

# Trump's executive orders put New York City college students in the crosshairs

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From October 2023 through 2024, Democrats and Republicans at the federal, state and local levels launched sweeping and brutal retaliation against pro-Palestinian protesters on US campuses. The witch-hunt whipped up during Congressional hearings against university administrators developed into an all-out purge of students and faculty opposed to the ongoing US-Israeli genocide in Gaza.

Now the Trump administration is further escalating and integrating this assault, which began under President Joe Biden and the Democrats, into its plans for presidential dictatorship. Trump has nominated Republican Congresswoman Elise Stefanik, who played a central role in the witch-hunt hearings, for US ambassador to the United Nations.

Last Wednesday, the Trump White House ordered the cancellation of student visas and threatened to deport students whom it slanders as “perpetrators of unlawful anti-Semitic harassment and violence.” As we wrote, this order is “aimed at transforming American universities into a surveillance and enforcement arm of the military-intelligence-immigration enforcement apparatus.”

Following from the order, the United States Department of Education announced late Monday that it has launched an investigation into five universities. The investigation will target Columbia University as well as Northwestern University, Portland State University, the University of California, Berkeley and the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.

Craig Trainor, the Trump-appointed Acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights in the department, said in a statement on the Department of Education's website:

Too many universities have tolerated widespread antisemitic harassment and the illegal encampments that paralyzed campus life last year, driving Jewish life and religious expression underground. The Biden Administration's toothless resolution agreements did shamefully little to hold those institutions accountable. Today, the Department is putting universities, colleges, and K-12 schools on notice: this administration will not tolerate continued institutional indifference to the wellbeing of Jewish students on American campuses, nor will it stand by idly if universities fail to combat Jew hatred and the unlawful harassment and violence it animates.

Columbia's Office of Public Affairs released a statement that reads, “We look forward to ongoing work with the new federal administration to combat antisemitism and ensure the safety and wellbeing of our students, faculty, and staff.”

Columbia University and New York University (NYU) in New York City are central targets of Trump's executive orders. New York is the second most popular state for international students after California, and Columbia and NYU have been prominent centers of pro-Palestinian

opposition on US campuses. Columbia University in particular started the movement for “Gaza Solidarity Encampments” on campuses in the US and around the world in 2024.

Zionist provocateurs in the city are coming forward with offers to cooperate directly with the Trump administration in enforcing the executive orders. Elizabeth Rand, the parent of an NYU student and the founder of a Zionist Facebook group called “Mothers Against College Antisemitism,” shared a link to the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) tip line with the message, “Please tell everyone you know who is at a university to file complaints about foreign students and faculty who support Hamas.”

On Monday, NYU's Association of University Professors (AAUP) reported that Rand has developed a close political relationship with NYU President Linda Mills. The report found that Mills and Rand have been in close discussion regarding disciplinary actions against pro-Palestinian students, including the fact that “President Mills interfered with NYU's disciplinary process specifically at Rand's request, having a conduct hearing for a particular NYU student preemptively dropped.”

Elsewhere in the city, members of the fascist group Betar US, which claims descent from the Zionist terrorist Ze'ev Jabotinsky, staged a provocation at the New School, attempting to hand students campaigning for a pro-Palestinian event “beepers,” in an obvious reference to Israel's terror attack in Lebanon last year. As of this writing, Betar's pinned post on X calls on its supporters to “assist @ICEgov in deportation efforts” and “submit names of attendees” to a vigil for Hind Rajab, a six-year-old girl killed by the Israeli military, “to @realDonaldTrump.”

At Columbia University, where a group of masked students disrupted the first lecture of a class on the history of modern Israel, Zionists have responded with a proposal to the University Senate to ban masks on Columbia's campus. As of this writing, the university has already suspended one Columbia affiliate involved in the protest action and barred another two students from Columbia's campus.

The proposed resolution claims that “masked individuals have participated in disruptive actions on campus, hindering the University's ability to identify and hold accountable those responsible,” and calls upon the school's administration to “institute and enforce a University-wide policy prohibiting the wearing of masks or any other face coverings that prevent the identification of the wearer in classrooms, academic and special events.”

Students and staff are broadly opposed to the resolution. In response, the student protest group Columbia University Apartheid Divest (CUAD) stated:

With a mask ban, Columbia further cements its genocidal support for the Zionist entity over even the health and wellness of our community. Columbia would rather discourage its students, workers, and faculty from protecting themselves from a pandemic,

which they have already taken away all accommodations for, than divest from genocide. As a leading public health research university, Columbia has betrayed its own principles and advocacy for the sake of repressing pro-Palestine action on our campus.

