

Vanderbilt University expels Nashville students for pro-Palestinian sit-in as attacks on campus free speech spread

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The students who occupied the hallway outside of Vanderbilt University Chancellor Daniel Diermeier's office on March 26 were informed of disciplinary measures against them on Friday. Three students who allegedly forced their way past campus security personnel to enter the Kirkland administrative building have been expelled from the university. One student, who attempted to enter the building by saying there was an appointment, has been suspended for a semester.

More than 20 other students who occupied the hallway outside of the chancellor's office have received 15 months of probation, and their offense will be documented in their official university records.

The Vanderbilt expulsions are only the most serious sanctions in a wave of repressive actions taken by university administrations in every region of the United States, seeking to beat back the growing opposition to Israeli genocide in Gaza and the Biden administration's fulsome support for it.

Just in the past few days, students have been arrested or otherwise targeted at Pomona College in Southern California, the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, Columbia University in New York City, and many other colleges. At the University of Michigan, the administration is preparing to enact a new policy that would effectively outlaw all protest actions on the campus, historically a center of student political activism of a left-wing, democratic and anti-war character.

These actions call for a massive response by workers nationwide. The attacks on student protests are attacks on all working people. The police-state methods being employed against students will be directed at the working class as a whole, as it moves into struggle to defend jobs, living standards and democratic rights, and to oppose imperialist war.

The Vanderbilt students appeared before a kangaroo court of university officials early last week where they were shown a doctored video of the demonstration and were prevented from offering evidence in their own defense.

Roughly 60 students participated in the 22-hour demonstration at Kirkland Hall organized to oppose the university's unilateral decision to block the vote on an amendment to the Vanderbilt Student Government Constitution that would divest student government funds from companies that finance Israel's occupation of Palestine.

In addition to more than two dozen students who entered Kirkland Hall, another 30 students blocked the steps outside of the building. Students reported being denied access to restroom facilities, as well as food and water throughout the demonstration.

The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) petition was overwhelmingly supported by students, garnering double the required signatures to move forward with the initiative.

The punishments were handed down despite widespread support for the students and their protest across the university. A letter signed by more than 150 faculty detailed the lengths to which the university went to thwart students' attempts to protest Israel's genocide in Gaza and build support for their referendum to divest student government funds from Israel.

The faculty members wrote: "[W]e are concerned that these rules seem arbitrary, shifting, and unevenly applied to student activists and other community members. We also contend that the criterion that student protests must not 'disrupt' university operations is perniciously vague and expansive."

Meanwhile, the Vanderbilt University Divinity School presented a petition that recalled the university's suppression of student protests during the Civil Rights era and the expulsion of a divinity student, James Lawson, for his involvement in the Nashville lunch counter sit-ins during the 1960s.

On numerous occasions before the sit-in at Kirkland Hall, the university canceled previously approved protests and meetings by the Vanderbilt Divest Coalition (VDC), the group behind the BDS initiative. Misconduct warnings were sent to students posting flyers in support of the BDS referendum. Only later did they discover that an unpublished map detailing updated no-protest and silent-protest zones had made their outdoor protest and speech a conduct violation.

A student close to the protest told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the administration is actively monitoring VDC members' social media and that students identified as Muslim or in support of Palestine are being stopped by campus personnel and questioned about their association with the VDC. "They are looking for the leaders," the student said.

Chancellor Diermeier is a right-wing figure who justified his attacks on students in a strident op-ed column in the *Wall Street Journal*. He is the Managing Director of Diermeier Consulting Associates LLC, which specializes in crisis leadership, reputation management, and regulatory and political strategy. The chancellor counts Shell, ExxonMobil, BP and the Federal Bureau of Investigation among his clients.

The attack on the free speech rights at Vanderbilt University is part of a crackdown carried out against pro-Palestinian student protests across the country:

- **Pomona College:** Nineteen students in Claremont, California,

were arrested after occupying the college president's office on Friday. The protest began after the college dismantled a student-erected pro-Palestinian protest art on the Claremont campus, which had been standing since March 28.

Eighteen students were charged with misdemeanor trespassing, and one with obstruction of justice, according to the Claremont Police Department after riot gear-wearing officers from Claremont, Pomona, Azusa and La Verne responded to the scene.

