

Columbia's capitulation to Trump: Academia bows before dictatorship

International Youth and Students for Social Equality
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality condemns the craven capitulation by Columbia University to the demands of the Trump administration to impose a regime of censorship on the campus.

The university's administration announced on Friday a list of sweeping measures, including: banning masks on campus; hiring 36 "special officers" armed with powers to remove individuals and make arrests; and placing the Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies departments, as well as the Center for Palestine Studies, under the oversight of a senior vice provost appointed by the university.

In addition, the university announced the adoption of a new definition of antisemitism that includes criticism of Israel and "certain double standards applied to Israel," a formulation designed to conflate anti-Zionism with antisemitism and suppress opposition to the crimes of the Israeli state.

The actions taken by Columbia have vast implications for free speech and democratic rights, not only on its own campus but across the entire system of higher education in the United States. As WSWs International Editorial Board Chairman David North wrote in a statement on X:

An American Trumpian version of what the Nazis called *Gleichschaltung*—the official subordination of intellectual and cultural life to Nazi ideology—is being implemented by leading "liberal" American universities.

These measures were not forced on the university through political coercion or court order. They were adopted by the university itself, voluntarily, in order to win Trump's support for the restoration of \$400 million in federal funding he withheld to force these changes. Columbia is acting as a willing accomplice, working hand in glove with the state to target students protesting against the US-backed genocide in Gaza.

On March 10, the Trump administration sent a letter to more than 60 academic institutions, Columbia included, declaring them under investigation for "antisemitic harassment and discrimination" and threatening further law enforcement action and funding cuts. Just three days later, Columbia announced that it had suspended, expelled or revoked degrees from 22 students involved in the peaceful occupation of Hamilton Hall.

Columbia also facilitated the seizure of Mahmoud Khalil, who was kidnapped from his residence near the university on March 8 and has spent the past two weeks at a detention center in Louisiana, threatened with deportation. In his letter from prison published last week, Khalil wrote:

[Columbia] Presidents [Minouche] Shafik, [Katrina] Armstrong and Dean Yarhi-Milo laid the groundwork for the US government to target me by arbitrarily disciplining pro-Palestinian students and allowing viral doxing campaigns—based on racism and disinformation—to go unchecked.

Prior to his arrest, Khalil had written to Columbia pleading for assistance against right-wing provocations from a university professor. He was ignored.

Universities across the country are embracing their role as enforcers of state repression, arresting students, surveilling protests and punishing expressions of opposition to the US-backed genocide in Gaza. This began under the Biden administration, which responded to the eruption of campus protests last fall by encouraging police crackdowns.

At Cornell University, the administration attempted to suspend graduate student and British-Gambian citizen Momodou Taal for his participation in a peaceful protest last fall, which would have led to his deportation. This action created the conditions for Trump's efforts, over the past several days, to have Taal seized and deported as retribution for his filing of a federal lawsuit challenging Trump's

executive orders as illegal and unconstitutional.

The administration at the University of Michigan appealed to Democratic Attorney General Dana Nessel to bring criminal charges against 11 pro-Palestinian student protesters, part of a broader effort—led by Democrats in Michigan—to criminalize opposition to war and genocide. Most recently, Tulane University has brought disciplinary charges against seven students for participating in off-campus protests to demand freedom for Khalil.

The capitulation of Columbia and other universities to the Trump administration cannot be explained merely by the cowardice of its administrators, though cowards they certainly are. Over the past four decades, the financialization of the American economy and the domination of social life by the stock market have given rise to a new, extremely affluent upper-middle class. This layer—intellectually corrupt and detached from any serious democratic tradition—now dominates the leadership of elite universities.

Columbia's endowment stood at a staggering \$14.8 billion as of June 30, 2024, with nearly 80 percent of its investments tied up in hedge funds, private equity and global equities. It is deeply embedded in the world of high finance.

Moreover, Interim President Katrina Armstrong, who receives more than \$1 million a year in salary, and the Board of Trustees are closely tied to the Democratic Party. Of the \$4.1 million in political contributions made by Columbia's trustees during the 2020 and 2024 election cycles, 88 percent went to Democrats. Trustee Adam Pritzker of the billionaire Pritzker family alone gave nearly \$1 million to Kamala Harris's 2024 campaign.

Former Obama Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson, now a partner at the Paul Weiss law firm, sits on Columbia's Board of Trustees alongside top financiers, CEOs and political operatives.

Significantly, Johnson's law firm, Paul Weiss, recently made its own abject capitulation to the Trump administration, announcing a deal with the White House to provide \$40 million worth of pro bono legal services for causes selected by the Trump administration in exchange for exemption from one of Trump's executive orders targeting law firms and lawyers. A law firm that adapts itself to the demands of the state ceases to function as an advocate—it becomes an instrument of political repression.

What is being exposed through these developments is that there is no serious constituency for the defense of democracy within the state, the Democratic Party or any of the institutions of so-called "civil society." Trump is not acting alone. His assault on democratic rights is being carried out with the active collaboration of both parties, the courts, the media, the universities and the corporate elite.

Just a week ago, Democratic Senate Minority Leader

Chuck Schumer ensured passage of a bill to fund the very government that is implementing a systematic plan for dictatorship. The Democratic Party, whatever its tactical disagreements with the Trump administration centered on foreign policy, is a party of Wall Street and privileged sections of the upper middle class.

What is taking place now goes far beyond the McCarthyism of the 1950s. It is a coordinated assault on the most fundamental democratic rights of the entire population.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) calls for the broadest opposition to this assault on democratic rights. But this battle cannot be waged on the campuses alone. The only basis for the defense of democratic rights is the political mobilization of the working class—the vast majority of the population—independent of both capitalist parties and based on a socialist program.

The working class is an immensely powerful force, which can overturn capitalism and restructure society on the basis of socialism. The turn of the capitalist oligarchy to dictatorship is inextricably connected to the war being waged on the working class, in the form of the massive assault on social programs, the mass firing of federal workers and the elimination of all regulations on corporate profit.

The abolition of free speech on campuses will be followed by moves to legalize strikes and other forms of protest against corporate exploitation. At the same time, it is connected to an enormous escalation of imperialist war—now taking the form of the expansion of the genocide and a broader war throughout the Middle East, along with the preparations for war against China.

The IYSSE, the student and youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, is fighting to build a movement of young people oriented to the working class, in opposition to the entire political establishment, including the Democratic Party and all of its apologists and defenders.

We urge students: Take up this fight! Join the IYSSE!



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