

Columbia University threatens to deploy National Guard as mass arrests of anti-genocide protesters continue

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On Tuesday night, leaders of the student protest at Columbia University revealed that the university administration had threatened in negotiations to deploy the National Guard to crush the encampment.

In announcing the threats made against them, a student leader invoked the precedent of the Kent State Massacre of May 4, 1970, when the Ohio National Guard, deployed by the Nixon White House and Ohio governor, murdered four student protesters against the war in Vietnam, wounding nine more. “Make no mistake,” she said. “They are threatening to harm their own students and possibly even kill them.”

Late Tuesday night, Columbia University President Minouche (Nemat) Shafik sent out an email to the student and faculty body, issuing an ultimatum for the camp to be cleared by midnight, implicitly threatening another crackdown.

The threat from the Columbia administration, which is headed by a former leading IMF official, follows incitement by fascist Republicans Tom Cotton and Josh Hawley and smears of the protesters as “antisemites” by President Joe Biden. Biden has also made clear that the White House is coordinating and overseeing the ongoing crackdown on free speech on campuses and beyond.

In another state provocation against the protesters, the Republican Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, a vocal supporter of Trump’s fascist coup attempt of January 6, announced he will be visiting Columbia’s campus Wednesday to speak with “Jewish students.” Johnson had earlier called the anti-war protests “outrageous and un-American” and “antisemitic mobs.”

The crackdown at Columbia is now the focal point of an escalating campaign of state repression, targeting opponents of genocide and war.

Earlier on Tuesday evening, the New York Police Department (NYPD) conducted mass arrests of hundreds of members of the Jewish Voice for Peace that had gathered to shut down traffic at Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn—near Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer’s home—for an “Emergency Seder in the streets.” The action displayed a large banner in the center of the plaza saying, “No one is free until everyone is free. Jews say stop arming Israel.”

On Monday night, the NYPD arrested over 120 students and faculty at New York University, who demanded an end to NYU’s complicity in the genocide. The NYPD’s “strategic response group” was mobilized, with cops showing up in riot gear, beating protesters and using pepper spray against at least one member of the student press.

Much like Columbia, NYU has been turned into a police fortress, with cops stationed across campus. On Tuesday morning, Gould Plaza was barricaded off with a row of vertical plywood sheets and police barricades.

Echoing the line of President Joe Biden and the far-right Republicans, NYU President Linda G. Mills justified calling in the militarized NYPD

on her own students and faculty due to “hate,” “disruption” and “intimidating chants and several antisemitic incidents.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has repeatedly emphasized, the smear of opponents of war as “antisemites” is a pack of lies and an Orwellian distortion of reality. “The false identification of opposition to genocide with antisemitism is aimed at criminalizing any opposition to the crimes of imperialism and capitalism,” the WSWs wrote. “The target is not only the opponents of the Gaza genocide. Fundamentally, the aim is to preempt the emergence and prepare the violent suppression of a much broader movement against war and capitalism among youth and, above all, within the working class.”

The crackdown is also being escalated in other parts of the country. Nearly 50 student protesters at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, were arrested Monday, while nine students who were part of a pro-Palestine encampment at the University of Minnesota were arrested Tuesday morning. Harvard University has reportedly been turned into a police fortress, and the Harvard Palestinian Solidarity Committee, which has organized all the major protests on campus, has been suspended.

In response to these flagrant attacks on free speech, solidarity encampments, occupations and protests continue to emerge on college campuses and in the streets throughout the country.

Protests are also developing internationally. Students in Italy staged a demonstration yesterday to support the protests at Columbia University.

On Monday, the WSWs spoke with protesters at NYU, shortly before the NYPD crackdown. Jennifer, who studies politics, told the WSWs, “They’re cracking down on liberty. The use of police force is never for us. It is because the government is supporting and complicit in the genocide. We are not officially in a world war but what is going on equates with that.”

Another student, who wanted to remain anonymous, explained, “We at NYU are standing for the defense of rights with the students of Columbia University. Freedom of speech is being taken away across America. I never protested before in my life but after seeing what was happening in Columbia, I wanted to come to the demonstration here. The genocide is unjust, and there are no words to describe the situation in Gaza. The world is mourning it. The US is complicit.”

