

Protests erupt on campuses across the US in opposition to the Gaza genocide and attack on free speech

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In the wake of the arrests of over 100 pro-Palestinian Columbia University student protesters on Wednesday last week, a growing movement of students and youth has swept across the United States. Within days of the crackdown, which was coordinated between Columbia President Nemat Minouche Shafik, Democratic New York City Mayor Eric Adams, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) and the Biden White House, solidarity protests have spread across the country.

Last Friday, hundreds of students at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, established a protest encampment in Beinecke Plaza on the university campus. Twenty-four tents were erected outside of a Board of Trustees dinner honoring outgoing President Peter Salovey, with students demanding that Yale disclose its investments in military weapons and manufacturers supplying the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and divest from them.

On Monday morning, similar demonstrations emerged at New York University (NYU), as well as at universities in the greater Boston area including at Emerson College, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Tufts University.

Student protesters also set up camp on the University of Maryland campus Monday. Several dozen students at the University of Michigan set up a protest encampment occupying The Diag, a large open space in the middle of campus. At the University of California, Berkeley, students established an encampment on the steps of Sproul Hall in the center of campus. Students at Cal Poly Humboldt in Northern California occupied Siemens Hall and were confronted by police in riot gear. Protests at The New School in New York City continued through Monday.

Encampments at the Columbia campus have been revived and continued to grow despite the arrests of students on Wednesday. By mid-afternoon on Monday, hundreds of Columbia professors staged a spontaneous walkout in protest of the crackdown on students. Demonstrators walked out of their remote teaching offices and gathered on the lawn in front of the protest encampment, brandishing signs that read, “Hands off our students.” Clearly fearing a further expansion of the protest, the university administration has announced that it will move all classes online until the end of the spring semester on April 29.

The ruling class has responded to the rapid spread of protests with a growing police-state crackdown. By Monday morning, Yale

University police had arrested 47 protesters and charged them with criminal trespass. On Monday evening, NYPD riot police descended upon the NYU protest encampment at Gould Plaza outside the Stern School of Business and arrested dozens of student and faculty protesters. Live-streamed videos of the arrests are circulating widely on social media. According to social media reports, at least 300 people marched to the nearby police precinct to demand the release of the students and faculty members arrested. NYPD officers have occupied Gould Plaza. As of this writing, hundreds were protesting the arrests.

The crackdown was clearly coordinated at the highest levels of the state, with the Democratic Party and far-right Republicans. On Sunday, Joe Biden and the White House issued statements backing the assault on free speech on campuses. On Monday, New York state Governor Kathy Hochul gave a duplicitous video address outside of the main Columbia campus which was accompanied by the statement that “[t]he recent harassment and rhetoric is vile and abhorrent. Every student deserves to be safe.”

Repeating the slanderous equation of anti-genocide protests with “antisemitism” that now forms the basis for the persecution of anti-war protesters, many of whom are Jewish, Hochul implied the issues at play on the Columbia campus were that of religious persecution. She said, “this is a country founded on people searching for religious freedom, fleeing religious persecution elsewhere. No one here on college campuses should feel that they are being persecuted because of their religious beliefs.”

The real antisemites are now being mobilized and promoted by the Democratic Party and figures like Hochul in the campaign to abolish free speech. Last December, immediately following the McCarthyite House Committee on Education and the Workforce Committee hearings, led by the fascistic Republican New York Representative Elise Stefanik, which ousted University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) Liz Magill, Hochul praised the hearings and threatened to withdraw funding from public universities which did not similarly crack down on pro-Palestinian speech.

Stefanik, for her part, released a statement on behalf of Republican New York state members of Congress Monday morning to denounce Columbia University’s President Minouche Shafik for insufficiently cracking down on the protests. The letter called on Shafik to resign due to her “failing to put an end to an

unsanctioned mob of students and agitators.”

Jonathan Greenblatt of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a right-wing Zionist organization, visited the Columbia campus and called for the redeployment of the NYPD onto the campus, as well for a National Guard presence on campus. These calls were later echoed by fascist, Trump-supporting Republican senators Josh Hawley (Missouri) and Tom Cotton (Arkansas) on Monday.

Prominent leaders of the union bureaucracy have joined the attacks by the fascist Republicans and the Democrats on the protesters. The president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) union, Randi Weingarten, who shook hands with admirers of the Ukrainian fascist and antisemite Stepan Bandera in Ukraine in 2022, denounced the Columbia protesters as “antisemites.”

Weingarten wrote on X/Twitter, “The antisemitic chants from protestors outside of Columbia University are horrific, unacceptable examples of antisemitism. This hatred and vitriol understandably puts Jewish students, professors and the community on edge. Hate speech that threatens violence is not protected speech under the law & must be condemned—calling for divestment is protected free speech, calling for the killing of Jews is not. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: hate does not belong on campus.”

This vicious campaign to smear opponents of genocide as “antisemites” is a state provocation, aimed at justifying a war on democratic rights and the state slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza. It lacks any credibility.

The IYSSE spoke with Elijah, one of the student protesters at Yale University and a member Yale Jews for a Ceasefire. Responding to the slanders of “antisemitism” hurled at protesting students and faculty, Elijah said,

Anti-Zionism is absolutely not equivalent to antisemitism! Of course it’s true that there have been incidents of antisemitism on campuses, other places in the country and in the world. But the accusation of antisemitism is now often weaponized against people who are simply dissenting against what’s going on in Gaza. They’re opposing it in a totally evidence-driven, completely principled, completely reasonable way, and they’re accused of peddling hateful ideology that they really have nothing to do with.

Pointing to the large number of Jewish students and faculty opposed to the genocide and involved in the countless protests, Elijah noted:

It’s insulting to Jews who have experienced and whose families have experienced real antisemitism. People who escaped something as horrible as the Holocaust are now fighting to make sure nothing like that ever happens again. To accuse them of antisemitism, I think, is hurtful and baseless. Many of us are descended from families who experienced the Holocaust, experienced pogroms and are

motivated by a conviction that should never be allowed to take place in our lifetime or at any time in the future.

He described the development of the protests at Yale:

The general mood on campus is one of horror at what’s been going on in Gaza over the last six months. On campus, students have protested outside Board of Trustees meetings. We had many, many people, I believe it was over 100 at a previous protest. We held a vigil in November that easily drew over 100 people. There are students who have gone on a hunger strike. There was a hunger strike at Brown, I believe last month, and now we have students here on hunger strike. There is a vital and active culture of student organizing that has effectively mobilized in the months after October 7, throughout this war, and hopefully I think it will continue to be energized.

I think particularly when it comes to an issue like divestment, we know that the administration is invested in weapons contractors, weapons manufacturers, who sell weapons to the Israeli military and are directly complicit in this war. But even in terms of Yale’s publicly disclosed investments—and I’m not an expert on this subject—Yale is invested in index funds and other kinds of funds that have holdings in these companies supplying weapons to the Israeli military. Those are in the portfolio, publicly disclosed, confirmed. Yale and many other major universities are absolutely corrupt, beholden to these corporate investments, which we reject. It’s absolutely hypocritical for a university that espouses rhetoric of free inquiry, free speech and students having the right to express themselves, using censorship and repression so obviously.



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