

University of Michigan students, faculty, staff, alumni issue open letter defending U-Mich Eight

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An open letter signed by more than 260 University of Michigan faculty, students, staff and alumni denounces the federal indictment of eight pro-Palestinian U-Mich students and employees as a politically motivated assault on democratic rights.

On June 10, the FBI, in coordination with U-Mich police, Michigan State Police, the Ann Arbor Police Department and other local agencies, carried out raids in southeast Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin against those named in a federal indictment for allegedly conspiring to commit domestic terrorism. The eight had been involved in anti-Gaza genocide protests, raising the demand for the university to divest from Israel.

Defendant Mariam Odeh of Dearborn appeared before a federal judge in Detroit on July 1, entered a plea of not guilty, and was released on bond. Odeh is the former president of Students Allied for Freedom and Equality (SAFE), the U-Mich chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine, which the university banned in early 2025. She is the seventh defendant to be arraigned. Six co-defendants previously entered not-guilty pleas and were released on bond. No arraignment date has been set for Amatullah Hakim, who is reportedly in India on a work-study program.

All eight are charged with conspiracy to transmit threats in interstate and foreign commerce, carrying a maximum penalty of five years in federal prison. In addition, defendants Zainab Hakim and Paige Feyock face a charge of witness intimidation, carrying a potential 20-year penalty. The indictment alleges they confronted a fellow student whom they believed was cooperating with authorities. Alexander Sepulveda faces a charge of destruction of property to prevent seizure, which carries a five-year maximum sentence. He is alleged to have deleted the contents of his phone and computer.

The prosecution of the U-Mich Eight is one front in a national campaign of political repression under National Security Presidential Memorandum-7 (NSPM-7), the fascist directive issued by President Trump on September 25, 2025. It names “anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism and anti-Christianity” as “common threads animating” domestic terrorism.

Six days after the Michigan raids, on June 16, the Justice Department indicted 15 anti-Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) protesters in Minneapolis on federal felony conspiracy charges. On June 23 and July 1, federal judges in Texas sentenced 15 defendants in the Prairieland Detention Center case to a combined 556 years in prison, the first major prosecutions under Trump’s domestic counterterrorism framework.

The open letter challenges the government’s characterization of the alleged conduct. “The defendants are accused of causing relatively minor damage to the property of individuals or organizations complicit in the genocide in Palestine and in the repression of campus activism,” the letter states. “No matter who is responsible for these actions, no person has been physically harmed by them.”

The signatories draw a sharp contrast between the property damage alleged in the indictment and the violence inflicted by the university itself against anti-war protesters. “UM police have beaten, pepper sprayed, and groped protesters on campus,” the letter notes. It cites the university’s hiring of private undercover investigators from the firm City Shield to surveil and harass student activists, and the rewriting of internal disciplinary procedures to “remove students’ ability to defend themselves effectively.”

The open letter situates the campus repression within the broader context of the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza: “Powerful individuals and organizations that are complicit in genocide deserve scrutiny and pushback. Property is nothing compared to human lives.”

Comments appended to the signatures reveal the anger within the university community at the federal prosecution and the U-Mich administration’s collaboration.

A graduate student in English wrote:

I refuse to watch my coworkers and peers have their basic rights violated in order to send political messages. The position of the university administration is clear: they will not only submit to federal repression of our

right to expression and protest, but will actively aid the federal government in repressing our voices.

Another graduate student captured the disproportion at the heart of the case:

It is outrageous that kids who, if there is any proof behind the federal indictment, may have done nothing more than a few pranks, are facing years in prison while those responsible for the murder of tens of thousands of children walk free.

Several signatories directly indicted the university administration. An undergraduate in the School of Music, Theatre, and Dance wrote:

I am ashamed to be affiliated with an institution that hides support of genocide and restriction of speech behind “professionalism” and respectability politics. May everyone see how violent and barbaric the University of Michigan is.

A faculty member in the Residential College wrote:

These charges are clearly intended to intimidate and stifle our freedom and right to protest. This runs counter to the long history of legitimate political struggle in this country and casts a dark shadow across our so-called institution of higher learning.

A staff member in Clinical Engineering articulated the political stakes:

The only real safety is collective safety: We must not let the University and the state divide us. We must resist the efforts to paint these activists as “terrorists.” The real issues are the genocide in Palestine, UM’s complicity in it, and the criminalization of campus activism and dissent.

The Biden administration laid the groundwork for the current federal prosecution by smearing anti-genocide protesters as antisemites and supporting the police suppression of campus encampments. Democratic Michigan Attorney General Dana

Nessel brought state-level felony charges against protesters in 2024 before being forced to drop them in May 2025. The FBI credited Nessel’s office for providing logistical assistance in the June 10 raids. Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer has remained silent.

The U-Mich administration facilitated the prosecutions of five Chinese researchers that led to the suicide of postdoctoral researcher Danhao Wang on March 19, a day after he was interrogated by federal agents. U-Mich President Domenico Grasso testified before a House committee a week later, presenting the university as a partner with the national security state. In May, Grasso censured outgoing Faculty Senate Chair Derek Peterson for comments at a commencement ceremony praising student activists, triggering an open letter of protest signed by over 1,500 students, faculty and staff.

The Democratic Party leadership’s response to the indictment has ranged from endorsement to equivocation. Representative Haley Stevens, running for US Senate, issued a statement fully supporting the investigation. Her opponent, Abdul El-Sayed, whose campaign employed defendant Mariam Odeh as a staffer, did not demand the dropping of charges against the U-Mich Eight. He instead told reporters: “Yes, targeting people, their families, properties, businesses (is) wrong. But it’s also wrong when January 6 terrorists do it,” implicitly comparing the anti-Gaza genocide protesters to Trump’s January 6 fascists.

The silence from national Democratic “progressives” has been deafening. Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Zohran Mamdani have said nothing. *Jacobin* magazine, the unofficial organ of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), has not mentioned the U-Mich Eight. Democratic Minnesota Governor Tim Walz and Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey have said nothing about the indictment of the Minnesota 15. On the Prairieland sentences, there has been no word from any national Democratic politician.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at the University of Michigan demand the immediate dropping of all charges against the U-Mich Eight and the Minnesota 15 and the release of the Prairieland 15. The IYSSE fights for the independent mobilization of the working class against both parties of US imperialism on the basis of a socialist program, the only means of stopping the drive to dictatorship and defending democratic rights.



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