

# Colleges reopen amid nation-wide escalation of attack on free speech

Josh Andrews  
23 August 2024

University and college students are returning to campus amidst a fall offensive launched against free speech. The ruling class is determined to put students “in their place” after they have bravely opposed the Gaza genocide, despite savage repression, punishments by administrators, and the revoking of job offers to oppose US support for the genocide in Gaza.

Both the Democrats and the Republicans are well aware that, though subdued during the summer break, opposition to the genocide continues to seethe among increasingly radicalized youth. Therefore, anticipating a renewal and broadening of the protests this semester, college administrations are converting campuses into fortresses in which freedom of movement is severely curtailed and protests are criminalized. In many cases, it is universities in Democratic-controlled states and cities that have been most aggressive in their attack on the right to protest and free speech.

The University of California, the largest state university system in the country, has banned the wearing of face masks, which many protestors have used to protect themselves from doxxing and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. A swathe of students will return to school with legal charges hanging over their heads incurred for peacefully protesting last semester. Meanwhile the fascist vigilantes who attacked an encampment set up by students at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) as police and campus security guards looked on will face no repercussions. *The Guardian* wrote, “At least 55 students who were arrested in May also received letters from the university threatening to place a hold on their academic records or withhold their degrees.” The California State University system has also banned all encampments.

Perhaps the most far-reaching restrictions are being imposed at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, which also spearheaded policies to effectively ban protests last semester. On August 20, the Senate Committee on University Affairs issued a letter protesting drastic policy changes that had been worked out behind closed doors by

the administration. According to the Committee’s letter, the changes will “deprive students of the right to due process and fair hearings with faculty oversight, curtail freedom of speech and expression, and radically increase administrators’ power to prosecute students and limit inconvenient forms of free speech, in effect suppresses freedom of speech and due process.”

Though not always so far-reaching, similar policies are being enacted by university administrations across the country.

- **Columbia University** in New York City has imposed a total ban on encampments. Moreover, according to *Inside Higher Ed*, “until further notice, only individuals with university IDs can enter the campus, and they must fill out a “guest registration form” if they want to bring anyone else to campus.”

- **New York University** has updated its discrimination and harassment policy to ban criticism of Zionism, conflating this racist political ideology with Jewish identity in a vicious caricature of Judaism. Willfully ignoring the fact that Jewish individuals and groups, such as Jewish Voice for Peace, have in many cases led the protests against the genocide, the document states, “for many Jewish people, Zionism is a part of their Jewish identity.”

- **Rutgers University** in New Jersey will be requiring students to submit an Orwellian-named “Free Expression Notification Form” in order to protest, according to an article published on *nj.com*. In violation of longstanding tradition, the putting up of tents will also be banned. Students for Justice in Palestine has been blacklisted on campus. Additionally, “Demonstrations must be held between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. and only in certain locations.”

- The **University of Southern California** implemented a policy in which anyone without an ID must pass through a security checkpoint.

The restriction of access to campus is clearly aimed at isolating students, as many workers in the community supported the encampments and are opposed to the genocide.

There can be no doubt that these policies were worked out in close consultation with representatives of the US state apparatus and especially the Democratic Party. They mark a significant broadening and intensification of last semester's systematic assault on free speech.

In the spring, Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan, adopted the authoritarian position that any act that "disrupts" normal activities is prohibited. On March 27, far-right Texas governor Greg Abbott signed executive order GA 44, which ordered all public institutions of higher education in the state to "reevaluate" their policies on anti-semitism and incorporate the Anti-Defamation League's definition, which conflates criticism of Zionism with anti-semitism. Other such attacks on the right to protest abound, notably at Columbia University, where New York City police entered the campus for the first time since the Vietnam war at the request of President Minouche Shafik, beating protesters, ripping off hijabs, and pepper-spraying bystanders.

Across the country, hundreds of students were arrested for peaceful protests at their colleges. While in some cases, as at UT Austin, charges have been dropped by local prosecutors, and in others students are still awaiting trial, in most instances students continue to face punitive actions by the universities.

At Towson University in Maryland, according to *Inside Higher Ed*, "The ACLU claims two of those punished with 'deferred suspensions,' which appear on the students' disciplinary records but don't prohibit them from coming to campus as usual, were not even involved in the demonstration." Other universities where actions have been taken against protesting students include:

- **University of Georgia:** six students have been suspended for one semester and put on academic probation for the rest of their time at the university despite appeals

- **University of Texas at Dallas:** nine students, three of them already graduated, currently await their trial dates as they appeal their sanctions

- **George Washington University:** administrators have blackmailed students by offering to drop criminal charges if they agree to physically restrict themselves to their dorms and classes

- **Pomona College:** 19 protesters will have their charges dropped if they "complete 16 hours of community service and incur no more criminal charges over the next six months."

Further attacks on academic freedom and the free speech rights of left-wing professors are also underway. Since October 7, numerous professors and academic workers have lost their positions and faced other punitive actions for voicing opposition to the Israeli onslaught on Gaza and

defending protesting students.

Now, reviving the McCarthyism of the 1950s, state governments are mandating sanctions for professors that go against the state ideology of genocide and war. On August 14, *Inside Higher Ed* reported on a lawsuit filed by professors at Indiana and Purdue universities against a law passed by the state legislature that dictates schools "must deny tenure to professors who are 'unlikely to foster ... intellectual diversity.'"

Republican state attorney general Todd Rokita argued that "the classroom curriculum of a public university is government speech set in accordance with State law." As the article notes, the authoritarian logic of this argument is mirrored in the Stop WOKE Act in Florida, which dictates how social issues can be discussed in the classroom.

The University of Texas system has issued a new policy, banning its 14 universities and health-related institutions from taking a public position on any political or social matter "unrelated to campus operations."

The assault on free speech is part of a broader move to harness universities to the war drive of U.S. imperialism. Millions of dollars in academic resources are reallocated to the research of ever deadlier weapons and cyberwarfare techniques.

The campaign against free speech on campuses constitutes an attack on the rights of the entire working class and must be opposed by all class-conscious workers and youth. It demonstrates that fight against war is inseparable from the fight to defend democratic rights. The role of the Democratic Party in spearheading both the genocide in Gaza and this assault on free speech underscores the urgent need for workers and youth to develop their struggles independently from and in opposition to both the Democrats and Republicans and the capitalist system they both represent.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**