

Supporters of Laaila Irshad speak out against anti-democratic seizure of her personal phone by UCSC police

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More than 40 students, faculty and community members attended the hearing on Wednesday for the case brought by Laaila Irshad against the University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC), which seized her phone on October 1, 2024, in retaliation for the suit that she and two others filed on September 9, 2024, against the university for banning the three from campus for two weeks, resulting in homelessness, financial loss and disruption of studies. They were banned by the university for their participation in protests going back to October 2023 against the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

At the hearing, Santa Cruz County Judge Erika Ziegenhorn partially granted the motion put forward by Irshad's lawyers to quash the search warrant for her phone, which allowed campus police all access to her cellphone data, which contains pictures, texts, contacts and more going back to fifth grade.

The ruling is a legal victory for every student protester across the country, hundreds of whom have faced repression, arrest and even deportation for their opposition to the Gaza genocide. Among the most prominent include Cornell student Momodou Taal, who was forced to return to Britain at the end of March, Columbia University graduate student Mahmoud Khalil, and Tufts University PhD student Rümeysa Öztürk, who are both still detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Protesters expressed strong support for Irshad and fierce opposition to the university administration and the Democratic Party, which defended the seizure. Many drove more than an hour to the Watsonville, California, courthouse for the hearing.

"I'm here because there has been a campaign of police and legal persecution against members of the UC Santa Cruz community who have spoken out against the genocide that Israel is perpetrating against the Palestinian people," explained one woman outside the courthouse, "and this is the third hearing and it was a victorious one in a sort of legal saga that extends back some months."

Another one of Irshad's supporters emphasized the enormous expenditure by UCSC, despite its reported financial crisis, to hire "a top-ranking Democratic Party law firm in San Francisco to come against freedom of speech." She noted, "UC Santa Cruz is in the most dire budgetary situation of every single UC in the system. And it spent a minor fortune on a top-ranking Democratic Party law firm to go after the exercise of freedom of speech."

Several attendees shared their firsthand experiences of the brutal May 2024 police crackdown on the UCSC Gaza solidarity encampment that precipitated Irshad's original lawsuit.

"I was there in the morning, I was there earlier than my friend was. I was there around 7-ish and I saw the last of the protesters being rounded up, including some of the professors," recounted one supporter. "They were just being, you know, like forcibly torn from each other. I saw a student with a bag over his head, who I think eventually like passed out for a bit."

Another supporter described arriving at the encampment after police had already begun their assault. "I went in the morning to bring food to the protesters who were still there. Because it occurred, I believe, around 4am. Throughout the night the police were arresting protesters and shutting it down. And beating them up."

The excessive force used by police had devastating consequences for at least one student, according to an attendee who noted, "There is a student from that protest who, as of last summer, was using a cane but now uses a wheelchair. Why? Because their zip ties were too tight. They pleaded with arresting officer to loosen these zip ties. The officer refused. A blood clot went to that student's brain and they suffered a stroke."

Many protesters emphasized the bipartisan nature of the crackdown on student dissent, noting that both Democratic and Republican administrations have supported Israel's genocide in Gaza while repressing those who speak out against it.

"I think the university is trying to say that it's against Trump's policies and standing up for whatever but these are the exact same repressive policies, these are the exact same restrictions that are clamping down on students and speech and students who are trying to do what is right," observed one protester. "I think that if you find yourself on the other side of students who are willing to be arrested, who are willing to be beaten up by police, you know history shows that like you're probably on the wrong side."

Another concurred, "I think it's a bigger problem, not just with the campus, the UCSC campus, but overall with the US and in support for Israel. Because the protest was for Palestine, and our government, not Trump, but Biden, was in support of Israel. And that support has continued into the current administration."

He added, "I think we're going down a very authoritarian way in terms of how we deal with protests, with people getting attacked,

people getting arrested, their phones being seized, their rights being taken away. It's not limited just to Trump, but again, it's just the overall government of how they are doing things."

One attendee, who described herself as "distressed about the state of human rights," said flatly: "I think that what Trump and the right wing government is doing is giving permission for these kinds of abuses to happen."

