

# Wayne State University president resigns

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Wayne State University President Kimberly Andrews Espy resigned September 17 as it was becoming clear the Board of Governors was planning to remove her. Located in the center of Detroit, Wayne State is Michigan's third-largest university, with nearly 24,000 graduate and undergraduate students, including a large number of Arab and Middle Eastern descent.

While Espy cited “personal reasons” for her resignation, there is little doubt that her ouster is related to a series of political convulsions on the campus involving students, faculty and administration, connected to the widespread protests over Israeli genocide in Gaza. Both Espy and the board were involved in repression of these protests.

In November 2023, Espy called police to block students from entering a publicly accessible building, the Faculty/Administration Building, where her own offices are located, to stop them from protesting the genocide.

The group of several dozen students included members of the campus student organizations Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), Jewish Voice for Peace, and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), along with members of the Student Senate. They held a public rally outside the building at which speakers denounced the Israeli mass murder in Gaza and the complicity of the US government—then headed by Democrat Joe Biden—and institutions like WSU that were supporting Israel.

A speaker for the IYSSE denounced claims that opposition to the genocide in Gaza was antisemitic, declaring, “There can be no greater slander against the Jewish people than to claim that the mass murder of women and children is in their interests. It is not the Jewish people who are responsible, but the despised Netanyahu regime and its backers in Washington, London, Berlin and Paris.” The speaker called for students to turn to the working class to build a

movement against imperialist war and genocide.

In the spring of 2024, the campus was again the site of police action in violation of the free speech rights of students, faculty and campus workers. At the instruction of Espy, police raided a peaceful encampment of anti-genocide protesters who were advocating for divestment from Israel, arresting a dozen students.

This prompted widespread opposition to Espy and the Board of Governors from both faculty and students. A group of 100 faculty issued a statement April 30 last year that denounced “McCarthyite repression against students on campuses across the United States.” The statement continued: “We particularly condemn President Kimberly Espy and the Board of Governors, who looked on silently as a large group of ... students were assaulted and violated by campus police and security.”

A spokesman for the Wayne State IYSSE issued a statement condemning the attack on the encampment, while adding:

We support the actions of protesters: no one’s tuition should go to fund a genocide. But the goals of these protests do not go far enough.

The police crackdown is a class issue. Behind the Wayne State Board of Governors lies “Genocide Joe” Biden and both Wall Street parties. This is an imperialist war ...

The same profit motives driving war abroad are driving dictatorship at home. The Democrats and Republicans who are making an example of the students will use the same methods against the working class, which is pushing for strike action against poverty and exploitation.

This is why the working class must come to the defense of students. ... We call on students to

join our appeal to the working class. Come with us to the factories and other workplaces and make the case to workers yourselves for why they must join you. The working class are the ones with true power to change what is happening, and they are the only true revolutionary class.

The Wayne Academic Union, the campus branch of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), also criticized the “militarized response by institutional leaders” and the “politically motivated assault on higher education.” It called the equation of protesters with terrorists an “incitement to violence,” and described recent events as “an existential threat to democracy.”

In reaction to Espy’s resignation, Jennifer Sheridan Moss, president of the Wayne Academic Union, told WXYZ television, “I don’t think it came out of nowhere. I think there was a lot of dissatisfaction with the previous president. We thought she was turning the campus into a police state essentially after the Palestinian encampment, after that was broken up.”

WSU senior Nuzmeya Abdrabboh told the station, “I think that it was a culmination of events that led up to this point: the ongoing lawsuit that Wayne State is experiencing against their students for violating their rights to free speech, taking down the encampment and arresting 12 students.”

The Wayne State Board of Governors presently has a 5-3 Democratic majority, and was 6-2 for Democrats during the period of the police attacks on anti-genocide protesters. It is chaired by Democrat Shirley Stancato, a longtime banking executive at Chase Bank who also has a seat on the board of Fifth Third Bank. Ford Motor executive Bryan C. Barnhill, another Democrat, is vice-chair. He previously worked for the real estate company controlled by Jared Kushner, Donald Trump’s son-in-law.

Espy’s resignation was accepted at a 10-minute board meeting, without any explanation of why she was leaving. Whatever its differences with Espy, the Board of Governors is not sending her away empty-handed. She receives \$730,000 severance, more than her annual base salary of \$690,000, although that rose to nearly \$1 million with benefits, expenses and other perks.

The board named Richard Bierschbach, dean of the Wayne State law school, as interim president, pending a search for a permanent replacement.

Espy’s ouster may well be connected to a murky conflict within the Wayne State School of Medicine, one of the most prestigious facilities associated with the university. Last month, Espy placed the longtime dean of the School of Medicine, Dr. Wael Sakr, on paid leave pending an investigation into unspecified allegations against him.

The move sparked an outcry by medical school faculty, with 300 signing a statement calling for Dr. Sakr’s reinstatement. The Student Senate also issued a statement supporting him. Sakr sent a statement to the School of Medicine faculty that said the allegations against him did not involve “sexual harassment, financial mismanagement, or racial bias.”

However, Sakr, who is Syrian-American, is named in a pending federal civil rights lawsuit. The *Detroit Free Press* described the issues in the lawsuit by Dr. Stanley Berry, a black physician. “In a civil rights lawsuit filed in US District Court, Berry alleges Wayne State and three individuals, including School of Medicine Dean Wael Sakr, unlawfully retaliated against him for engaging in protected activity—that is, voicing his concerns about racial bias in health care.” The lawsuit claims Sakr passed over Berry for a leadership post in favor of a less-qualified white colleague.



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