

Reinstate staff member Zainab Hakim and four student workers at University of Michigan!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at U-M
23 April 2025

On April 11, the University of Michigan (U-M) fired full-time staff member Zainab Hakim and suspended four student workers for participating in pro-Palestinian protests on campus eleven months earlier. The firing and suspensions mark a sharp escalation of U-M's authoritarian attacks on democratic rights. The attack is intended to align the university with the Trump administration's rampage against student protesters and democratic rights across the country.

It is part of U-M's efforts to placate Trump in order to avert his threat to block billions in government grants, bowing in the process to the government's drive to carry out an American version of Hitler's Nazification of higher education. This would include government control over the curriculum, faculty and hiring, with the aim of imposing Trump's far-right, chauvinistic, militaristic, anti-science and anti-Enlightenment agenda.

This authoritarian attack must be opposed by all students and workers on campus, and it must become part of a broader campaign within the working class for a unified struggle against anti-democratic and fascistic attacks on workers and students.

According to reports, there was no warning of any investigation from U-M officials to Hakim, a program manager in the Center for South Asian Studies in the International Institute of the School of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA). Though she had been hired in October 2024, and her LSA employers had apparently viewed her participation in the protests as a strength in the interview process, the university pursued the action against her following the coming to power of Donald Trump and his administration's demands for the subordination of universities to his "America First" fascistic agenda and ideology.

In this, Trump has intensified the unconstitutional

crackdown on pro-Palestinian protesters opposed to the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza that was launched under Democratic President Joe Biden, under the specious claim that opposition to the genocide equals antisemitism.

On April 7, Hakim was given a suspension letter from the central university Human Resources department, citing a police report on her participation in a May 3, 2024, protest, when she was an undergraduate at the university. On that day, over 200 students peacefully protested the attendance of a U-M Board of Regents member at a gala event at the U-M Museum of Art.

The protesters demanded that U-M end its financial connections to Israeli and US companies involved in the genocide in Gaza. Hakim told *Middle East Eye* that she believed she was cited at the rally for speaking on a megaphone, but that she complied with orders and was never arrested or charged with any crime. One of the suspended students, speaking anonymously to the *Michigan Daily*, said protesters were given citations seemingly at random amongst the crowd.

Employing Orwellian language, the university has accused Hakim and the four student employees of committing "violent" breaches of university policy by engaging in peaceful protest. The use of this false and provocative language to describe protests is drawn directly from Trump's Executive Order titled "Additional measures to Combat Anti-Semitism," which is being used to attack free speech and all forms of dissent on college campuses.

The university has released no official statement on the April 11 firing, and LSA faculty and staff say they were not informed of any U-M investigation until Hakim was suspended.

During her brief suspension period, Hakim was afforded one 15-minute meeting with a central human relations

(HR) representative, with no legal counsel allowed at the meeting and no ability to appeal the suspension. Hakim was informed within four days of the initial letter that she had been terminated from her position and was not eligible for re-hire at the university. She is currently pursuing legal action against U-M.

Two of the four suspended student workers are seeking meetings to get their suspensions overturned, but they must appeal to the same HR office that has falsely accused them of “violence,” with no option for an independent or democratic appeal process.

Between March and August 2024, the university revised its student and faculty conduct policy three times to remove virtually all democratic rights and appeal processes. New policies were implemented with deliberately vague language about “disrupting... normal operations,” which had the intended effect of giving the university license to ban any protest whatsoever.

The university violently broke up a pro-Palestinian encampment on May 21, 2024. At the urging of the U-M Board of Regents, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, a Democrat, has since charged at least 10 U-M protesters with felony crimes.

With Trump’s ascension to power in his second term, U-M has been working to accommodate the fascist would-be dictator at every step. On January 16, the university banned the Students Allied for Freedom and Equality (SAFE), the local chapter of the pro-Palestinian group Students for Justice in Palestine.

This was followed by the university’s ending of its \$236 million Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) program in March, in keeping with Trump’s dictates.

The State Department revoked the visas for 22 current and former U-M SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System) students in early April, in response to which U-M President Santa Ono published a cynical letter that made clear U-M would offer no opposition to the witch-hunting of students and workers for thought crimes.

Hakim is a member of the newly formed University Staff United (USU) union on campus, which represents over 500 academic staff. Thus far, the USU has done nothing to mobilize any of its members in defense of Hakim and the four undergraduate students.

The USU is an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which also incorporates four other academic worker unions on campus, representing multiple thousands of members: the Lecturers Employee Organization (LEO) of nontenure-track faculty; the

Graduate Employees Organization (GEO) of graduate student employees; the United Physician Assistants of Michigan Medicine (UPAMM) of physician assistants; and the United Michigan Medicine Allied Professionals (UMMAP).

The only action the Michigan AFT has pursued to date is to file an unfair labor practices complaint with the Michigan Employment Relations Commission. Amid an unprecedented assault on its own members, the Michigan AFT is refusing to mobilize its membership against these attacks because its leadership is deeply tied to the Democratic Party, which is seeking accommodation with the Trump administration. This includes the support of supposed “left” groups like the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), which dominates the leadership of the GEO union.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at U-M denounces the firing of Zainab Hakim and the suspension of the four undergraduate students. The IYSSE demands that they be immediately reinstated and allowed to function freely as students and workers on campus without threat for exercising core constitutional rights. The IYSSE also demands the dropping of charges against all anti-genocide protesters. The IYSSE calls on all workers, students and youth at U-M and beyond to oppose the attack on Hakim as an attack on the First Amendment right to free speech.

The IYSSE says that to defend democratic rights and prevent fascist dictatorship and war, it is necessary to remove the root of these evils—the capitalist profit system. A movement must be built in the working class, independent of both parties of the billionaire oligarchy and of the trade union bureaucracy, to abolish capitalism and establish socialism. All those students who agree with this policy must come forward to join to IYSSE and take up the fight for socialism.



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