

Multiple students at Pomona College in Southern California arrested for protesting against Gaza genocide

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In a vicious attack against democratic rights and freedom of speech, nineteen students were arrested Friday at Pomona College in Claremont, California. The students were arrested at the college president's office after holding a sit-in opposing the university's previous crack downs on pro-Palestinian protests.

The student arrests were coordinated at the highest levels with police from the college along with the nearby cities of Claremont, Azusa and LaVerne all participating. They are another clear indication that university administrations in the US, in full coordination with state governments and the Biden administration, have decided to launch police state crack downs against student youth protesting the Gaza genocide.

According to media reports, an initial contingent of seven patrol cars arrived at the president's office and departed soon afterwards. Twenty minutes after their departure, however, 20 squad cars arrived on the scene and quickly proceeded to conduct a swat-style raid against the protesting students, suggesting that a heavy-handed operation was prepared in advance.

One student who witnessed the operation told CBS News, "When [the police] walked in, they were in full riot gear, there were lots of them. A couple of them had big rifles, like two and a half feet long, strapped across their chest, they all had batons and they all had the helmets down."

Pomona College is part of a small consortium of seven private liberal arts colleges located in the Southern California city of Claremont outside of Los Angeles. Approximately 1,690 undergraduate students attend Pomona college alone. The students arrested were not only from Pomona but also Scripps and Pitzer Colleges, all part of the Claremont College network. Because of the close proximity of the campuses, many students attend classes at the other colleges in the consortium.

According to media reports, the protest had been triggered by the university's dismantling of a student-made sculpture on campus called the "apartheid wall." The sculpture's creators said it was designed to highlight "the unequal treatment of the Palestinian people living under the brutal conditions of the illegal Israeli Occupation."

Another motivation for the protest was the university's complete refusal to acknowledge a February vote of the student government which voted by 78.29 percent for the college to "cease all academic" support for Israel. Over four fifths, 86.17, percent voted for the college to reveal its investments "in all companies aiding the ongoing apartheid system within the state of Israel" while 81.67 percent voted in favor of the college completely divesting from said companies.

Pomona College President Gabrielle Starr, with a salary in excess of \$685,000, responded to the student arrests with particular vindictiveness. A statement released by Starr's office Friday read, "Any participants in today's events on the SCC lawn or in the Alexander Hall, who turn out to be Pomona students, are subject to immediate suspension. Students from

the other Claremont Colleges will be banned from Pomona's campuses and subject to discipline on their own campuses. All individual participants not part of The Claremont Colleges community are hereby banned from campus immediately."

Not only were the students banned from classes but were also not allowed back into their dorm rooms leaving the students scrambling to find housing. The students, many of whom were a month away from graduation, also relied on school cafeterias to eat, from which they are now banned as well.

Heather Ferguson, a history professor at Claremont McKenna College who sympathizes with the protesters, told the *Los Angeles Times*, "Regardless of what the Pomona College Administration thinks about this, this is a peaceful act of civil disobedience and it does not warrant such a strong police response. It's actually extraordinarily difficult to imagine why anybody would think that would be an appropriate response."

An attorney for the students, James Gutierrez, told the *Times* that he was not allowed to see his clients while they were in police custody. "This is the first time anything like this has happened to me," he said. "Where a law enforcement agency is prohibiting me from seeing my clients."

After their expulsions were announced, the arrested students were only given 30 hours to appeal the university's decisions.

The attack on the students at Pomona, while outrageous in its own right, is only the latest in a growing crackdown on peaceful student protests against the Gaza genocide.

Only last week, 20 students at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee were either expelled or put on probation as a result of a March 26 action involving students occupying the chancellor's office after the university blocked a vote amending the student government constitution to divest student government funds from companies that support Israel's occupation of Palestine.

At Columbia University, at least four students were suspended for participating in a panel supporting resistance against the Israeli occupation while at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, with the administration there condemning a student government resolution calling for the university to stop funding an archaeological research project in Israel in the midst of the Palestinian genocide.

These events follow the move by the University of Michigan—historically an epicenter of student protests against the Vietnam War in the late 1960s and early 1970s—to implement a new "anti-disruption" policy preventing any student actions disruptive to "normal celebrations, activities and operations of the university." Students there have already begun receiving notices from campus police banning them from university buildings.

Such attacks are being coordinated at the highest levels, including the

Biden administration, which fears that the campus protests could spin out of control and could jeopardize not only its unstinting support for Israel's campaign of ethnic cleansing but its plans for war against Iran, Russia and China as well.

