

The Encampments film screened to large audience in Santa Cruz, California

Our reporters
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The documentary *The Encampments* was screened on May 17 in Santa Cruz, California. The screening was attended by many students who had participated in the University of California, Santa Cruz encampment, inspired by the anti-genocide protests at Columbia University depicted in the film. Students and their supporters maintained the encampment for a month before being arrested en masse in a major police dragnet on May 30 of last year.

More than 150 people attended the screening, which included a question-and-answer panel with director Michael T. Workman, civil rights attorney Thomas Seabaugh, and student activists and community members, who had participated in the UC Santa Cruz encampment.

Representatives of the Socialist Equality Party and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), attended the screening, set up a literature table and spoke with attendees. At the request of the organizers, no photographs were allowed.

At the start of the showing, Workman explained that the filmmakers had not initially set out to document a global student movement, but their presence on the ground during the pivotal days at Columbia enabled them to capture a rebellion that ultimately spread to more than 180 campuses worldwide. Addressing the audience, he said:

I hope that the bravery of the students will remind you, who are in the movement, of your own bravery in this very dark moment and not retreat in fear.

Civil rights attorney Seabaugh represented several students and faculty following the encampment. He addressed the students, faculty and community members in attendance who had themselves participated in the protests.

Seabaugh said:

The severity of the repression against students is unprecedented for the US, at least going back to the period of the Civil Rights struggles and the Vietnam

War. ... In some ways, it was more ferocious, and we should think about what that means. A government that is capable of committing genocide abroad can't be expected to respect democratic rights at home.

At the same time, the desperation of the repression is a reflection of the massive opposition. A clear majority in the US opposes sending further weapons to Israel, and if you were to do a poll of the population of Planet Earth, opposition to the genocide would be the resounding, overwhelming, thunderous majority.

However, he continued:

In the period since the encampment was raided, we've watched students getting dragged into vans and disappeared. This isn't just about immigrants—the Trump administration has openly stated that it wants to send “homegrown” US citizens who supposedly support “terrorism” to a concentration camp in El Salvador. That's not an exaggeration; that's what they are planning to do.

Almost every day, judges are ruling that what the government is doing is illegal and unconstitutional, but the government is yelling that any judge who rules against Trump is a “radical Marxist” and a “communist.”

He added:

As we watch this film, we can think about what we've learned from this experience, what conclusions need to be drawn about the situation we're in, and how to take the struggle to the next level.

The film, as the *World Socialist Web Site* previously noted, “clearly shows the courage and determination of the student

protesters.” It features interviews with Mahmoud Khalil, who has since been abducted and imprisoned by the Trump administration. Following Khalil’s abduction, the film’s release was moved up and has since drawn significant interest from students, many of whom recognize their own campuses in the montages depicting the formation of encampments and the brutal repression carried out under the Biden administration.

The film effectively juxtaposes footage of Democratic and Republican politicians, alongside figures in the corporate media, with scenes from the encampments themselves. As one outrageous lie follows another, the cumulative effect by the end of the film is to thoroughly expose and discredit the entire American political and media establishment.

At the same time, as the WSWS wrote, the film does not go beyond the politics of the student organizers. While the students displayed courage and a willingness to sacrifice—chanting “We will not stop, we will not rest”—they could not, by themselves, halt the genocide. The film does not grapple with the critical question: What must be done next?

Following the film screening, a substantial panel discussion took place, during which faculty and students from UC Santa Cruz shared their experiences. One faculty member recounted that university administrators instructed faculty not to say anything that deviated from their “course syllabus,” effectively imposing a gag order on political expression in the classroom.

One speaker noted how the university fraudulently invoked the “safety of Jewish students” as a pretext for repression, while another described how many of her family members had been murdered in Gaza and read messages from relatives still trapped in the “red zone.” “We didn’t know that the world could see us,” one message read. “Maybe we are not alone after all,” said another.

Speaker after speaker described the brutality of the police assault in Santa Cruz: Riot cops smashed the encampment, trampled belongings and provocatively ate food donated by the community. Students were crammed into buses—nicknamed the “torture bus” and the “pee bus”—while the press was kept away from the scene.

Workman, the film’s director, commented:

Why did the students make the ruling class lose their minds? They had banned groups like Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace months before, but when the students acted at Columbia the universities lost control of the narrative. It became a global news item, and it scared them.

He added, “What’s happening in Gaza is directly related to American imperialism, and the students have exposed the rot of the system.”

Several attendees asked questions along the lines of: “What

should we do now?” Seabaugh responded by placing the student repression in its broader social and historical context. He explained that the dismantling of democratic rights has developed alongside the explosive growth of social inequality, with both the Democrats and Republicans complicit.

Seabaugh said:

You can’t have democracy when one person owns hundreds of billions of dollars and the bottom 90 percent have nothing.

He emphasized that slavery was not abolished through petitions to slaveowners or by voting alone. “You can’t just bang pots and pans together and expect the ruling class to change its ways. It won’t. ... Slavery was abolished in a massive social struggle that involved millions of people.” Today, he continued, students facing attacks on their democratic rights must turn to the working class—healthcare workers, warehousemen and Amazon workers, dockworkers and teachers.

Seabaugh said, “For us, we have to prepare for a massive social struggle against capitalism.”

“The democratic rights of the students are the rights of the working class,” Seabaugh said, to applause. “The issue is how to translate the views of the majority into reality.”

One of the organizers of the film festival commented to the *World Socialist Web Site*:

I thought it was interesting to have a lawyer explain the implications of all this. This is the best turnout we’ve had at the festival, and it was because of the students.



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