Such a policy, if implemented by the university administration, would be a significant intensification of the police-state atmosphere built up over the last year on Columbia's Manhattan campus. The university has, following the encampment protests last spring, become a closed, police-controlled fortress.

Well over 100 students have been arrested on or directly outside Columbia's campus by armed police over the last year. Over the same period, the university opened over 300 disciplinary cases against anti-genocide students, suspending 122, evicting over 50 and expelling one student. Last week, the university announced that it will be further boosting security on campus, with regular patrols by police officers and tightly controlled ID checks for access to university buildings.

Faculty have also come under assault. Earlier this month, Columbia forced law professor Katherine Franke to retire due to her comments opposing the chemical attack on pro-Palestinian protesters at Columbia last year. Stefanik cited and distorted these comments in a congressional hearing against Columbia, and then-University President Minouche Shafik agreed they were "unacceptable and discriminatory." Franke wrote in a statement:

While the university may call this change in my status "retirement," it should be more accurately understood as a termination dressed up in more palatable terms. In exchange for my agreement to step down as an active member of the Columbia faculty, the university demanded that I surrender significant rights and privileges that are provided to all retired faculty as a matter of policy. To describe my change in status with the university as a "retirement" is both misleading and disingenuous.

Franke has since filed a grievance with the university based on the argument that the crackdown on pro-Palestinian speech constitutes a form of anti-Palestinian racism.

Students remain undeterred. On January 21, hundreds at Columbia rallied to protest the occupation of Palestine.

Three students at the university have filed a lawsuit against Columbia to contest the biased and anti-democratic treatment over the last period. According to Drop Site News, "the students state that the university violated its own policies during the disciplinary process, that the university targeted the students for their views, and that it violated New York's landlord tenant laws when it evicted the students from university housing."

A hundred blocks south of Columbia, NYU has suspended at least 13 students and placed at least 20 others on probation for at least a full year for participation in a pro-Palestinian sit-in protest at the end of the last academic semester. The protest, which took place during the week of final examinations in December, was immediately followed by university-issued "persona non grata" statuses against students and faculty who participated. Police arrested two faculty members at a protest outside NYU's Bobst Library the following day.

Students have reported unusually short disciplinary hearings, followed by suspensions, despite most of the university's charges not applying to their individual actions. The university did not give students information to prepare proper defenses ahead of their hearings, and only limited access to evidence related to the Office of Student Conduct's claims.

A petition calling on NYU to drop the suspensions of the student protesters garnered around 4,000 signatures from university students, faculty and staff. Members of NYU's Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine (FSJP) attempted to deliver it directly to Linda Mills, but she refused to see them. A member of her staff accepted it on her behalf.

NYU, like Columbia, has built up its security apparatus. It has hired more security officers, increased the presence of police on campus and significantly limited access to many university facilities. Over the last 15 months, police have arrested hundreds of NYU students.

The danger of the political situation under Trump can not be underestimated. The Trump administration's executive orders attacking the democratic rights of foreign students are only the beginning of efforts to subordinate academic freedom to dictatorial rule. Furthermore, Trump's support for fascism will embolden far-right Zionists to carry out greater attacks on protesters.

At the same time, the opposition to genocide has not been intimidated. The vigil for Hind Rajab that was threatened by Betar was well-attended, and hundreds of students at Columbia and NYU continue to participate in protests calling for an end to Israel's genocidal war. And the working class will not accept dictatorship in the United States without a fight.

The critical political lessons of the last 15 months of continuous anti-genocide protests must be drawn. Genuine opposition to fascism, genocide and war will not come through appeals to university administrations or the Democratic Party. Appeals must instead be made to the working class, the international social force that can carry out the revolutionary social, economic and political change necessary to save humanity from the death grip of the capitalist profit system.

There are many sections of the working class in the New York City area where opposition to the actions of both the Trump administration and politicians of the Democratic Party has intensified in recent weeks. Immigrant workers, who have been targeted by ICE raids in the Bronx and in Newark, New Jersey in the last two weeks, have begun to seek ways to fight back. Anger among transit workers, UPS drivers, postal workers and Amazon workers over the attacks on democratic rights and the rising cost of living is a social powder keg waiting to explode.

The working class is the only force capable of putting an end to war, genocide and destruction of democratic rights. Students and youth must turn to this force, join the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), and wage a political struggle for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist society.



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