

Pro-Palestinian students occupy Columbia University building to protest expulsions

Sandy English
27 February 2025

On Wednesday night, nearly 100 students at Columbia University in New York City occupied Milbank Hall, at Barnard College in Manhattan, the historical women's college associated with the university, to protest the expulsion of two pro-Palestine students.

Barnard expelled the students on February 21 because they entered a classroom a month earlier where a course called the History of Modern Israel was being taught to protest the whitewashing of the history of Israel and Palestine.

The protesters entered Milbank Hall at about 4:00 p.m. after pushing past security and held a peaceful rally with signs, banners and speeches. Barnard gave the students a deadline of 9:30 p.m. to leave but the students did not vacate the building until about 10:30 p.m., after the administration agreed to meet with student representatives to discuss the expulsions.

The occupation was organized by the student group Columbia University Apartheid Divest (CUAD). CUAD noted in a press release that these are the first political expulsions from the university since 1968.

The group, which has organized many of the protests at the university over the last 16 months against the Israeli and American genocide in Gaza is demanding the rescinding of the expulsions, an amnesty for all students who have been disciplined for pro-Palestinian activity in the last year and a half, the reform of Barnard's disciplinary process and a meeting with college president Laura Rosenbury and Dean Leslie Grinage.

While Grinage agreed to meet with protesters, in a statement on Wednesday evening Rosenbury said, "The masked protesters who refused to identify themselves engaged in disruptive contact and damaged our property. ... Let us be clear: their disregard for the safety of our community and respect for our campus remains completely unacceptable."

The college claimed that an employee had been hurt and sent to the hospital with minor injuries, but a protester told the *Columbia Spectator*, "I saw the guard putting his arms around a student and twisting until a student fell to the

ground. It was people trying to help that student, that is how that guard got injured."

It is worth noting that Rosenbury in her statement made a reference to "masked protesters" (twice) and that the *New York Times* in its report on the occupation also referred to the protesters as masked no less than four times. This is because there is a concerted effort by both the universities and the Trump administration, as well as Zionist fascist groups to identify and doxx protesters. The students know this very well and are forced to conceal their identities.

Last month, Zionist elements put forward a proposal to ban masking on the Columbia campus to the University Senate Faculty Affairs Committee.

As a part of weeklong protests against the expulsions, about 100 students protested peacefully in front of Barnard's gates Thursday.

One Barnard student at the rally told the *World Socialist Web Site*:

I think no one should be expelled for protests exercising their free speech rights. A line has to be drawn for the First Amendment. I don't know for sure in what way they disrupted a classroom, but there was such a quick turnaround in the penalizing of the students. There were no hearings. They were close to graduation.

My grandparents tell me about the McCarthyism of their day and it is something like that now. There is a real rise of fascist ideology in this country carrying through in all aspects of life, like with immigration, cutting climate regulation, increasing deforestation.

Another student said, "I have spent many nights crying, watching the videos of babies in Gaza burnt and killed. I owe it to all of them to protest to stop this, even if it takes my whole life. This did not start in October 2023 but in 1896 when Theodor Herzl published *The Jewish State*. Zionism

was aimed in opposition to the socialist Bund of workers.

“It used to be that the media could hide things, but the protests grew because people can see the raw video footage of the atrocities on the internet. This generation is looking for the truth.”

City University of New York (CUNY) students also assembled Thursday at the City College of New York in Harlem to protest a scheduled speaking engagement by New York Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul.

Hochul ordered CUNY’s Hunter College to remove a posting for a faculty position in Palestinian Studies, and, as a state spokesperson said, to “conduct a thorough review of the position to ensure that antisemitic theories are not promoted in the classroom.” Hunter College faculty have also protested Hochul’s move. Hochul eventually canceled her appearance at CUNY over purported security concerns.

Hochul’s censorship and Columbia’s expulsion of students is the latest in a series of attacks on the freedom of speech of students and faculty at campuses in New York City and nationally.

Last month, dozens of New York University (NYU) students and three faculty members were declared *personae non gratae*—meaning their access to campus facilities was removed—after they participated in an anti-genocide protest at the university’s Bobst Library.

Earlier this month, NYU as well as its Langone Medical Center announced it would “comply with the law”—meaning President Donald Trump’s executive orders—and allow Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents on to campus and into hospital premises to arrest undocumented immigrants.

The attacks on students, faculty and curriculum at Columbia University, NYU, as well as the University of Michigan represent a continuity of repression of student rights to protest and speak freely, particularly over the destruction of Gaza.

Last year former Columbia President Minouche Shafik allowed the New York Police Department on to campus to arrest and brutalize scores of students and had the tent encampments on campus property torn down. The neo-McCarthyite House Committee on Education and the Workforce, led by the fascist New York Republican congresswoman Elise Stefanik, targeted Ivy League universities including Columbia, MIT and Harvard.

Campus administrations in other Democratic Party-controlled states also had students evicted or arrested for protesting the Gaza genocide, notably the University of Michigan. All of this was done with the fulsome approval of the Biden administration, which itself was the quartermaster of the Israel Defense Force that bombed, shot and starved the Palestinian population—as it continues to do in Gaza and

the West Bank.

The most recent events on campuses, nevertheless, also represent a new phase of repression of students under the Trump administration, one that is part and parcel of a historic attack on the democratic rights of the working class, including ICE raids on immigrant workers and the mass firings of federal workers.

In a January 20 executive order, Trump announced his intention to deport international students on visas who expressed “antisemitic” that is, anti-genocide, views. Another executive order on January 29 mandated the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights to launch a probe into civil rights complaints and legal cases on antisemitism since October 7, 2023.

There is no question that a state-university-fascist conspiracy against pro-Palestinian students is brewing. Columbia’s Interim President Katrina Armstrong met on February 20 with Israeli Minister of Education Yoav Kisch. According to an official statement, Kisch stated he was pleased President Armstrong “is taking decisive action to eradicate this phenomenon [of campus antisemitism].”

On Wednesday, Leo Terrell, the head of the Department of Justice’s Task Force on Antisemitism, told the media, “You see all these disorderly demonstrations, supporting Hamas and trying to intimidate Jews? We are going to put these people in jail—not for 24 hours, but for years.” He said that the first indictments would be filed in the next week and a half and that his department would announce other “aggressive” moves. “A lot is going to happen in the next four to five weeks,” he said, adding, “When you see universities start losing millions of dollars in federal funding, you’re going to see a change in their behavior. When you see court orders protecting Jewish students, visas of antisemitic students being revoked—you will see a major change.”

Universities in New York City and all over the United States, are, in other words, with the full support of the Democrats, slated by the Trump administration to become test cases for dictatorship.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact