

Columbia University students defy crackdown, continue pro-Palestinian protest as solidarity actions spread to other campuses

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Students and faculty at Columbia University are continuing to defy police state repression of pro-Palestinian protests, with students occupying the South Lawn for a fifth straight day on Sunday. Rather than silencing opposition to genocide, Columbia's brutal attacks on democratic rights, orchestrated and backed by the Biden administration and both big business parties, have reenergized protests at campuses around the country.

Support is also growing within the working class in New York City and around the country for students and workers arrested, expelled or fired for peacefully demonstrating against the US/Israeli war of extermination in Gaza.

Amid a mass mobilization of New York City riot cops and surveillance teams, Democratic Mayor Eric Adams, a former cop, attacked pro-Palestinian protesters on Sunday, issuing a statement that ominously warned:

We will not be a city of lawlessness, and those professional agitators seeking to seize the ongoing conflict in the Middle East to sow chaos and division will not succeed.

President Joe Biden added his voice to the increasingly strident, bipartisan attack on the right to protest against war and mass murder, based on the lie that the campuses have become centers of antisemitism. Biden, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's chief arms supplier and accomplice, issued a statement on Sunday saying:

Even in recent days, we've seen harassment and calls for violence against Jews. This blatant antisemitism is reprehensible and dangerous — and it has absolutely no place on college campuses, or anywhere in our country.

In their statements, Democratic officials falsely implied that pro-Palestinian demonstrators were instigating violence. Meanwhile, the Democrats joined with Republican fascists in the House of Representatives to pass a series of bipartisan bills providing \$95 billion to continue funding the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, increase the supply of weapons for Israel's genocide in Gaza, and step up preparations for war against China.

The statements of Biden and Adams make clear that the attack on students at Columbia is not simply a matter of overreach by a university administration, but part of a coordinated political attack aimed at

criminalizing and suppressing opposition to the policies of US imperialism.

Last week's arrest of over 100 Columbia and Barnard students who were carrying out a peaceful encampment to protest the Gaza genocide marked a major escalation in the assault on democratic rights not only in New York, but across the country and internationally.

University President Nemat "Minouche" Shafik first suspended the students and then called the NYPD to remove them for supposedly "trespassing." Students have reported being held by the police in zip ties for over seven hours.

Arrested Barnard students were evicted from campus housing, having been given just 15 minutes notice to remove their belongings. They also lost access to the university's dining halls. Columbia students have thus far not been evicted and can still eat in the dining halls, but are locked out of all other campus buildings.

The police have imposed a lockdown on Columbia University. Hundreds of cops, many equipped with riot helmets and batons, have surrounded the campus. The gates to the campus remain sealed. Only students and faculty who show ID are allowed in. Faculty have reported losing card access to Columbia buildings and requiring security escorts to enter buildings.

According to an Twitter/X post by WKCR, the Columbia University student radio station, a security officer attempted to shut down live broadcasts of the protests, relenting only after a Columbia faculty member intervened.

Beyond Columbia, the assault on pro-Palestinian speech on American university campuses includes student suspensions at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee and Pomona College in Southern California, as well as the effective banning of all protests at the University of Michigan under the pretext of preventing "disruptions."

University of Southern California valedictorian Ansa Tabassum has been barred from giving her commencement address due to her pro-Palestinian advocacy. A number of university professors at New York City colleges have been fired for speaking publicly in support of pro-Palestinian students.

The Columbia administration's actions have been denounced by academics, students and youth across the country. Rather than quelling the demonstrations, they appear to have emboldened protesters. According to reports on social media, tents reappeared Sunday evening at Columbia to replace those torn down previously by the NYPD.

Several protests in solidarity with the victimized students have erupted both on campus and in the surrounding area. A "Gaza Solidarity Encampment," similar to that which was busted up by the NYPD, has been erected at the New School, just a few miles from Columbia.

On Friday, hundreds of students at Yale University in Connecticut set up

a solidarity protest outside of the Schwarzman Center, the main student life building. Students in Ohio and North Carolina have similarly set up solidarity encampments. Solidarity walkouts are planned this week, including Monday at New York University.

Faculty are also lining up in support of the democratic rights of Columbia protesters. On Friday, the Columbia and Barnard chapters of the American Association of University Professors issued a declaration denouncing the actions by Shafik and demanding the student suspensions be immediately lifted.

On Sunday morning, Dr. Tao Leigh Goffe, a professor at the City University of New York (CUNY) and artist-in-residence at Columbia, announced that she had quit her position at Columbia. More than 100 Public Interest Honorees, a designation awarded by Columbia Law School to students who complete pro bono work and fellowship programs related to specific social issues, published a statement denouncing the university's attacks and withdrawing consent for their likenesses to be used in promotional materials for the university.