On Tuesday afternoon, following Monday night’s police crackdown, several hundred NYU students and faculty joined a demonstration in Washington Square Park to oppose the genocide and attack on democratic rights.

At the University of Minnesota Tuesday afternoon, around 1,000 students and faculty rallied together in an emergency protest following the arrests in the morning of student participants of the Gaza Solidarity Encampment.

At Columbia, the “Gaza Solidarity Encampment” has only spread on

campus since last week's arrests. Tuesday saw large crowds of student and faculty protesters.

Catherine, an International Affairs graduate student at Columbia, spoke to an International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) team at the encampment Tuesday.

Anyone who tries to isolate Palestine or any liberation struggle from the broader ecosystem of oppressed peoples, of working class struggles against capitalism, against these forces that seek to oppress and marginalize our people does a failure to our movement. Because Palestine, while it is our compass, while it is a liberation struggle that must be won in order to achieve the liberation of all peoples is not one that is fought in isolation, but one that is deeply intertwined with working class peoples everywhere.

We're seeing student workers begin to organize in a manner that we haven't seen on this campus in years. ... So I think there is, at least in my more microcosm environment here at Columbia, a lot of momentum in the idea that withholding labor from universities, from what is functioning all of our workplaces here. It is one of the levers of power that is absolutely necessary for us to be able to negotiate towards demands like divestment, amnesty, ending displacement, etc.

Another student at Columbia, who asked to remain anonymous, told the IYSSE:

I think the Democratic Party is just as complicit in some ways more insidiously than the Republican Party when it comes to the issue of Palestine. I remember being really shocked when I first moved to Palestine years ago, and one of my friends said (this was when I came back after the first election of Trump) and one of my friends said, honestly, we prefer Trump to Obama. And I was like, what are you talking about? He was like, at least Trump, excuse my language, f*** us to our face. Obama does it behind our back. ... I've thought about his comment over the years, and I think it is very emblematic of the way these parties operate.

If I'm in the US in November, I will not vote for Biden. I think it's a dynamic we're seeing actually play out anecdotally here at Columbia with the comments of, well, if it's not Shafik [as] our current president, it's going to be someone worse, someone even more Zionist. And I think that's the same thing we hear people say about Biden, the "lesser of two evils" argument. People love that. I would say it's long overdue for people to realize that the "lesser of two evils" argument is no longer tenable. Because it allows us to feel some sort of logic, some sort of acceptance in the fact that we are forced to choose between these two parties. And I think so long as we understand ourselves as having no other choice, we won't be able to begin to exist outside of the two-party system.

Significant portions of Columbia faculty have powerfully rallied in defense of students. On Monday, over 100 faculty walked out in support of the students, and over 100 untenured Columbia, Barnard and Teachers College faculty issued an open statement to students:

In the face of these events, we stand with you. You should be able to express your views and engage in peaceful protest on

campus, not least in public spaces. You should certainly not be worried about being sanctioned for your political views. You should not be made fearful because police line the gates, ready to flood onto our campus at the invitation of the administration.

On Tuesday, 18 faculty members of the Sociology Department at Columbia University issued a statement denouncing the NYPD arrests:

The decision to call the police into campus violated also the important principle of protecting free expression on campus. Coupled with the testimony given by President Shafik and members of the Board of Trustees in Congress, in which they failed to defend crucial values of academic freedom, the police action seems like capitulation to forces outside the university that would like to curtail academic freedom and freedom of expression.

The faculty called on the university "to immediately reverse these suspensions" and evictions and announced that "as members of the faculty of the department of sociology, we will continue to keep our courses open to these students, we will grade their exams and papers, and we will give them final grades in our courses so they may receive credit."

On Tuesday, a video statement made by an IYSSE member at Columbia emphasized the need to turn out to and mobilize the independent working class:

To the extent that the movement against the genocide does not openly break with the Democratic Party and take root in the working class, it can be isolated, politically derailed and made an easy target for state repression.

We therefore urge students: Turn to the international working class! Mobilize support among teachers, healthcare, auto, logistics and transit workers! Break with the capitalist politics of the Democratic Party!

And we urge workers: Take up the defense of the students! The attack on their democratic rights is an attack on your entire class.

Everything now depends on merging the fight against genocide, imperialist war and the attack on democratic rights with the development of the class struggle and the building of a revolutionary leadership in the working class.



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