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Elliott Murtagh, Clara Weiss
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New York police arrest over 100 Columbia University students in crackdown on pro-Palestinian protests

In a brutal state crackdown on pro-Palestinian protests on campuses, a horde of New York Police Department (NYPD) officers descended onto Columbia University's campus in New York City on Thursday afternoon to arrest over 100 peaceful student protesters. It was the first time in over half a century that Columbia University allowed the NYPD onto the campus to arrest students.



Police in Riot gear stand guard as demonstrators chant slogans outside the Columbia University campus, Thursday, April 18, 2024, in New York City [AP Photo/Mary Altaffer]

The police-state action, directed by Columbia President Dr. Minouche (Nemat) Shafik, came the day after she testified before a McCarthyite congressional hearing. It marks a new and

dangerous stage in the attacks on democratic rights across the US and internationally, centered on the drive to suppress widespread opposition to the US-backed genocide in Gaza. According to a press release from Columbia Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) Thursday evening, over 120 students were arrested. The statement said that the lawn where the encampment took place was designated a “free speech zone” under Columbia’s latest policy on protests.

The SJP statement explained:

The Gaza Solidarity Encampment was established to pressure Columbia to divest all funds, including the endowment, from corporations that profit from Israeli apartheid, genocide and military occupation in Palestine. We demand they ensure further accountability with complete transparency for all Columbia’s financial investments.

Columbia students erected the “Gaza Solidarity Encampment” on the South Lawn with 50 tents, beginning at 4 a.m. Wednesday morning, ahead of the House Committee’s hearing, which focused on Columbia University.

The encampment was organized by Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP)—both of which were banned by the university last November—and Columbia University Apartheid Divest (CUAD). Hundreds of students and supporters had gathered on campus by the evening, amid growing threats by the administration of mass expulsions and arrests following President Shafik’s kowtowing appearance before far-right congressional representatives.

As the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) analyzed yesterday:

The hearing made clear that the goal of the US ruling class is nothing less than a purge of the faculty and student body at universities in order to completely subordinate higher education to the war machine. Everyone who dares voice opposition to US foreign policy is to be thrown out, blacklisted and made the public target of attacks by Zionists and far-right elements.

Students manned the encampment through the night from Wednesday to Thursday, and protests continued to grow on Thursday.

Early Thursday afternoon, Shafik made good on her promises. The university president sent a campus-wide email stating that she had ordered the NYPD “to begin clearing the encampment.”

In a separate letter by Shafik to the NYPD, the president stated:

All University students participating in the encampment have been informed they are suspended. At this time, the participants in the encampment are not authorized to be on University property and are trespassing.



NYPD vans for Columbia students that are about to be arrested, parked outside the campus on April 18, 2024

Student leaders of the campus occupation reported receiving emails Thursday morning stating they were suspended, including Minnesota Representative Ilhan Omar’s daughter, Isra Hirsi. This follows a wave of student evictions and suspensions at New York City universities, including Columbia and New York University.

Widely shared social media posts calling for mass student support in response to these attacks brought together over 1,000 chanting students to surround the encampment.

Dozens of NYPD buses and hundreds of police in riot gear blocked off access to the campus-adjacent streets, after which, at 1 p.m., the police stormed the encampment, zip-tying and arresting a mass of students.

A recorded message blaring from an NYPD loudspeaker said, “You are currently participating in an unauthorized encampment. You will be arrested and charged with trespassing.”

Video footage shows NYPD Commissioner Edward Caban, Chief of Patrol John Chell and Deputy Commissioner Kaz Daughtry—the head of the NYPD’s drone program—leading the charge. According to the SJP, “NYPD Technical Assistance Response Unit, Strategic Response Group, and Anti-Terrorism Unit were confirmed on campus.”

The mass arrests included Jewish students and legal advisers. After the encampment was torn down, hundreds of student protesters moved the location of their action and began occupying a campus lawn, while shouting pro-Palestinian and anti-NYPD chants. Hundreds of students and supporters also continued to demonstrate outside of Columbia's main campus.

Socialist Equality Party 2024 Presidential candidate Joseph Kishore issued a statement on X/Twitter Thursday afternoon:

The arrest of students at Columbia University is part of an expanding police-state assault on opponents of the Gaza genocide, supported by the Biden administration and both the Democrats and Republicans. The arrests follow the testimony from Columbia University President Nemat Shafik before Congress, held on the false pretense that universities have been overcome by "antisemitism," an outrageous slander directed at opponents of the genocide in Gaza.

Shafik issued a statement saying she invited the NYPD gestapo police onto campus because the opponents of the genocide were creating a "harassing and intimidating environment for many of our students."

Lies!

All students protesting the genocide must be freed! Those who should be behind bars are those who are carrying out the genocide and arming and financing it, that is, the Netanyahu government and its accomplices in the Biden administration.

Students, as well as faculty at Columbia and local residents, have expressed shock, anger and defiance in the face of the violent state assault on peaceful protesters. One student organizer tweeted:

Just got out of jail after Columbia called NYPD to mass arrest 100+ students. I have been suspended and evicted from housing by Barnard. This has only strengthened my commitment to the movement for Palestinian liberation and I promise to continue fighting for divestment.

A Columbia alum spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* Thursday night at a protest next to the campus and denounced the hearing and the crackdown on protesters as a "new McCarthyism," saying, "I think it is despicable, really against the tenets of the university, both against free speech and expression and diversity of thought."

There is no question that the Columbia University administration staged the police raid in close coordination with the Democratic administration of New York City Mayor Eric Adams and the White House. Adams held a brief press conference Thursday evening, flanked by top NYPD officials, defending the crackdown.

The message is clear: Anyone who dares to publicly protest against a genocide that is being carried out with drones, tanks and planes manufactured and paid for by the United States can be subjected to arrest and expulsion from their school or workplace, as well as being targeted for public harassment and attack.

One day before the police raid at Columbia, nine Google workers protesting their company's involvement with Israel's genocide were arrested and a total of 28 were terminated. The Columbia raid also comes less than a week after the raid and shut-down of the anti-war Palestine Congress in Berlin by 900 German police, which included the arrest of Jewish activists and the issuing of bans on prominent politicians and academics entering Germany and addressing German audiences online.

The IYSSE demands an immediate end to the crackdown on free speech on campuses and workplaces. All arrested, suspended and expelled students, faculty and organizations must be immediately released and reinstated. The attack on the democratic rights of students is an attack on the entire working class.

Workers throughout New York, the US and internationally must take up the defense of these students against the state assault.

We also support calls for walk-outs by students and faculty to protest this egregious attack on democratic rights, and demand an end to the genocide in Gaza and the universities' complicity in it.

However, in developing and broadening the protests, students and youth need a clear understanding of what lies behind the attacks on them, and who their enemies and allies are.

Students at Columbia University are confronted with the full force of the state because they are opposing what is now declared a state policy of genocide in Gaza. But this genocide cannot be understood outside of the emergence of a new imperialist redivision of the world, targeting not only Russia and Iran, but also China. The pursuit of this war is incompatible with the maintenance of bourgeois democratic forms of rule.

Columbia University's administration is tied by a thousand threads to Wall Street and the Democratic Party. This is why it is so ruthlessly cracking down on its own students.

Two fundamental political conclusions follow from this: First, appeals to the Democratic Party are a dead end, and can only lead to the demoralization and isolation of the protests. Second, the fight in defense of democratic rights, and against imperialist war and genocide, cannot be limited to the campuses. It must be rooted in the working class, waged through the means of class struggle and based on a revolutionary socialist program.