

Texas governor orders crackdown on pro-Palestinian speech on campuses

Josh Andrews
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On March 27, far-right Texas Governor Greg Abbott signed an executive order, GA 44, that requires all public universities in the state of Texas to “review and update free speech policies to address the sharp rise in antisemitic speech and acts” and “establish appropriate punishments, including expulsion from the institution” for students who voice opposition to the Israeli state.

The reactionary decree makes no mention of the mass slaughter in Gaza, but amounts to full support for Israel’s genocide and identifies essentially every expression of criticism of Zionism and the state of Israel as a form of antisemitism that is now to be subject to punitive measures.

GA 44 explicitly mentions the student groups Palestinian Solidarity Committee (PSC) and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), which currently lead many of the protests against Israel’s genocide in Gaza and have faced violent provocations from Zionists encouraged by university administrations. Over the course of the last several months, there have been recurring pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Austin, the Texas capital, with tens of thousands participating at times.

The pseudo-legal basis for the repressive measures in GA 44 is the definition of anti-Semitism adopted by the State of Texas in Section 448.001 of the Texas Government Code. Per the specified code, Texas recognizes the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s “working definition of antisemitism,” which equates anti-Zionism with antisemitism.

Thus, “drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis,” “claiming that the existence of the State of Israel is a racist endeavor,” and “denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination,” are all prohibited, as is the slogan frequently chanted at anti-genocide protests, “From the

river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”

Governor Abbott’s action follows on the heels of similar efforts to stifle the free speech of pro-Palestinian students on campuses across the country, such as the attempt by Florida’s Ron DeSantis to illegalize the Students for Justice in Palestine and Palestinian Solidarity Committee in the state university system. The presidents of the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard University were forced to resign for failing to sufficiently crack down on pro-Palestinian opposition to Israel’s crimes.

Last year, two teaching assistants (TAs) at the University of Texas, Austin were fired for composing a letter that identified mental health resources to which Palestinian students could turn. Students who opposed the firings and demanded that the laid-off educators be reinstated were then accused of harassment and given deferred suspensions by the college. Administrators clearly wanted to make an example of them.

An increasingly violent atmosphere is also beginning to emerge at Texas’ universities and elsewhere. On April 5, a Muslim student and a companion were assaulted on the Austin campus after leaving a mosque. Two months earlier, Palestinian-American Zachariah Doar was stabbed in an explicitly racist attack after attending a protest for Palestine at the Texas State Capitol. Governor Abbott has been silent about both incidents.

In intensifying the McCarthyite atmosphere at Texas’ colleges and universities, Abbott has the full backing of the state’s Democratic Party. In line with their unabashed support for Israel’s “right to self-defense,” Texas Democrats, including so-called “progressives,” such as US representative for Texas’s 35th congressional district, Greg Casar, have been silent on executive order GA 44. In other parts of the country,

university administrations with close ties to the Democratic Party, including Columbia University in New York City, and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, have taken the lead in cracking down on student protesters on their campuses.

The drive to illegalize opposition by students to imperialist barbarism is an integral part of the attempt by the ruling class to completely subordinate the higher education system to its preparations for another world war. Huge resources are devoted at universities and colleges across the country, including the University of Texas, Texas A&M University and other smaller institutions, to programs that recruit young people into the military. At Texas' flagship campuses, the US military maintains extensive training and research centers, with the universities basically serving as a production facility for weapons innovations, intelligence personnel and army officers.

The Students for Justice in Palestine and the Palestinian Solidarity Committee have issued a petition, opposing GA 44 and calling upon the administrations of the University of Texas system to "reject Abbott's demand." Appealing to both students and "neighbors" in their petition, they denounce GA 44 as "censorship" and an act of "State discriminatory suppression."

The petition says,

We condemn the racist campaign being launched in violation of our state and federal constitutions and reaffirm our commitment to fight for the liberation of Palestine on our campuses and communities. ... When confronted with the strength, momentum, and mass support of our movement, the Governor has leveraged the highest level of state action to suppress our activism. He is resorting to racist misrepresentations to justify the blatantly discriminatory violation of our First Amendment right. There is no real, legal, or moral basis for their censorship. Our right to demand accountability for our institution's complicity in genocide and to advocate for the freedom of the people in Gaza is protected speech.

International Youth and Students for The Socialist Equality at Austin Community College unequivocally opposes GA 44 and endorses the demands by the SJP and PSC. We have signed the petition and call upon all our readers and supporters in Texas to do the same. The attack on the democratic rights of the SJP and student protesters is an attack on the democratic rights of the working class as a whole.

In opposing this state-backed offensive, young people cannot limit their struggle to the campuses: The fight to defend democratic rights, just as the fight against imperialist war and genocide, requires the mobilization of the working class as the principal force in society that can overthrow the root cause of both: The capitalist system.



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