

Democrat Abdul El-Sayed seeks to contain anti-war opposition during Michigan university campaign tour

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On April 7, roughly 500 people attended a campaign event led by senatorial candidate Abdul El-Sayed at the University of Michigan's (U-M) Central Campus Classroom Building. The event featured several Democratic Party officials, many aligned with the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), alongside Twitch streamer and political commentator Hasan Piker.

On the same day, El-Sayed hosted a campaign event at Michigan State University, with reports indicating it was the smaller of the two events in his university campus tour ahead of the midterm elections in November.

While the overwhelmingly young crowd of students and workers was no doubt drawn to El-Sayed's rally by opposition to the Gestapo-like operations of Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) officers and the fascist Trump administration's broader attacks on democratic rights and social institutions, the perspective offered at the rally was a political dead-end.

El-Sayed, who was born in Detroit of Egyptian immigrant parents, previously ran for the Democratic nomination for governor in 2018 with the backing of Senator Bernie Sanders, losing to Gretchen Whitmer. He has headed public health departments in Detroit and Wayne County.

After the announcement by Democratic Senator Gary Peters that he would not seek reelection this year, El-Sayed entered the race for the Democratic nomination to succeed him. His campus tour is a calculated intervention by a faction of the Democratic Party—along with its pseudo-left satellites—to corral the growing leftward movement of students within the framework of capitalist electoral politics.

In his Senate campaign, El-Sayed has positioned himself as the “left” candidate in a three-way Democratic primary set for August 4, against US Representative

Haley Stevens and State Senator Mallory McMorrow. Polling by Emerson College in late January 2026 showed McMorrow at 22 percent, Stevens at 17 percent and El-Sayed at 16 percent among Democratic primary voters, with a huge 38 percent still undecided, leaving the race wide open.

Former Representative Mike Rogers is expected to be the Republican nominee. Rogers narrowly lost a Senate contest to Democrat Elissa Slotkin, a former CIA agent, in 2024.

MSU's East Lansing campus and U-M's Ann Arbor campus became centers of mounting opposition to war, social inequality and Trump's fascism, with U-M also serving as an arena for the Biden administration's crackdown on pro-Palestinian protesters. El-Sayed's intervention is above all aimed at blocking a turn by students toward an independent movement of the working class for socialism.

At the Ann Arbor rally, addressed by El-Sayed, Piker and Representatives Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) and Summer Lee (D-PA), the speeches were most notable for what they avoided. While denouncing the militarism and outright criminality of the Trump administration, the speakers made no mention of capitalism or socialism, although Piker calls himself a “Marxist-Leninist” and Tlaib and Lee are both members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

Everything was carefully edited to focus only on the primary in August and the general election in November. Toward this end, the content of nearly all the speeches emphasized El-Sayed's supposed trustworthiness. “He's someone I don't have to call and check on,” Tlaib stated, adding, “if he's elected, I know I won't have to watch him,” and voters won't have to pressure him constantly to “do the right thing.”

Amir Makled, a civil rights attorney and Democratic Party candidate for the U-M Board of Regents, opened the meeting. Last year, Makled represented pro-Palestinian protesters at U-M against felony and misdemeanor charges brought by state Attorney General Dana Nessel; in April 2025, he was detained by Trump's border agents at the Detroit airport while returning to the country.

Makled's introduction was devoid of any serious political perspective on the threat of fascism and world war. He made almost no mention of his experience in the legal battle against the campaign to suppress democratic rights at U-M, co-orchestrated by the U-M Board of Regents and the Michigan state Democratic leadership under Governor Whitmer.

None of the speakers made any reference to the death of Danhao Wang, a Chinese national and U-M researcher who committed suicide following intense questioning by federal agents last month, or the role played by the U-M administration in condoning and covering up the incident.

Yousef Rabhi, a Washtenaw County Commissioner, DSA member and Democratic candidate for Ann Arbor mayor, also spoke ahead of El-Sayed. Screaming out a speech peppered with expletives, Rabhi denounced Trump while stating, "We need to take this country back!" But from whom?

Rabhi went on to claim Trump is spending taxpayer money to bomb "innocent people ... halfway around the world" rather than on healthcare and education here at home, with no mention of the role of Democrats in Congress who approved the military spending.

Hasan Piker's presence attracted smears of antisemitism from the Democratic Party establishment for weeks ahead of El-Sayed's campus tour, because of his vocal opposition to the US-Israel-led genocide in Gaza and support for pro-Palestinian protests across the US and internationally.

Piker drew direct attention to this in his speech, but, in doing so, embraced the claim, made by both the pseudo-left and the far right, that US imperialism's war against Iran and the crackdown on protesters in the US are entirely or largely the product of Israeli influence over the US government. To this end, Piker described Trump as the "first and, hopefully, last ever president that would be foolish enough to be at the mercy of Netanyahu and follow through with his lifelong death and destruction campaign."

When it was finally El-Sayed's turn to speak, the "progressive Democrat" had just as little to offer as the preceding speakers. While emphasizing that ICE is not

reformable and must be abolished, El-Sayed only presented one path to oppose fascism and war: vote for the Democratic Party, which is facilitating the rise of fascism and US imperialism's wars abroad.

Publicly, El-Sayed expresses rhetorical opposition to US imperialism's Middle Eastern wars as matters of flawed military and political procedure and presidential overreach. Behind this anti-war appearance, El-Sayed aligns himself with the Democrats' imperialist foreign policy consensus, citing both the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the US-NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 as examples of positive exercises of US military power.

In line with the politics of imperialism, El-Sayed's gestures in support of expanding healthcare and social spending are of a limited reformist character that do nothing to challenge or undermine the capitalist system, the source of inequality, war and authoritarianism pressing down on workers and youth.

The droning chorus of statements praising El-Sayed as a steadfast and reliable political representative is true only in the sense that he will be firm in his allegiance to the capitalist politics of the Democratic Party and the ruling elite, which are presently rushing to provide political cover for Trump's war against Iran.

In an interview with the DSA-linked publication *Jacobin*, El-Sayed emphasized that winning in Michigan would "suggest a way forward in the rest of the country," meaning he had a strategy for rebranding the Democratic Party. While insisting he could "speak truth to power," El-Sayed promised the ruling class that his proposals—single-payer healthcare, limited debt relief, modest taxation of the wealthy—would not fundamentally threaten their wealth, property or control of the state.

Like DSA member Zohran Mamdani, who won the New York City mayoral election as a Democrat in 2025 on a platform of limited social reform, opposition to the US-Israeli-led genocide of Palestinians in Gaza and resistance to Trump's authoritarianism, and now leads a program of cuts to social spending and political alliances with the fascist in the White House, El-Sayed offers no serious alternative to the right-wing politics of the Democratic Party.



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