

Michigan Attorney General charges 11 pro-Palestinian student protesters at the University of Michigan

Luke Galvin
15 September 2024

Last Thursday, Michigan Attorney General (AG) Dana Nessel released a statement announcing that her office filed charges against 11 pro-Palestinian protesters at the University of Michigan (UMich) in the 15th District Court in Washtenaw County.

The charges are an escalation of the bipartisan campaign, which in Michigan has been spearheaded by the Democratic Party, to attack and suppress the rights of students and workers to protest war and genocide. The UMich administration has close ties to the Democratic Party, and Nessel is a Democrat.

Nessel's office issued a statement saying that they were charging 11 out of the "over 35 protesters" who were investigated. Seven of the protesters are being charged with trespassing and obstructing a police officer, a felony with a maximum two-year sentence. Two are only being charged with trespassing. The remaining two demonstrators are charged with various misdemeanors, likely stemming from interactions with Zionist counter-protesters, including disturbing the peace and "attempted ethnic intimidation."

The AG has also stated that the protesters were involved in the months-long protest encampment set up in the UMich Ann Arbor campus Diag (the university's quad) last semester. The peaceful tent encampment was attacked and destroyed by police on May 21, following weeks of provocations by the UMich administration and police.

Nessel's office clarified that they are currently not prosecuting protesters involved in the Honors Convocation on March 25 inside Hill Auditorium or those who interacted with police outside the UMich Museum of Art on May 3. The investigation into protesters placing fake corpses and bloody toys in front of eight regents' homes on May 15 continues.

Employing the same doublespeak used by UMich administrators and those of other major universities across the US to justify their new authoritarian policies directed against anti-genocide protesters, Nessel proclaimed:

The right to free speech and assembly is fundamental, and my office fully supports every citizen's right to free speech under the First Amendment... However, violent and criminal behavior, or acts that trample on another's rights, cannot be tolerated. I hope today's charges are a reminder to everyone who chooses to assemble, regardless of the cause, that the First Amendment does not provide a cover for illegal activity.

In other words, the right of students, youth and workers to peacefully assemble and protest the Gaza genocide, or any other crime of US imperialism and its allies, is illegal.

The charges are a direct attack on democratic rights that was undeniably coordinated within the upper echelons of the Democratic Party and the state intelligence apparatus. Nessel is the right hand of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, a leader in the Democratic Party and among those that were earlier floated to replace President Joe Biden on the Democratic presidential ticket.

Furthermore, the charges come as the latest in a string of attacks on students' and workers' rights since the beginning of the fall semester. On August 28, police violently arrested four protesters at a peaceful "die-in" protest on the Diag for impeding foot traffic. These arrests came within days of the UMich administration's announcement of its revised conduct policies, which allow the "university" to file a complaint against a student with practically no restrictions.

Previously, all complaints about misconduct had to come from staff members, faculty or students. These new policies provide legal cover to allow for outside consulting firms to gather information and file complaints and sanctions against students on behalf of the university.

The change in policy at UMich mirror similar actions taken the other administrations, including Columbia University overtly banning encampments and Rutgers

students needing to submit a “Free Expression Notification Form.” Students who participated in protests at George Washington University last academic year started the semester facing potential criminal charges. These administrations are clearly attempting to intimidate and restrict students to prevent any expression of the widespread anti-war and pro-Palestinian sentiment.

On August 31, the Michigan Democratic Party (MDP) blocked the nomination of Palestinian American activist Huwaida Arraf, who won the popular vote to become the Democratic candidate for the UMich Board of Regents elections. Arraf was backed by the Tahrir Coalition of student groups against the genocide in Gaza. Both Arraf and leaders of the Tahrir Coalition have accused the MDP of manipulating the vote through a vote weighting system in coordination with other candidates.

Both the American Human Rights Council (AHRC) and the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan (ACLU) have denounced the charges against students as an alarming attack on democratic rights. In its statement on the charges, the AHRC demanded Nessel rescind the charges while calling on municipalities and academic institutions to respect the rights of protesters.

Dr. Ihsan Alkhatib of Murray State University and advisory board member of the AHRC explained the impact of Nessel’s decision: “These charges relate to matters that are ordinarily handled at the local level. Nessel is choosing to use the power of the state when it is known that she has a position on the issue and is not an objective state official simply enforcing the law as she sees fit.”

In its own statement, the ACLU noted Nessel’s act of announcing the charges “run the serious risk of chilling future speech and protest” on the campuses. The ACLU’s statement continues, laying particular significance on the fact that the state government is bringing trespassing misdemeanor charges against protesters, charges which, as the AHRC pointed out are largely dealt with by university and local authorities:

The charges by the MIOAG represent a pattern of excessive response by law enforcement to the campus protests. As we noted when the campus encampment at the University of Michigan was dismantled in May, the use of militarized tactics by the police, including chemical munitions, was grossly disproportionate to what had been a peaceful protest.

The escalation of attacks against anti-genocide protests has

exposed the futility of a perspective based on pressuring the UMich administration and Democratic Party to halt the genocide in Gaza. Furthermore, the attacks coincide with an overt pressure on the protests to capitulate to Democratic Vice-President Kamala Harris’ campaign for US president.

On September 6, the Black Student Union (BSU) at UMich publicly announced it was withdrawing from the Tahrir Coalition over broad claims of a “rampant anti-Blackness” within the organization. The timing of the exit and lack of any concrete examples of the Tahrir Coalition’s alleged discrimination against members of the BSU points to a deeper political motivation.

Attacks on democratic rights are escalating at the same time as the ruling class assault on jobs, living conditions and social spending . The Biden administration’s authorization of long-range missiles for use by Ukraine to hit targets deep within Russian territory raises the direct threat of nuclear war, as do the continued threats of war by US imperialism and the Israel regime against Iran.

At the same time, the threat of fascism has materialized in Donald Trump’s campaign for US president. The Democratic Party has refused to publicly acknowledge this threat and presents no progressive alternative to it.

The only perspective capable of ending the genocide in Gaza and the threat of fascism is an international socialist anti-war movement based on the working class. As the objective political situation continues to deteriorate, workers are being driven into struggle against the capitalist ruling class and its political system. Workers and youth require a revolutionary perspective based on a historical understanding of the crises at hand and the socialist internationalism.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact