

Michigan Attorney General drops charges against 7 anti-genocide protesters at U-M, defends decision to prosecute

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On May 5, Democratic Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel dropped all charges against seven of the 11 protesters who were arrested during the pro-Palestinian encampment at the University of Michigan (U-M), which was established last spring and dismantled by police in May 2024.

The individuals—Oliver Kozler, Samantha Lewis, Henry MacKeen-Shapiro, Michael Mueller, Asad Siddiqui, Avi Tachna-Fram, and Rhiannon Willow—had been charged with misdemeanor trespassing and felony obstruction of a police officer, the latter carrying a maximum sentence of two years in prison.

Robyn Liddell, a deputy to Attorney General Nessel, filed the motion to dismiss the case, visibly surprising the defendants and their attorneys, who had been prepared to deliver closing arguments. Nessel herself did not appear in court but later issued public statements explaining the decision to drop the charges.

“When my office made the decision to issue charges of Trespassing and Resisting and Obstructing a Police Officer in this matter,” Nessel stated, “we did so based on the evidence and facts of the case. I stand by those charges and that determination.” She blamed the 14A-1 District Court for failing to promptly bind the case over to the circuit court, where preliminary hearings on the felony charges began in December. “During this time,” Nessel added, “the case has become a lightning rod of contention.”

Nessel’s remarks alluded to growing public calls for her to recuse herself from the prosecution, as well as a defense motion to disqualify her from the case. The motion cited her open political alignment with the Zionist Israeli regime and numerous personal and financial ties to the University of Michigan Board of

Regents.

Nessel also cited a letter submitted to the court by the Jewish Federation of Greater Ann Arbor, a local Zionist organization, which defended her against accusations of bias. Calling the letter inappropriate, Nessel later told the *Detroit Free Press*, “We have learned that a public statement in support of my office from a local nonprofit has been directly communicated to the court. ... The impropriety of this action has led us to the difficult decision to drop these charges.”

In concluding her statement, Nessel doubled down on her support for the original felony charges, declaring, “While I stand by my charging decisions, and believe, based on the evidence, a reasonable jury would find the defendants guilty of the crimes alleged, I no longer believe these cases to be a prudent use of my department’s resources, and, as such, I have decided to dismiss the cases.”

While the dismissal of charges are a victory for the rights of the seven defendants, several other protesters at the University of Michigan still face prosecution by Nessel’s office.

Four individuals charged for their involvement in the pro-Palestinian encampment continue to face misdemeanor charges. Additionally, on January 15, Nessel announced new charges against three protesters who participated in a “die-in” demonstration on the university’s central quad, the Diag, during the annual Festifall club event in August.

The remaining charges include felony counts of resisting and obstructing a police officer, as well as misdemeanor trespassing.

Moreover, the courtroom prosecutions are just one component of a broader, bipartisan campaign—led in

Michigan by the Democratic Party—aimed at criminalizing protest and suppressing political opposition to the interests of American imperialism.

On April 23 this year, Nessel, with the assistance of FBI agents and local police, coordinated raids on five locations across southeast Michigan as part of an investigation into what her office called “coordinated criminal acts of vandalism and property damage” across multiple counties, allegedly totaling \$100,000 in damages.

No one was arrested or charged during the raids, but police and FBI agents seized electronic devices and personal belongings, and briefly detained 11 individuals for questioning. At least one of the three raided residences had its door broken down by police, who initially refused to present a warrant. One person targeted in Canton was compelled to provide a DNA sample.

Earlier this month, eight former University of Michigan employees filed a lawsuit against the university, alleging that it violated their right to free speech and unfairly terminated and barred them from campus due to their political views and participation in nonviolent protests.

The day before Nessel dismissed the felony charges, University of Michigan President Santa Ono announced that he would be stepping down from his position, which he has held since October 2022. He stated that he was accepting a position at the University of Florida.

Over the past year and a half, Ono, as president of the University of Michigan, played a leading role in the nationwide bipartisan campaign to suppress and intimidate opposition to the US- and Israeli-led genocide in Gaza. For his efforts, the U-M Board of Regents—a cabal of political operatives and multimillionaires from both the Democratic and Republican parties—rewarded him with a planned eight-year contract extension and a salary increase to \$1.3 million.

Throughout 2024, Ono’s administration repeatedly altered the university’s conduct policies, effectively redefining any form of protest as “disruptive” and subjecting students and staff to a wide range of disciplinary measures.

In October, leaked audio revealed Ono stating, “The government could call me tomorrow and say, in a very unbalanced way, that the university is not doing enough

to combat antisemitism.” He added that the government could “say something like, well, we will withhold two billion dollars in funding if you don’t address antisemitism.”

In January, Ono’s administration banned Students Allied for Freedom and Equality (SAFE), the local chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), for organizing peaceful protests against the genocide in Gaza throughout 2024. This marked the first time in U-M’s history that a legacy student organization was banned. The action stripped SAFE of formal club status, access to university facilities and the right to promote its views on campus.

By pivoting to the University of Florida—where fascist Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has appointed the majority of the university’s trustees—Ono is aligning himself with the far right as the Trump administration seeks to transform American academia into an instrument of *Gleichschaltung*: the official subordination of intellectual and cultural life to fascist ideology.

To smooth his transition to Florida, Ono on Wednesday withdrew his signature from a public letter defending academic freedom, originally launched by the American Association of Colleges and Universities and signed by more than 150 university presidents and leaders.

According to reports from the *New York Times*, Ono is expected to receive a salary of up to \$3 million as the new president of the University of Florida—more than any other university president in the country and more than double what he earned at U-M.



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