

In transparent act of censorship, Cornell University cancels anti-genocide singer Kehlani's performance at campus event

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Last week, Cornell University in Ithaca, New York abruptly withdrew its invitation to singer Kehlani to perform at an upcoming campus event. In a letter to students, Michael I. Kotlikoff, president of Cornell, accused the singer of antisemitism and cited a need to avoid "division and discord." Kotlikoff's false and contemptible charge of antisemitism is based solely on Kehlani's public opposition to Israel's genocide of the Palestinians. Acting as an arm of the US government, the Cornell administration seeks to silence opponents of the Zionist state's crimes against humanity.

The event in question is Slope Day, which is scheduled for May 7. Slope Day is an annual Cornell celebration of the end of the school year that generally features concerts, games and food. Students and faculty alike participate in it.

Kotlikoff's letter reeks of dishonesty and hypocrisy. He explains that he has heard "grave concerns from our community that many are angry, hurt and confused that Slope Day would feature a performer who has espoused antisemitic, anti-Israel sentiments in performances, videos and on social media." Students at Cornell, and at universities around the world, are overwhelmingly opposed to the genocide. Who are the unnamed students who expressed "grave concerns" about Kehlani?

The protest came from a group called Cornellians for Israel, according to campus newspaper *The Cornell Sun*. Students belonging to this group started a petition against the selection of Kehlani shortly after it was announced. The group complained about the video for her song "Next 2 U," which begins with the message "Long live the Intifada." The Arabic word "intifada" refers to an uprising against oppression, such as those

of the Palestinians against the illegal Israeli occupation. Cornellians for Israel also denounced Kehlani's social media posts.

In his letter, Kotlikoff solemnly invokes his responsibility "to ensure community and safety at this high-profile event that reaches the entire campus." He adds that "every person should feel included at the signature social event of the year." This nonsense insults students' intelligence. The president's concern for "safety" and "inclusion" extends only to those who support the mass murder of Palestinians and the ethnic cleansing of Gaza.

But the offenses do not end with the cancellation of Kehlani's performance. Students have traditionally been the lead organizers of Slope Day, which has now been "compromised," according to Kotlikoff. "Going forward, we will work together to revise the process for researching and selecting performers for this important annual event," he writes. This "revision" will mean the reduction or elimination of student input into the annual celebration, which would constitute a further, long-term incursion into students' autonomy and self-expression.

Kehlani responded to Cornell's disinvitation a few days later. "I am not antisemitic, nor anti-Jew. I am anti-genocide," she said in a video on Instagram. "I am anti the actions of the Israeli government, I am anti the extermination of an entire people, I am anti the bombing of innocent children, men, women—that's what I'm anti."

The singer also referred to her collaborations with Jewish Voice for Peace and other Jewish organizations. The very existence of these groups refutes the lie that opposition to the Israeli state or to Zionism equates to antisemitism. The false accusation of antisemitism

“keeps coming up as a means to silence me,” said Kehlani, adding that it would not stop her from pursuing her career or upholding her principles.

Kehlani has spoken out against the Israeli onslaught from the beginning. In October 2023, she signed the “Artists Against Apartheid” open letter that opposed the Zionist occupation of Palestine. The following month, she signed an open letter calling for a ceasefire and an end to the Israeli blockade of the Gaza Strip.

Last year, Kehlani criticized artists who have not spoken out against the genocide, implying that they value their careers more than human lives. “You can’t speak?! Disgusting,” she said in an Instagram video. “You don’t draw a line at beheaded babies or people burnt alive after seven months of plenty of other atrocities?”

The singer’s troubled background has doubtless heightened her sensitivity to these issues. She was born in Oakland, California, to a mother with a drug addiction. While her mother went to prison, Kehlani was raised by an aunt. Her father, who also had addiction, died when the singer was a toddler.

As a member of the teen pop group PopLyfe, Kehlani appeared on *America’s Got Talent*. But during the following two years, while she was still a teenager, the singer was homeless. To support herself, Kehlani stole iPhones and sold them. She also has spoken about surviving sexual assault and rape. The singer thus understands something of the experience of the most oppressed and marginalized layers of society.

Kehlani has had a successful career as a solo artist. Her mixtape *You Should Be Here* (2015) went gold. *SweetSexySavage* (2017), her solo studio debut, reached number three on the *Billboard* 200. *It Was Good Until It Wasn’t* (2020) reached number two. Kehlani has cited contemporary R&B singers such as Jill Scott, Erykah Badu and Lauryn Hill among her influences.

Cornell’s withdrawal of its invitation to Kehlani is only the institution’s latest attempt to suppress opposition to the genocide. In September 2024, the university suspended British-Gambian graduate student Momodou Taal for having participated in protests in support of the Palestinians. Taal’s unjust suspension placed him at risk for imminent deportation. Intense backlash and a vigorous campaign in defense of Taal forced the university to back down and reinstate him. But facing subsequent persecution by the Trump

administration, Taal later decided to leave the United States rather than risk deportation.

The most recent attacks on pro-Palestinian students extend beyond Cornell. On April 24, City University of New York sent security personnel and New York police officers to brutalize students who had just set up a protest encampment at the school. The administration of Columbia University locked down the campus when they heard that students were planning to set up a tent encampment. In a flagrant violation of the First Amendment, students were warned that protesting would lead to arrest.

The suppression of opposition to the genocide at universities across the country is being overseen not only by Trump and the fascistic Republicans, but also by their Democratic accomplices. Students have shown great courage and persistence throughout these attacks. But to date, their appeals have been directed to the very officials who are complicit in the genocide. Students must orient themselves toward the working class, which, by virtue of its social position, is the only force capable of ending these horrors and bringing the perpetrators to justice.



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