

Rhode Island School of Design students occupy building, MIT and Harvard threaten protesters with suspension and “involuntary leave”

Kate Randall
7 May 2024

A group of students from the **Rhode Island School of Design** (RISD) and their supporters have occupied a school administration building in support of the population of Gaza. RISD is a private art and design school in Providence, Rhode Island, affiliated with Brown University.

Students at Brown last week took down their “Encampment for Gaza” after school administrators agreed to put a resolution on divestment from Israel up for a vote at the October meeting of the Corporation of Brown University, which does not commit the university to specific action. In return, the students agreed to end the encampment and not violate Brown’s conduct code through the end of the academic year.

The group RISD Students for Justice in Palestine is leading the occupation of Providence Washington Hall at RISD, renaming it Fathi Ghaben Place. Ghaben, 77, was a renowned Palestinian artist born near Gaza City. He died in Gaza after being denied permission by Israeli authorities to travel abroad to receive treatment for chest and lung issues that he was unable to get in the city due to the lack of oxygen and other medical supplies in the besieged enclave.

The student group has vowed to continue the occupation until RISD President Crystal Williams meets its demands and

- “Provides total fiscal transparency of RISD’s investment portfolio”;
- “Commits to a holistic divestment from companies, corporations, and institutions that are implicated in sustaining Israeli Apartheid”;
- “Establishes a student oversight committee for

future investments.”

They also demand that Williams “publicly condemn the Israeli Occupation’s genocide in Gaza as well as the military and settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, and take a public stance for a permanent ceasefire.”

Williams met with students inside the occupied building Monday evening. Students said the RISD president gave them until 8 a.m. Tuesday “to decide their next steps,” but that deadline appears to have come and gone without any movement on either side.

RISD administration issued the following statement:

We have and continue to affirm our students’ right to freedom of expression, freedom of speech, and peaceful assembly. RISD condemns violence and injustice, and we decry antisemitism, Islamophobia and all forms of hate. The well-being of all of our students has been and remains our top priority, and we continue to support all members of our community.

In line with President Joe Biden, politicians in both parties, and administrations at other colleges and universities, the RISD administration advances the “big lie” that opposition to the genocide in Gaza is an expression of “antisemitism.”

As of this writing, student protest encampments remain at Harvard University and the Massachusetts

Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, despite threats of disciplinary action from both school's presidents.

At **MIT**, students protesting the genocide in Gaza had almost entirely emptied their Scientists Against Genocide Encampment Monday after school administrators warned students they would be placed on immediate academic suspension for the remainder of the semester if they did not disperse by a 2:30 p.m. deadline.

Throughout the afternoon, however, hundreds of demonstrators arrived at MIT, including about a hundred local high school students who had walked out of classes and sat down on Massachusetts Ave., blocking the main public road that crosses through campus. At 6 p.m., protesters began to knock down barricades the administration had erected around the encampment to keep out protesters.

Police from MIT and Cambridge, as well as Massachusetts state troopers, were on scene in force, but no arrests were reportedly made. Journalists were kept from entering the area of the encampment. Police eventually reduced their large presence late Monday. On Tuesday, students continued to protest in the area surrounding the tents.

At **Harvard**, also on Monday, Interim President Alan Garber broke his silence on the encampment in Harvard Yard, sending out a university-wide email threatening pro-Palestinian protesters who continued their occupation with “involuntary leave.”

Garber wrote of the encampment: “Those who participate in or perpetuate its continuation will be referred for involuntary leave from their Schools,” adding, “The encampment favors the voices of a few over the rights of many who have experienced disruption in how they learn and work at a critical time of the semester.”

As the student protests began to sweep across the US, the Harvard administration locked down Harvard Yard—the central area of campus that traditionally attracts thousands of visitors and tourists—to all but those with Harvard IDs. In an effort to isolate and quash the protest, the gates to Harvard Yard have remained locked by Harvard administrators to block entry to “outsiders.”

Garber's email comes less than two weeks before Harvard commencement ceremonies, which annually

attract more than 30,000 to the campus, including students and their families, as well as wealthy alumni and donors, some of whom have been pressuring Harvard to clamp down on alleged “antisemitism” on campus.

In the email, Garber wrote that students who are suspended will not be able to finish exams or stay in Harvard housing and “must cease to be present on campus until reinstated.” It follows that if students are barred from campus the door will be open for police to remove protesters and their encampment from Harvard Yard. Garber had previously said there would be a “very high bar” before the university would ask police to respond to any student protests.

On Monday evening, more than 400 Harvard students and area residents, organized by Harvard Out of Occupied Palestine, joined forces to protest the threat by Garber against the encampment. Speakers referenced past protests at Harvard, including against the Vietnam War and South African apartheid. They chanted “Harvard University, we know what side you're on, remember South Africa, remember Vietnam.”

The protesters then marched to the private residence of the Harvard president, who was not at home.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact