addition, students who ran on a “Shut It Down” platform—which pledges to shut down student government until the university divests from Israeli military connections—won nearly half of the available assembly seats in the CSG, including president and vice president.

Students in opposing parties are now initiating a lawsuit against the Shut It Down candidates, along the same right-wing lines employed in shutting down the November 2023 anti-genocide resolution, claiming alleged minor election code technicalities should have their victories disqualified.

The turn to increasingly authoritarian measures by U-M to suppress the protests is directly connected to the sharp escalation in the genocidal war in Gaza and the risk of larger world war.

A new stage of genocidal murder is being implemented in Israel, supported by the Biden administration, as a barbaric siege is looming against the southern town of Rafah, where nearly 1.5 million Gazans are seeking refuge from Israeli attack. Earlier in the week, reports revealed that over 400 people were massacred by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) at the Al-Shifa hospital in the north.

Many Palestinians in Gaza are facing starvation, including children who make up nearly half of the population. The United Nations and World Bank are now warning that famine is “imminent” in Gaza. On Monday, the IDF murdered seven international aid workers from the World Central Kitchen bringing food to the starving population.

These horrific events were followed by Israel’s assassination of three senior military officials at the Iranian embassy in Damascus on the same day, an act of war that could trigger a broader regional war.

At every step, the Biden administration has supported and ensured that the genocide continues, including resupplying Israel with 1,800 bombs, each weighing more than 2,000 pounds, this same week. This aid follows the nearly \$1 trillion allocated for the US military in the most recent budget approved by Biden on March 23. This is funding aimed at preparing US imperialism for world war, with Russia, Iran and China as primary targets.

All of this barbarism is being met with enormous opposition in the working class and on campuses around the world. Everywhere around the world the ruling class is seeking to suppress growing opposition to war and genocide. The critical task is to turn to the international working class, the only social force capable of halting the production and distribution of war materiel, and whose objective interests are for the socialist reorganization of society.



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