

Columbia University suspends and evicts pro-Palestinian students

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9 April 2024

On Wednesday, April 3, Columbia University suspended and evicted six students for their involvement in a pro-Palestinian panel event on campus on March 24. According to Columbia's student newspaper, the *Daily Spectator*, the students received a notice that read, "You may remain in your Columbia residence for 24 hours after which time your access to your residence and dining services will also be suspended."

Two of the students had their suspensions lifted on Thursday, and one of the two told the *Spectator* that he "was not involved in organizing nor did he attend the event, but lives in the residence hall where the panel was held." The reversal of the remaining four suspensions and evictions has become a key demand of ongoing protests at Columbia.

All six students were apparently arbitrarily targeted after the university brought in a team of private, former police investigators. According to Columbia Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), the investigators harassed and intimidated a Palestinian student at their home, demanded to see students' private text messages and sent threatening emails to the leaders of pro-Palestinian student groups.

The investigation into the event, which was held on Sunday, March 24 under the title "Resistance 101," began after the Columbia chapter of Zionist organization Students Supporting Israel (SSI) made a post characterizing the event as a "terrorism recruitment opportunity." In particular, SSI identified Khaled Barakat, one of the event's featured speakers, as a "terrorist leader" for his alleged connections with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

Barakat is a pro-Palestinian activist who is now affiliated with the Palestinian Alternative Revolutionary Path Movement. Barakat has been targeted by Zionists internationally since as early as 2019, standing accused of being a leading member of the PFLP, an organization outlawed in Israel by the Knesset and deemed a terrorist outfit by the US, Canada, the European Union and Japan. He has denied this claim.

The university responded first with a statement from Chief Operating Officer Cas Holloway on March 28 that read, "The event that took place Sunday night was unsanctioned and unapproved. ... We have banned the outside speakers from campus. Columbia University rejects all forms of hate and bigotry, and we unequivocally condemn language that promotes or supports violence in any manner. We will pursue discipline against any community member who has violated our policies."

On Friday, Columbia University President Minouche Shafik added in a second statement that the Resistance 101 event was "an abhorrent breach of our values." She wrote, "[t]hat I would ever have to declare the following is in itself surprising, but I want to make clear that it is absolutely unacceptable for any member of this community to promote the use of terror or violence."

The university has also targeted pro-Palestinian professors, including Professor Abdul Kayum Ahmed, who was removed from teaching positions after an article in the *Wall Street Journal* accused him of pro-Palestinian "political indoctrination" in his Health and Human Rights Advocacy class.

As Columbia's Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) pointed out in their response to the suspensions on Instagram, "This is all part of a coordinated campaign to boost Columbia's public image prior to the antisemitism congressional hearing on April 17th, where President Minouche Shafik and two trustees will testify before congress."

The post continued, "Both the presidents of Harvard and University of Pennsylvania were forced to resign shortly following their own hearings. They received heavy backlash from Zionists for being perceived as insufficiently harsh on pro-Palestine campus organizing."

The statement also pointed out that Columbia conducted no such investigation into the chemical attack by former Israel Defence Forces (IDF) soldiers on student protesters on campus in January.

Elsewhere in New York City, attacks on academic

freedom have also defined the past six months. Developments at New York University (NYU), was the subject of a recent op-ed by two NYU professors in the *New York Times* titled, “Is This the End of Academic Freedom?”

The op-ed cites disciplinary measures against students for attending a pro-Palestinian poetry reading, the closure of the Grand Staircase in the Kimmel student center (“a storied site of student protests”) and the NYU administration’s refusal to respond to a student government resolution calling on the university to reaffirm protection of pro-Palestinian speech.

The op-ed adds, “The New York Police Department has become a pervasive presence on campus, with over 6,000 hours of officer presence added after the war broke out. Hundreds of faculty members have signed onto an open letter condemning the university’s ‘culture of fear about campus speech and activism.’”

The events at Columbia and NYU are part of a new wave of attacks on students’ democratic rights in every part of the country. In an article on the expulsion of pro-Palestinian students at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, the WSWS noted:

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.

At a Columbia student protest on Thursday titled “All Out for Al-Shifa”—held in response to Israel’s massacre at Al-Shifa hospital—one of the four still-suspended students was a featured speaker.

“Columbia is making us homeless, taking away our campus jobs, our sole source of income, taking away our scholarships, our access to dining halls, our access to classrooms and education that we have earned,” the student said. “I received 24-hour notice that I, a full-scholarship, federal-work-study receiving student with disabilities and housing accommodation, will be evicted from my University housing. This was all done with no hearing and no semblance of due process. Shame on Columbia.”

In Friday’s statement, President Shafik wrote that the university is pursuing further disciplinary action against students for engaging in the All Out for Al-Shifa protest,

again claiming the main issue was that the event was “unapproved.”

As the WSWS wrote in response to University of Michigan’s efforts to suppress student protests:

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.

It is significant that students have not been intimidated by the universities’ efforts to clamp down on pro-Palestinian, anti-genocide speech. At Columbia as well as the University of Michigan, hundreds of student protesters have turned out in defiance of the university administrations.

But, despite students’ courage and determination to fight, their bravery alone is not enough. The correct political and class orientation must guide their struggles. Students must demand that the university reverse the suspensions and evictions, but they cannot place their faith in the university to bend to protests and appeals. Instead, students must make a decisive turn to the working class as the only social force capable of fighting to put an end to capitalism, the root cause of imperialist war, the genocide in Gaza, and the attack on democratic rights.

As the WSWS wrote in its article on the student expulsions at Vanderbilt,

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.



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