

Trump's attack on immigrants and students continues with abduction of Ellie Aghayeva from Columbia University

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On Thursday morning around 6 a.m., federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents arrived at a Columbia University residential building and, posing as police officers searching for a missing child, kidnapped Elmina “Ellie” Aghayeva, an immigrant undergraduate student at Columbia studying neuroscience and political science.

In a chat message to fellow Columbia students, Aghayeva said, “ICE is in my house. They are trying to take me away.” ICE agents removed her to the notoriously filthy federal detention center in lower Manhattan.

Aghayeva was freed several hours later after New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), called President Trump and asked for her release. Trump met with Mamdani on Thursday to discuss federal aid for a major real estate development in Queens.

Trump's decision to release Aghayeva at Mamdani's request has obscured the political issues in her abduction, as it was no doubt intended to do. Mamdani was providing political cover for Trump shortly after the president delivered a fascist diatribe in his State of the Union speech, and immediately before American and Israeli forces attacked Iran, killing Iranian civilians, including nearly 200 children, and murdering members of Iran's government, including its Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei.

The abduction of Aghayeva was a provocation against Columbia University students, who have played a leading role ever since October 2023 in protesting the Gaza genocide and other crimes of American imperialism and Zionist Israel. Students have protested ICE and Trump's immigration policy, particularly since Mahmoud Khalil, a Palestinian and lawful permanent resident of the United States, was abducted from Columbia University housing almost a year ago.

Another Palestinian student at Columbia, Mohsen Mahdawi, was detained in April 2025 in Vermont by ICE at

a routine citizenship interview.

A third person, Leqaa Kordia, a Palestinian who participated in the Columbia anti-genocide protests, was abducted by ICE in New Jersey on March 13, 2025. All three were active in anti-genocide protests at the university.

Khalil was released on the order of a federal judge after four months, but the Trump administration is still trying to deport him. Mahdawi was released after 16 days in custody by order of a federal judge and proceedings against him were terminated last month.

Kordia, however, remains incarcerated at the Prairieland Detention Center in Alvarado, Texas, where she was recently hospitalized for a seizure. The federal government is still actively seeking the deportation of another international student, Yunseo Chung, though she remains protected from immediate arrest by a federal court order.

Students have protested the government attacks, including staging a massive walk-out at Low Library last year to condemn the presence of ICE agents on campus. More significantly, it was only a day before Aghayeva's kidnapping that the Student Workers of Columbia, the union for student workers, an affiliate of the United Auto Workers, held a rally at on campus demanding that Columbia officially declare itself a sanctuary campus, grant better contractual protections for non-citizen student workers, and seek the release of Leqaa Kordia.

There is no question that the abduction of Aghayeva was an attempt to terrorize students and faculty. In the aftermath of nearly 3,000 ICE abductions in New York City alone and the murders of Renee Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis—and the massive protests they inspired—there can be no question that this was a mafia-style message sent to students and meant to intimidate them.

By the early afternoon on Thursday, about 200 faculty, students and supporters had gathered outside Columbia's main gate on Broadway for an emergency protest against Aghayeva's detention. In a scene reminiscent of the anti-

genocide protests after 2023, according to the *Columbia Daily Spectator*: “Dozens of New York Police Department officers patrolled the streets amid the protest and blocked protesters with barricades.”

Around 3 p.m., Mamdani announced on X that he had met with President Donald Trump and that Trump had agreed to free Aghayeva.

This was broadly and deceptively celebrated by Mamdani, various local Democratic politicians and the DSA itself as a major victory. It implied that Trump could be reasoned with and that the onslaught against democratic rights could, at least, be mitigated by a special relationship between the “democratic socialist mayor” and the fascist president.

In fact, the opposite was the case. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted on Friday: “... every such transaction strengthens the political authority of the far right. Trump releases one student and detains a hundred more. He smiles for a photograph with the ‘communist mayor’ and uses the image to demonstrate that even his nominal opponents submit to his authority.”

Trump used this authority the next day to bomb Iran, and he will use it to continue his assault on immigrants in New York City and on Columbia students themselves.

Trump and his cabal are seeking to turn the universities into platforms of far-right pro-imperialist ideology, a particularly important task in time of war, while students and faculty live in fear of the police.

Pressure also continues to be brought on the administration of the university. Last week, Trump’s defense secretary, Pete Hegseth, announced that his department was severing ties with Columbia following a similar order on February 6 breaking off “graduate-level professional military education, fellowship, and certificate programs” at Harvard. This immediately impacts student aid for a relatively small number of members of the military studying at Columbia, but a much larger sum of \$50 or \$60 million annually that the university receives from the DOD may be withdrawn.

Columbia received roughly \$1.3 billion in total government grants in fiscal year 2024, with the vast majority coming from the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation. Last year the Trump administration canceled approximately \$400 million from a variety of agencies, citing the prevalence of student protests at the university.

The funding was restored, but only after Columbia capitulated in July to a completely fraudulent suit by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission that alleged the university had allowed discrimination against Jewish faculty and staff. The university agreed to pay a penalty of \$220 million for its “offense” of allowing students to speak out against the Gaza genocide.

The university agreed, in essence, to do what the fascist administration told it to do, in a process that the *World Socialist Web Site* has compared to the Nazi policy of *Gleichschaltung*, the “synchronization” of culture and education at all levels into the arms of the state as a propaganda tool.

In October 2025 the Education Department circulated a “Compact for Academic Excellence” that conditions federal funding on universities’ compliance with political and ideological demands, including curriculum and speech restrictions. Education is to be subordinated to state and corporate priorities, crushing dissent and hollowing out public intellectual life.

The transformation of the universities is critical as the United States begins its assault on Iran and prepares for a third world war. Scientific research must be geared toward the technology of war. Militarism must be made supreme, and the humanities subordinated to virulent nationalism.

Among the well compensated, upper middle-class cadre of campus administrators, Trump will find no shortage of people willing to work with him as Mamdani does. But it cannot proceed without breaking the will of the students and much of the faculty and campus workers to fight back.

Aghayeva is free for now thanks to Mamdani’s shady maneuvering, but workers and youth should have no illusions. Mamdani and the Columbia administration are both representatives of the Democratic Party, which is seeking in every avenue to collaborate with Trump, particularly on the waging of imperialist war.

Young people who want to stop dictatorship and war must turn toward mobilizing the working class against the Trump administration and fighting to build the International Youth and Students for Social Equality.



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