

Edinburgh students defy authorities in graduation ceremony walk-outs, protesting Gaza genocide

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In a powerful show of opposition to the Gaza genocide, large numbers of students at University of Edinburgh, Scotland held dramatic walkouts and protests at their graduation ceremonies over the past fortnight, to oppose their university's financial ties to the Israeli arms industry and its complicity in genocide.

Young people interrupted their graduation ceremonies, unfolding flags and banners with slogans including, "Fund teaching not genocide", "No Graduates in Gaza" and "No universities in Gaza", before walking out of the graduation halls, to cheering and clapping.

Walkouts took place at the Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences graduation on July 4; at the Business School event July 8; Biomedical Sciences, July 9; and the School of Social and Political Science graduation July 10.

Organised by the university's Justice for Palestine society, the protests testify to deeply rooted opposition among students to the ongoing imperialist-backed genocide in Gaza.

Another protest took place at the Edinburgh Napier University graduation in Usher Hall, when one student unrolled a keffiyeh and shouted, "Free Palestine!", to considerable clapping. Terrified at this show of opposition, university authorities shut down a live stream of the event.

These protests coincided with publication of a report by United Nations' Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese, which singled out University of Edinburgh as "one of many" in the UK which have maintained ties with Israel after October 2023.

Francesca Albanese's report

Albanese's report "From economy of occupation to economy of genocide" is a devastating review of profit-making by countless "corporate entities" from the ongoing

illegal occupation and genocidal escalation in Palestine.

The report notes the judgements by the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court that "place on corporate entities a *prima facie* responsibility to not engage and/or to withdraw totally and unconditionally from any associated dealings, and to ensure that any engagement with Palestinians enables their self-determination."

Should activities and relationships with Israel's economy, military, public and private sector continue, these "corporate entities" may be found to have knowingly contributed to violating Palestinians' right to self-determination, crimes of aggression and human rights violations, crimes of apartheid and genocide.

Besides the war on Gaza producing a 65 percent increase in Israeli arms spending, and a surge in profits for Israeli arms companies such as Elbit Systems, numerous international companies are reaping profits from the genocide. Albanese lists Lockheed Martin, IBM, Hewlett Packard, Microsoft, Google, Amazon, Caterpillar, Hyundai, Doosan, Volvo and Heidelberg Materials AG, among many others.

Many academic institutions are implicated too. Albanese cites the Massachusetts Institute of Technology conducting weapons and surveillance research funded by the Israeli government. The European Commission's Horizon programme collaborates with complicit Israeli institutions and has handed over billions, including to the Technical University of Munich.

University of Edinburgh complicity

Albanese notes, "One of many British examples, the University of Edinburgh holds nearly £25.5 million (\$31.72 million) (2.5 per cent of its endowment) in four tech

giants—Alphabet, Amazon, Microsoft and IBM—central to the Israeli surveillance apparatus and the ongoing Gaza destruction. With both direct and indexed investments, the University ranks among the most financially entangled institutions in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The University also partners with firms aiding Israeli military operations, including Leonardo S.p.A. and Ben-Gurion University, through the AI and Data Science Lab at Ben-Gurion University, sharing research that directly links it with assaults on Palestinians.”

But rather than praise students for warning the university of its deep complicity in war crimes, Vice-Principal Students Professor Colm Harmon falsely accused the protestors of creating an “intimidating and hostile environment that was deeply disrespectful to our graduates, guests and university staff.”

Harmon’s stance is consistent. While Edinburgh University has been a focal point for student opposition to the genocide, the response from the university has been contemptuous.

In late 2023, the Edinburgh branch of the University and College Union complained of the bullying treatment of anti-genocide protestors by university authorities, who deployed private security and called police against peaceful protestors.

An encampment and mass hunger strike were maintained by students at the university last year for several weeks, joined by similar protests outside the Scottish parliament.

Staff in their hundreds signed an open letter supporting the encampment and demanding “immediate emergency measures” to divest from any companies “complicit with Israel’s regime of apartheid and plausible genocide”. Another open letter called for the creation of a “special fund for the support of academics and students from Gaza (whose universities have been completely destroyed).” The university authorities ignored them.

The university is currently imposing up to £140 million worth of cuts, reportedly the biggest ever made at a Scottish university.

Fear of student opposition drove another Edinburgh institution to collaborate with arms manufacturer Raytheon, now RTX, to surveil students. Freedom of Information requests from Scotland’s *Herald* exposed that Heriot-Watt University agreed a range of security measures prior to a careers fair which Raytheon were attending. Heriot-Watt agreed to monitor student chat groups and CCTV for signs of protests, and provide an “enhanced” physical presence to “help safeguard Raytheon employees” and “act as a deterrent”.

The careers fair was attended by another arms company, Leonardo. Both RTX and Leonardo have substantial Scottish-based operations and make parts for Lockheed Martin’s

F-35 jet fighters.

Scottish National Party support ban on Palestine Action

This is the context for the Scottish National Party’s (SNP) decision to abstain in the July 2 Westminster vote to proscribe direct action protest group Palestine Action.

The amendment to the Terrorism Act 2000 was passed by 385 to 26 votes. The SNP, the ruling party in Scotland for the last 18 years, passed over the chance to register even a token protest to the draft order that bans membership of Palestine Action or any support for the organisation, punishable by 14 years’ imprisonment.

For more than two decades, the SNP’s default position has been to position itself one notch to the left of the Labour Party, and the party’s parliamentarians have been vocal in calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

But the financial institutions and weapons manufacturers whose lucrative Scottish operations are equipping the Gaza genocide form a major part of the local economy. Already booming due to the Ukraine war, these arms companies—alongside the universities—anticipate a major profit windfall as part of the Starmer government’s re-armament program, and the SNP wants a part.

Besides RTX and Leonardo, Scotland hosts BAE Systems and Thales, both of which are equipping the genocide. These companies are all members of arms industry umbrella ADS, which lobbies Holyrood and Westminster on behalf of the multi-billion-pound industry. According to ADS, the aerospace, defence, naval and security sector is worth some £7.3 billion annually in Scotland alone.

Showing intent to intimidate and criminalise the broadest layers of workers and youth, the Palestine Action ban has already been deployed against a peaceful anti-genocide protestor in Glasgow. A 55-year-old man was arrested at the TRNSMT music festival last weekend, from which Irish band Kneecap were previously banned over their opposition to the genocide.

The man was arrested for allegedly wearing a T-Shirt which stated “Genocide in Palestine. Time to take action”, with the words “Palestine” and “action” in a larger font than the rest of the text.



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