University of Michigan uses plainclothes contractors to spy on student protesters

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A June 6 report by the *Guardian* newspaper revealed that the University of Michigan (U-M) has been using undercover contract investigators to surveil pro-Palestinian protesters and campus groups for nearly a year.

Within two days of the exposure, the university announced it was terminating its contracts with the private security firm Ameri-Shield, whose agents had engaged in spying and intimidation and even endangered the lives of student activists.

The June 6 report revealed that the university contracted with Detroit-based City Shield, a subsidiary of Ameri-Shield, to deploy plainclothes operatives against students in July of 2024. This was roughly a month after the university violently destroyed a month-long student anti-genocide encampment on the campus Diag in May 2024. The university paid the firm at least $850,000 from university funds to conduct covert surveillance.

The *Guardian* report documented that a systematic campaign was pursued that involved trailing pro-Palestinian student protesters on and off campus, furtively recording their activities and conversations, eavesdropping in cafes and bars, and engaging in verbal harassment and intimidation.

Multiple students reported recognizing dozens of different investigators, often working in teams. One U-M student, Josiah Walker, a prominent student activist, became a key target. In a recorded interaction, Walker confronted an agent who initially feigned physical disabilities. Later, when Walker confronted the same agent, the latter falsely accused Walker, who is black, of attempted robbery and of mocking people with disabilities. Walker described the false accusations as "extraordinarily racist" and "extremely dangerous."

The Ameri-Shield operation escalated beyond surveillance to direct physical endangerment. Walker also reported an incident in which an agent deliberately drove a car at him, forcing him to jump out of the way. He stated, "The university had used a lot of its own resources to uplift my previous involvements and accomplishments. Now I'm on the other side, where the university is using those same resources to try to destroy my future and, quite frankly, seriously injure or kill me."

The exposure of U-M's surveillance has triggered widespread outrage, both on and off campus, which is particularly evident on social media.

Faced with the public exposure of its spy operations, the administration, led by Interim President Domenico Grasso, launched a damage control campaign involving denials and falsehoods.

In a June 8 campus-wide letter, Grasso acknowledged the Ameri-Shield contract, but cynically claimed it was for "observation and reporting of criminal or suspicious activity on university property," a description that is contradicted by student accounts of extensive off-campus surveillance.

Although Grasso wrote that "no individual or group should ever be targeted for their beliefs or affiliations," every student who spoke to the *Guardian* was a participant in anti-Gaza genocide protests. Grasso also asserted that employing plainclothes security is a "common approach," which suggests the practice is widely employed by university administrations. Campus rights advocate Lindsie Rank, however, called U-M's use of undercover private investigators for intensive surveillance "highly unusual in a university setting" and potentially "unprecedented."

The use of paid spies suggests that the university is pursuing tactics of disruption and provocation, while attempting to bypass any formal constraints that might

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be placed on campus police (UMPD) or the U-M Division of Public Safety and Security (DPSS).

Following the *Guardian* report, Grasso announced the termination of contracts with external vendors for plainclothes security, blaming “an employee of one of our security contractors” for “disturbing, unacceptable, and unethical” behavior. This “rogue agent” narrative attempts to shield the university from accountability for a systematic undercover field surveillance program aimed at its own students.

The surveillance exposure is only the latest evidence of a coordinated effort by the university to suppress all opposition to genocide and war on campus, aligning itself with the crackdown on universities begun under the Democratic Biden administration and expanded under Trump. In addition to the May 2024 attack on the anti-genocide encampment, the university has pursued a systematic assault on democratic rights and individual student protesters.

In August 2024, a Faculty Senate letter to the campus revealed that U-M administrators had quietly implemented new policies, adopted without input, aimed at depriving students of due process, curtailing free speech, and increasing administrators’ power. U-M also used private consultants like Grand River Solutions to bring complaints against students, further outsourcing repression and removing processes from transparent oversight.

U-M enlisted Democratic Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel in September 2024 to pursue charges against 11 protesters who were arrested at the encampment. Seven of these protesters were initially charged with felonies, carrying sentences of up to two years in prison. Faced with increasing public outrage and the exposure of her political alignment with the Zionist Israeli regime and numerous personal and financial ties to the University of Michigan Board of Regents, Nessel was forced to drop felony charges against seven of the protesters on May 5, 2025.

On January 16, just days before Trump’s inauguration, U-M banned Students Allied for Freedom and Equality (SAFE), the local chapter of the national pro-Palestinian group Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), depriving the group of access to university facilities and the right to promote its views on campus. This was the first ever suspension of a legacy student organization in the university’s history.

Former President Santa Ono, who oversaw the crackdown on pro-Palestinian protests, swiftly eliminated the $236 million Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) program in March 2025. In early June, Ono attempted to cash in on his efforts overseeing this anti-democratic campaign by accepting a lucrative bid for the University of Florida presidency. However, his candidacy was rejected at the last minute by the far-right Florida Board of Governors, who thought his attacks on DEI and pro-Palestinian students were not sufficiently repressive.

On April 23 of this year, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents joined Michigan State Police and local police in coordinated raids on the homes of University of Michigan (U-M) pro-Palestinian activists in Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti and Canton Township. The raids resulted in the confiscation of electronic devices, the detention and questioning of at least six activists and the seizure of personal belongings—all under the direction of Attorney General Nessel.

Also in April of 2025, the U-M ACLU chapter at the Law School issued an open letter about new, high-powered surveillance cameras in public spaces, warning of threats to civil liberties and a chilling effect on free expression. In the wake of the latest scandal, on June 11, it issued a letter calling for these cameras to be removed. A Faculty Governance Update to the U-M Board of Regents in May 2025 explicitly named Ameri-Shield. The faculty letter noted that “many faculty and students feel a sense of oppression and observe that the extensive surveillance chills free expression and infringes on civil liberties and privacy.”

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