

“Not welcome in UCD”: Students at Ireland’s biggest university protest Nancy Pelosi’s visit and honorary degree

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On April 22, students at Ireland’s biggest university, University College Dublin (UCD), were joined by a large gathering of healthcare workers in a demonstration denouncing the visit of former Democratic Party speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, who had been invited to receive an honorary degree.

UCD president, Professor Orla Feely, had refused to cancel the award to Pelosi, which was opposed by the UCD Student Union (SU) and many students. Feely said in an email, “Were it to be our practice to take an institutional position on geopolitical matters, we would be inhibiting the freedom of members of our community to express their individual positions and suppressing our ability to sustain and respect a diversity of views.”

Student Union president Martha Ní Riada denounced Feely’s position, saying “essentially, she doesn’t want to take sides”. The SU demand was for a ceasefire in Gaza, which was “not taking sides, but the bare minimum”.

Ní Riada was present at the ceremony by invitation but was assaulted by police and UCD security and dragged from the O’Reilly Hall when she interrupted proceedings by denouncing Pelosi as a “Zionist and a war criminal”. Two plainclothes police wearing Garda pins seized her, assisted by UCD security, and dragged her out of the room as she shouted, “Israel is NOT in our DNA” and “What about Palestinian women?”, in a reference to Pelosi’s supposed feminist credentials.

Ní Riada later told reporters, “I had a few more lines that I wanted to say, expressing the students’ position and that we denounce this doctorate and this isn’t representative of what our students wish.

“We don’t want people like this to be celebrated. But then I only got a sentence in and two guards [police] came and forcibly removed me, with excessive force.” She suffered abrasions and bruising to both arms.

Ní Riada said that the arrests of hundreds of students on college campuses in the United States while protest encampments have been broken up by police were “really worrying”.

“Universities are constantly talking about academic freedom and protecting freedom of speech, but if the speech is something that they disagree with, there’s no protection of it. That’s a worrying trend.

“I think it’s a similar thing to when I was thrown out of the Pelosi event because I was stating a view that was unpopular with the administration but supported by the students... I think universities are in a dangerous place at the moment, where if this can be accepted, then academic freedom means absolutely nothing.”

Outside, as well as those organised by the Student Union, demonstrators were joined by UCD’s Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions organisation, the Union of Students in Ireland, and healthcare workers, mostly from a nearby hospital, in support of their Palestinian colleagues being targeted by the Zionist occupation forces.

Pelosi was recently condemned for calling on the FBI to investigate pro-Palestinian protestors she said may be “connected to Russia”. This was described as “unsubstantiated smears” by the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), targeting “those who seek an end to the slaughter of civilians in Gaza.”

Speakers pointed out that Pelosi had been an integral part of the US government, which provides an estimated 69 percent of Israel’s foreign-sourced weapons.

As “shame” was written across the window of UCD’s O’Reilly Hall and many waved Palestinian flags and shouted “shame on you” and “war criminal”, Pelosi was awarded an honorary doctorate in law, along with the Sutherland Leadership Award and the James Joyce

Award, from a student society. Peter Sutherland was a former Irish attorney general and director-general of both the World Trade Organisation and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

As guests, including former prime ministers Bertie Ahern and Enda Kenny, were ushered into the venue by police, they were met with chants of “Shame on you”, “Palestine will be free” and “While you’re dining, kids are dying”. To disrupt the dinner, three megaphones were programmed to play a high-pitched siren outside.

Incoming SU president Miranda Bauer told the crowd, “It is incredibly disrespectful of the university to completely negate the feelings of the wider student body”.

Protesters were joined by pseudo-left parliamentary deputy Richard Boyd Barrett, who said that if not “for the weapons and the political support and the impunity” provided to Israel by the United States, “the “genocidal massacre that has been inflicted on the people of Gaza could not happen, would not have happened”.

He added that Pelosi “could not even bring herself to say the word ‘ceasefire’. Pelosi and her associates are not just complicit with genocide, they are guilty of genocide”.

In line with the perspective of all the pseudo-left groups, Boyd Barrett sought to restrict opposition to the genocide to placing moral pressure on the capitalist states. He said that “people advocating on behalf of the Palestinian people” had been “begging Western governments to end the impunity of Israel long before the recent horror.”

Boyd Barrett also attacked the presence of former prime ministers Ahern and Kenny at the event, noting that throughout their time in government “they did nothing” for Palestine.

This wasn’t the first pro-Palestine event at UCD since October. There have been a number of protests and speeches on campus and Ní Riada said that a group of students briefly occupied the Tierney administrative building. “Back in October, we asked for the university president to call for a ceasefire and we also asked for the college to outline links they had with Israeli institutions,” she said.

“At that time, Feely said they had no links with Israeli institutions. But then later the *University Observer*, one of the student newspapers, researched it and found that UCD actually has links with 12 institutions. So then the college retracted that statement, and we updated our calls then for them to call for a ceasefire and also to cut ties with Israeli institutions.”

These calls were ignored.

Support for Palestine is strong in Ireland, both for historical reasons and present-day. The Irish have suffered dispossession, invasion, and attempted genocide—in the form of an engineered “famine” in the mid-19th century—at the hands of the British over centuries of their history and recognize all of these in Israel’s behaviour towards the Palestinians.

Hundreds of thousands have regularly attended demonstrations called by the Ireland-Palestine Solidarity Committee (IPSC). As many as 200,000 occupied the centre of the capital, Dublin, to demand a ceasefire, Israeli withdrawal, and action by the government to implement two laws on imports from the occupied territories passed by the legislature but not implemented by the state.

Hundreds of actions and events take place across the country.

A poll last November showed that 84 percent of Irish people already supported an immediate ceasefire, while 71 percent agreed that Israeli rule over the Palestinians is apartheid.

The three-party right-wing government has responded to this enormous popular pressure with fine words but has done little of substance to stop the Israeli assaults.

The Occupied Territories Bill, which would ban trade with and economic support for illegal settlements, has already been legislated, but the government has blocked implementation. Another piece of legislation it has failed to carry out is the Illegal Israeli Settlements Divestment Bill 2023, designed to compel the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund to terminate its investments in companies operating in Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

The government has not even joined in the South African legal action against Israel at the International Court of Justice in The Hague.



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