When discussing solutions to the ongoing repression, several attendees emphasized the importance of building a workers' movement that extends beyond campus boundaries.

"I agree with what you're saying," one young worker responded when asked about building a movement in the working class against both political parties responsible for the genocide. "I think we do need to build a bigger movement with workers where it's people-focused because given what the previous administration and the current administration have shown us is that they don't care about us. They saw the thousands of protests, hundreds of thousands of people when they were protesting for Palestine and all that got ignored. Money was still sent, weapons were still sent to Israel, there's still a genocide going on."

Another argued that "the working class is getting squeezed in a way that is becoming intolerable, is already intolerable for a lot of folks. But it's also where the power is. Like in history, it is the working class who rises up and is able to, by sheer number, by the fact that they're the ones who make society go... the working class has power but there needs to be a lot more organizing."

She noted the practical challenges workers face in political mobilization, "It's really hard for the working class to show up in ways because they have to work, they have to feed their kids, they have to go from job to job." Her companion added, "And then they have to come to these court dates when the police steal their phone."

Several attendees emphasized the connection between US foreign policy and domestic repression, suggesting that attacks on democratic rights at home are directly linked to US support for Israel's actions in Gaza.

"Neither [the Biden nor Trump administration] has in any way condemned Israel for perpetrating a genocide," stated one woman. "Moral clarity has come from students, community members, faculty and staff who are willing to speak out against what is happening at oftentimes great personal risk."

She elaborated on the connection between foreign and domestic policy, "Is there continuity between a policy of genocide there and policies of repression here and actions of repression? Absolutely. The one cannot be fought outside the other. And so here, and we know whenever the United States wages war, implements genocidal policy, it prepares for protests here. So the domestic front is considered another war front in a multi-fronted battle."

Protesters emphasized that legal challenges like Irshad's are crucial for countering the chilling effect that university administrations and government agencies aim to create among student activists.

"Suits like this are important because these tactics of repression are meant to create fear, are meant to stop these workers. And meant to divide people. To make workers and make students afraid to speak up and to do these things because they have a lot on the

line," said one protester. "This is one piece of the bigger puzzle, but like, we have to show up because this is part of the machinery that is keeping workers, students, other people who really hold the power but are not able to use it effectively. They're keeping us all down."

Another woman noted, "When we take a look at the wider scope of repression happening and the absolute lack of trust in the police, and the judicial overreach, everything happening right now... you see people get tied up in court and with retaliatory action. And I'm glad that they were able to make a little bit of headway today, but the question that they asked about the chilling effect on protesters within the court was extremely correct because we're seeing people getting deported for protest action right now."

She continued, detailing the material impact of such retaliation, "Every little piece of the authoritarian machine from deporting people to taking away their personal items, their phones, which have their memories, their contacts, cost hundreds of dollars, hundreds of dollars that many of these college students don't have... It is like a mountain, you know, this sort of, the machine of state violence against everyday people who are trying to express their First Amendment right."

Some attendees pointed to direct financial connections between the University of California system and Israeli military interests, suggesting these ties help explain the university's aggressive stance against pro-Palestinian protesters.

"Some of the donors to the UC include the Helen Diller Foundation. The Helen Diller Foundation funds, on the one hand, the Cancer Hospital at UCSF. It's the largest donor to the UC. It donated \$1.5 billion, but where does the money come from? It comes from Prometheus, which is one of the largest corporate slum lords," explained one attendee. "They also fund the Canary Mission [a Zionist doxing website that publishes the personal information of students, professors, and organizations that it slanders as antisemitic] and 'Friends of the IDF.'"

There was also significant sympathy for the whole student protest movement which emerged in October 2023.

"If the students are putting themselves in the front lines, like we as everyone who care about freedom and democracy and also just like about the lives of people including Palestinians, including the students who are putting their lives on the line including immigrants, like we have to show up for people like these students," said one woman.

Another supporter added, "You know, I think that wherever we can, we have to resist these kinds of incursions. And today was a very welcome outcome, hard won by lawyers that fought tirelessly on the rights of people to protest during these times. That is significant."



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