The crackdown at Columbia took place immediately following Wednesday's McCarthyite congressional hearing with Shafik by the US House Committee on Education and the Workforce. The aim of the hearing was, as the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) wrote in its statement on the event, "nothing less than a purge of the faculty and student body at universities, in order to completely subordinate higher education to the war machine."

As Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate for president Joseph Kishore explained in a statement:

The defense of democratic rights and opposition to war must be based in the working class, which produces all of society's wealth and therefore has the power to counter the reactionary conspiracies of the capitalist oligarchs. The SEP calls on workers to mobilize and demand an end to the persecution of students. The youth cannot fight this battle alone! They require the support of the working class as a whole.

On Saturday, members of the IYSSE took this message directly to the working class, distributing Kishore's statement at a public transit hub, an Amazon distribution center, a UPS facility, and a hospital.

Alison, an intern studying to become a physician's assistant, told the IYSSE:

I heard about what happened to the students protesting at Columbia and I was outraged. In the US there is supposed to be freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, but that is now being taken away.

I'm a student at a City University of New York (CUNY) school, a public school. It's disgusting to me that the government is using the tax money of American people to fund the genocide in Palestine. I am paying tuition to the government, yet I don't even have health insurance through my school.

Meanwhile, they have been bombing hospitals in Gaza and targeting innocent civilians. So I'm very glad to see the IYSSE today supporting these students. I will definitely attend the May 2 meeting [with Joseph Kishore in New York City] and tell my friends and family about it.

Wayne, a doorman from Washington Heights, told the IYSSE:

It's amazing to me that there is always money for all of these wars, yet education is being attacked as we speak. School facilities are being defunded and shut down, even in the Bronx district belonging to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, no less. I can't believe that she calls herself a socialist. As Tupac Shakur says, "They have money for war, but can't feed the poor."

I support everybody's right to protest for whatever they choose. But I don't support actions like, for example, what happened with Aaron Bushnell burning himself up. If guys like Cornel West and Chris Hedges want to get up there and promote that kind of stuff, why don't they burn themselves up? Why don't they send their kids to go do the same? You don't solve a problem by creating another one. We are not going to convince the world of whatever it is we want to accomplish by making a sacrifice like that.

I voted Democratic my whole life. But I stopped doing that in recent years. I really can't do it anymore. I consider myself independent. Trump is also, excuse my language, an a**hole. But I don't support the politics of racial and gender divisions promoted by the Democratic Party. It's actually making workers vote Republican, and it's dividing us.

The US is not creating democracy with these wars overseas. Not in Ukraine, not with China, and not at home.

Steve, a freight rail worker, said, "It's amazing to me that we are supposed to have the First Amendment right to free speech and free assembly. But now it looks like we don't have that."

A bus driver at the East New York bus depot said:

[I]t's been very hard for us—us being Yemeni or Muslim—to see our people slaughtered. They're helpless. This should not happen in the world today. We should all stand up. This is wrong. We have our voices, but even now, they want to take our voices as well, as you can see at Columbia.

In America, you have the Constitution. You have the right to free speech, the right to protest. But it seems like now, no, they aren't protected.

Referring to the Houthi shipment interruptions in the Red Sea, the bus driver said:

All we wanted was a ceasefire, but they're turning it into another propaganda war. People don't know that Yemen has been under attack. A lot of nonprofit organizations have left Yemen, so we have a famine coming back again. The World Food Bank has cut their programs as a result of asking for a ceasefire, as a result of saying, "We want peace." And when you want peace, this is what happens to you. They starve you to death.

Haven't we learned anything from wars? Nobody wins wars... It's this country against that country. But no one wins. It's one side against the other side. We didn't learn anything from Iraq, from Afghanistan. What happened there?

Richard, an unemployed worker, said:

It's a rich man's war, but poor people got to pay. We're paying more for goods and services every day of the week, but our income

doesn't go up, opportunities don't go up. Where in the city can you get adequate housing for the minimum wage? I'm looking for work and can't find even a part-time job. Millionaire CEOs can't say people are lazy and don't want to work. It's BS.

Susan, an urgent care worker who was on medical leave, told the IYSSE:

These students have the right to protest whatever they want, and they are doing the right thing by opposing an actual genocide. I think it's great that the younger generation is getting involved in politics. Imagine if we had the power of all of the students in support of the working class as a whole. If workers everywhere decided to go on strike together, combined with all of the intellectual resources of the students, we could fix all of the problems of this world.



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