It is also for this reason that the university trade unions including the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the Teamsters have said absolutely nothing about the ongoing crackdowns against student protests never mind actually mobilizing their membership in opposition.

The websites and Twitter/X feeds of UAW locals 5810 and 2865, the academic union locals of the UAW in California, have not uttered a single word about the student protests and subsequent crackdowns. At a UAW rally held in January in Michigan in which the union invited "Genocide Joe" to speak, union security forced those protesting Biden's speech out of the audience while riot police armed with batons and armored vehicles prevented further disruptions from protesters outside the union hall.

Similarly, the California Faculty Association (CFA), which in February rammed through a sellout agreement for 29,000 California State University educators, has had nothing whatsoever to say about the campus crackdowns or the Pomona College arrests in particular.

The February vote itself was a sham with the CFA telling workers they had the choice of voting in favor of the proposed agreement containing wage increases of only 5 percent guaranteed in the first year of the contract versus voting down the agreement and getting an even worse deal from the administration in return. No option was given to the workers to reject the agreement outright and continue striking until their demands were met.

If the ongoing genocide in Gaza is to be successfully fought, it will have to be on the basis of a fighting unity of both students and workers against not only university administrations but the capitalist system as a whole and in its representatives in the two parties of big business.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several students at the Claremont campuses on Tuesday, all of whom expressed opposition to the latest police action.

Kennedy, an undergraduate at Pomona College studying African American Studies, said, "I witnessed what happened on April 5, and it was just a reflection of whose side the college is on. These tactics that Israel is employing against Palestinians are just practices that are part of this country and its white supremacist principles, surveilling students, policing students, criminalizing students.

"They brought police officers in riot gear to detain students who were silently and quietly protesting in Alexander Hall. And the administration chose to call multiple police forces to take these students to the police department. And again that in itself shows where the college's support really lies, and it's not on the side of the students, it's not on the side of Palestinians. It's not on the side of working class people. It's not on the side of marginalized people.

"It's sad and disgusting because they pride themselves and they go and recruit students and spend so much money on these brochures and how these are their values. And yet Friday's demonstration shows what their actual values are. And it's not liberation."

Charlie, an undergrad at Harvey Mudd College studying math and physics, stated, "I was outside the jail when the students were in there. There were about 150-200 of us outside the jail rallying for a couple of hours. There were about 20 students arrested, including some from Pomona College but also Pitzer and Scripps.

"Technically I think the charge was trespassing and one was an obstruction of justice charge. I think this is crazy! These are students who go to these schools and went to the office of their president, and technically they got arrested because they refused to identify themselves in the end, but there were already threats of suspension at that point. If you were a student, you wouldn't choose to identify yourself under threat of suspension, right?

"I feel it's an insane escalation of violence to call riot police in on students who have really only made a very normal choice in that situation."

Damilola, a sophomore at Harvey Mudd studying engineering, said, "I don't know about Pomona's faculty, but Mudd's faculty has been shockingly very vocal about it. At one of my classes on Monday, after the arrests, the first thing the professor said, 'Hey, there were arrests made of 20 students. That is not good. We're going to have a lecture today, but I want to acknowledge the things that are happening, and I don't agree with that.'"

A group of professors from all five undergraduate colleges called the Claremont Consortium Faculty for Justice in Palestine issued an email telling all students to go to the jail and actively support the students who were arrested.

A statement released by the consortium on Friday called on the administration to: "Immediately drop all charges against students; Refrain from suspending students, who were exercising their protected rights to free speech and protest, and immediately reinstate any students who have been suspended already; Refrain from banning non-Pomona students from campus, as was threatened by Gabi Starr and documented in video footage; Apologize to the students and the Pomona College community for this violent and inappropriate escalation and police intervention on campus.

Damilola continued, "Everyone who was a Pomona College student got suspended. Everyone who wasn't a Pomona student was forced to drop their classes.

"Pomona really took a lot of action against the people who were protesting outside of just arresting them. There's also a campus ban against them. They're not supposed to be on campus. Arresting 20 students is overkill. Many Pomona students feel the president should resign."

Charlie said of his generation and why increased numbers of student youth are getting involved in protests, "I've been talking to my parents about this. It's clear we're getting our news from many different sources. From social media, we can get a lot more information about what's actually going on in Gaza. When you hear, 'Oh, this is supposed to be free speech. This is supposed to be democracy,' I don't know anybody my age believes in those things, believes that they're true right now. We're not really surprised by it, and we're expecting that we're going to have to fight the fight."



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