The protest was organized by Pomona Divest Apartheid, which is demanding the college divest from Israel's war in Gaza. The student demonstration included an installation art piece the group called an "apartheid wall," which was forcefully removed earlier that day.

News reports said more than 100 protesters had gathered outside the Alexander Hall by 4:00 p.m. Friday, and as many as 40 protesters had entered President G. Gabrielle Starr's office. When police arrived, about half of the protesters left the office and the rest remained.

Pomona Divest Apartheid issued a statement to FOX 11 that said, "Today's escalation by Pomona College's leadership, which led to student arrests, represents a clear choice by Pomona College to put students at risk and suppress students' right to free speech rather than meaningfully engage with the hundreds of students opposed to their policies."

President Starr issued a statement on Friday night that the students arrested Friday would face suspension, and any students from the other Claremont colleges would be disciplined at their own schools and banned from Pomona College campuses.

- **Columbia University:** At least four students were suspended for participating in an unsanctioned panel on campus called Resistance 101, on March 24, according to the student newspaper *Columbia Spectator*. University President Dr. Minouche Shafik announced the disciplinary measures on Friday claiming that the students had participated on the panel with "known" supporters of terrorism.

The New York *Daily News* reported that leaders of more than 100 student groups that belong to the coalition Columbia University Apartheid Divest were sent email messages by investigators into the Resistance 101 event and demanded students share their private text messages. The group described these demands as "threatening" and an attempt to "intimidate" students.

The *Daily News* report also said that Chief Operating Officer Cas Holloway announced last week that the university had notified law enforcement of the event and engaged an "outside firm led by experienced former law enforcement investigators" to conduct an investigation.

The assault on student rights at Columbia is part of the preparations for Shafik and two Columbia University trustees to testify at a congressional antisemitism probe in Washington D.C. on April 17.

- **University of North Carolina at Charlotte:** The administration has condemned a resolution passed by the Student Government Association (SGA) on March 29 calling for the university to stop funding an archaeological research project in Israel until there is a ceasefire.

The SGA resolution states, in part, that it officially recognizes that genocide is being committed by Israel in Gaza and calls for "the University of North Carolina at Charlotte's total divestment of funds from the State of Israel until at least the time in which the State of Israel arranges a ceasefire in Gaza and there are proper measures in place to hold the State of Israel and other party actors accountable for their role in the Palestinian genocide."

The university administration responded to the resolution by sending

a statement to *Queen City News* that said the SGA "has been counseled several times on the University's commitment to maintain institutional neutrality" and that the resolution "does not align with that commitment and will not be acted upon by the administration."

Falsely identifying the SGA's divestment demand with antisemitism and violence on campus, the administration's statement said the university is committed to fostering "conversations in a manner that affords respect, fairness and dignity to every member of the campus community and will immediately address any actions that compromise its ability to provide a safe environment to learn, live, and work."

Student groups have said the funding of a license for a dig site in Israel violates the administration's claimed neutrality. A member of Social Justice for Southwest Asia and North Africa (SJ4SWANA) said, "Their actions speak otherwise. And I think that if they truly are neutral, they shouldn't be funding other governments, especially not Israel."

A UNC Charlotte Board of Trustees meeting is scheduled for April 25 and students said they plan to attend to ensure the board addresses their concerns.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality condemns the growing wave of attacks on the free speech rights of students protesting the US-backed Israeli genocide against Palestinians. The suppression of resolutions and the arrests and disciplinary actions against students are aimed at silencing the widespread opposition to the collaboration of university administrations with the US government, military and businesses that have ties to Israel's policy of ethnic cleansing in Gaza.

The intransigent position of university administrators and boards of regents toward the demands of students, as well as their use of law enforcement against students, demonstrates that appeals to academia, like all factions of the US ruling establishment, will not stop the bloody wars being carried out in Gaza and elsewhere around the world.

The struggle to stop imperialist war cannot be waged through appeals by students for divestment from Israel to representatives in the universities or to the Democrats and Republicans in the US government. Imperialist wars and the barbarism of the genocide in Gaza can only be halted through the mobilization of the working class against the entire capitalist system, and it is to this revolutionary force that students must turn.



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