

As student protests over Gaza spread, US House Committee demands further crackdown

Patrick Martin
23 May 2024

Some 500 students walked out of the commencement ceremony at Harvard University Thursday, taking up chants of “Free Palestine” and “Let them walk!” This referred to 13 students who were barred from graduation with their class by a vote of the top governing body at the college, the Harvard Corporation.

The 13 students were victimized for their actions as part of the protests against the Gaza genocide and Harvard’s continuing ties with the state of Israel and the US war machine. While the university administration did not make public their supposed offenses, one press account said that some of them were involved in cutting a gate lock, a trivial case of property damage.

The administration withheld their degrees despite an overwhelming vote by the faculty senate opposing this action and a petition signed by 500 faculty members and 1,500 students. Interim President Alan Garber was loudly booed as he opened the commencement, and he conceded that “some among us may choose to take the liberty of expressing themselves to draw attention to events unfolding in the wider world.”

The signal for the walkout was given by one of the three student speakers at the commencement, Shruthi Kumar, who deviated from the text of her address to pull a prepared statement out of the sleeves of her gown and read it. Kumar attacked the administration for its treatment of the anti-genocide protests, saying, “This semester our freedom of speech and our expressions of solidarity became punishable,” as students erupted in applause.

She said she wanted to honor “the 13 undergraduates in the class of 2024 who will not graduate today,” adding, “I am deeply disappointed by the intolerance for freedom of speech and the right to civil disobedience on campus ... this is about civil rights and upholding democratic

principles.”

Referring to the widespread support for the victimized students, she continued, “The students had spoken. The faculty had spoken. Harvard, do you hear us?”

She then said she was walking in support of those denied their degrees. “These are my peers and friends, and I can’t in good conscience celebrate when their families are in pain,” she said. “This is beyond politics—it’s about civil rights and civil disobedience. We’re not intending to be disruptive or violent. But it’s making a statement, as a community, as the class of 2024.”

Some of the same democratic sentiments were voiced by the main commencement speaker, Maria Ressa, a Filipino journalist who won the Nobel Peace Prize for her exposures of corruption and state killings under the regime of President Rodrigo Duterte.

“The campus protests are testing everyone in America,” Ressa said. “Protests give voice; they shouldn’t be silenced.”

She also noted that she herself had been falsely accused of antisemitism for her opposition to the Gaza genocide, saying she had been “called antisemitic by power and money because they want power and money.”

The commencement protest came despite a heavy presence of police on the campus. This was a manifestation at Harvard of the crackdown being carried out on virtually every college campus where students have demonstrated, set up encampments or occupied buildings to declare their opposition to the Israeli genocide in Gaza and demand their universities break all ties with the Zionist regime and divest any holdings in companies that supply Israel with war materiel.

The harshest such crackdown Thursday came at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where

hundreds of police were mobilized in response to students who set up a new encampment at the school after the previous encampment was broken up by police earlier this month. While police broke up the new protest site, smashing through improvised barricades, students staged a second protest, taking over a building.

The attack on student protesters and their supporters is being driven from Washington, where both the Biden administration and Republicans and Democrats in Congress have sought to criminalize opposition to the Gaza genocide, declaring all criticism of the actions of Israel to be “antisemitic,” even though many of the protesters are themselves Jewish. More than 3,000 have been arrested for participating in the protests since they began last month.

One focal point of this witch-hunting campaign has been a series of hearings conducted by the House Education Committee, chaired by Republican Representative Virginia Foxx, at which university presidents and superintendents of large public school systems have been hauled before the congressional panel and berated for insufficient repression of the campus protests.

The fourth such hearing was held Thursday, with the presidents of Rutgers University, Northwestern University and UCLA the targets of the witch-hunting. The first two universities were denounced for negotiating compromise agreements with the anti-genocide protesters. UCLA was chosen as a supposed example of a repressive response that was delayed for too long.

The choice of presidents to harass and vilify gives a glimpse of the thinly veiled bigotry of the Republican politicians, who control the committee and are the loudest in screaming slanders about “antisemitism.” Jonathan Holloway, president of Rutgers, is African American. Michael Schill, president of Northwestern, and Gene Block, chancellor of UCLA, are both Jewish.

Representative Foxx of North Carolina opened the hearing with a diatribe against the university presidents. “Taxpayer dollars have no business funding universities without principles that align with the principles of this country,” she said. “Each of you refused to enforce your own rules, preserve campus safety and protect Jewish students.”

Ranking Democrat Bobby Scott mildly pointed out the hypocrisy of the hearing, given that the Republicans refused to hold a hearing on the Charlottesville neo-Nazi rally in 2017, when hundreds of white supremacists marched, carrying torches in the style of a Hitler rally and

chanting “Jews will not replace us.”

But more often in the course of the hearing, Democrats joined with the Republicans in grilling the presidents and vilifying anti-genocide protests. They all agreed that the traditional Palestinian slogan, “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” was a call for the extermination of the Jews, not a demand for democratic rights and equality.

At one point, Representative Elise Stefanik of New York, the fourth-ranking Republican leader in the House, sought to reprise her successful vilification of the presidents of Harvard, MIT and Penn last December. When she asked Schill about reported attacks on Jewish students, Schill replied that these allegations were under investigation and that he could not say in advance how long this would take. He concluded, “Well, if you remember, the encampment was up just a few weeks ago. So we believe at Northwestern in due process. We believe in investigations,” at which point Stefanik cut him off.

Representative James Comer, who has spearheaded his own witch-hunts as chair of the House Oversight Committee, also grilled the Northwestern president. He cited criticism of Schill by Zionist groups.

Schill replied, “I believe that we got a good result. We were able to get rid of the major antisemitic event on the campus with no violence.”

This slur against the students was not enough for Comer. He claimed that Schill achieved that goal “by institutionalizing antisemitism and agreeing to the demands of antisemites.”

Comer continued: “In my view you are the easiest case we have dealt with. You agreed to the demands of those who are trying to change university policy in an antisemitic way and supported their tactics and use of force.”

The Students for Justice in Palestine chapter at UCLA had a harsh and politically justified response to the hearing, calling it “McCarthyist” and “a textbook example of political theater,” which conflated “calls for Palestinian liberation with antisemitism” in order to justify suppression of the anti-genocide movement.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact