

University of Michigan moves to ban local chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine

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9 November 2024

On Thursday evening, Students Allied for Freedom and Equality (SAFE UMich), the University of Michigan chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), posted a statement on its Instagram account and the national SJP Twitter/X account announcing that the university had filed a complaint and was threatening to suspend SAFE as a student club.

SAFE noted that the complaint marked the first-ever attempt by the University of Michigan administration to suspend a legacy organization at its Ann Arbor campus.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth section of the Socialist Equality Party, denounces this witch-hunting attack on SAFE and on the democratic rights of all students, faculty and staff at the university. It is a direct attack on free speech and the right to peacefully protest, and marks an escalation of the nationwide attack on students and others who seek to oppose the Israeli genocide that is being armed, funded and overseen by the United States against the people of Gaza.

The IYSSE at UMich demands the immediate rescinding of the complaint and unconditionally defends the right of the pro-Palestinian organization to function politically at the university.

This attack is bound up with a series of anti-democratic changes made by the UMich administration to its code of conduct. Earlier this year, the university administration unveiled changes to its policies that allow the university to file a complaint against a student or organization with practically no restrictions. This, in turn, followed the adoption of policies allowing the administration to ban any protest or gathering it deemed “disruptive.” Additionally, the new conduct policies no longer guarantee an accused student or organization the right to request an appeals panel of students, faculty and staff, erasing due process.

The threat to suspend SAFE at UMich is only the latest anti-democratic attempt to muzzle the opposition to US/Israeli genocide among workers and youth. In October 2023, Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts became the first private university to ban an SJP chapter from campus, based on fraudulent charges of antisemitism. The university libeled students opposing the Gaza genocide as celebrating “the barbaric killing of Jews just because they are Jews.”

Just days later, Columbia University in New York followed Brandeis, banning its local SJP chapter alongside the Columbia chapter of the anti-Zionist Jewish student group, Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP). Far-right Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has also banned the SJP throughout the state university system.

The UMich administration’s attack on SAFE follows revelations in a *Guardian* report published in late October detailing how the UMich Board of Regents recruited Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel (Democrat) to investigate and charge protesters involved in the pro-Palestinian encampment established on the UMich Ann Arbor campus last semester.

According to the *Guardian* report, Nessel’s campaign for reelection as Michigan attorney general in 2022 received substantial funding from several UMich regents, as well as from Zionist forces among state politicians, organizations and UMich donors, all of whom have publicly denounced the anti-genocide protests as antisemitic. The UMich regents—wealthy financiers, politicians and business owners—are predominantly aligned with the Democratic Party.

In September, Nessel’s office announced it was charging 11 protesters involved in the encampment, the majority being students and campus workers. Seven were charged with trespassing and obstructing a police officer. The latter charge is a felony carrying a

maximum two-year sentence. The others were charged with trespassing and various misdemeanors.

On October 31, the Tahrir Coalition, a group of student organizations opposing the Gaza genocide at UMich, published an open letter demanding Nessel drop the charges her office brought against the 11 pro-Palestinian protesters in September. The IYSSE supports the open letter and joins in demanding the dropping of all charges against the 11 protesters. The IYSSE has signed the open letter and urges all workers and youth to do so.

In early October, a leaked clip of UMich President Santa Ono speaking on the repression of student protests on campus appeared on social media. In the clip, Ono explicitly stated that the US government was directing his administration and those of other leading universities across the country to suppress anti-genocide and antiwar protests.

“The government could call me tomorrow and say, in a very unbalanced way, that the university is not doing enough to combat antisemitism, and I could say it’s not doing enough to combat Islamophobia, and that’s not what they want to hear,” Ono explained.

He continued:

You may know that my peers from presidents of other universities have been in the hot seat in Congress. The question from Congress is not balanced. It’s focused almost entirely on antisemitism, which I think is an issue, but there’s also Islamophobia as well. And so, you can see, they are a very powerful group, who are not shy to say that they will hold the whole institution accountable for not addressing antisemitism.

At the close of the clip, Ono remarked that the US government would “say something like, well, we will withhold two billion dollars in funding if you don’t address antisemitism.”

On October 7, police violently attacked and pepper sprayed dozens of protesters marching on the university Diag. In late August, during U-Mich’s annual Festifall club day, police dragged, pinned and arrested three

protesters while ripping signs away from other protesters during a peaceful “die-in” protest on the Diag.



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