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Under the lying claim of combating antisemitism, California Governor Gavin Newsom enacts further assault on the rights of anti-genocide protesters

Earlier this month, California governor and national Democratic Party standard bearer Gavin Newsom signed into law four bills further clamping down on the free speech rights of anti-genocide protesters.



California Gov. Gavin Newsom discusses his proposed state budget for the 2024-2025 fiscal year, during a news conference in Sacramento, Calif., Wednesday, Jan. 10, 2024. [AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli]

The California Legislative Jewish Caucus sponsored the four bills with support from the Anti-Defamation League and other pro-Zionist outfits. While couched in the language of

combating hate speech, the assorted legislation represents an attempt to conflate antisemitism with criticism of the war crimes of the Israeli government and its backers in Washington.

Senate Bill 1287, entitled “Protecting Free Speech at Institutions of Higher Education,” in fact is meant to do precisely the opposite, while Assembly Bill 3024, the “Stop Hate Littering Act,” seizes upon genuinely far-right, antisemitic leaflets found in Jewish communities to criminalize left-wing leaflets opposing the genocide in Gaza.

Assembly Bill 2925, “Including Jews and Antisemitism in DEI Training” will require campuses that provide DEI (Diversity Equity and Inclusion) training to include Zionists as a protected identity historically subjected to racist bigotry.

Finally, Senate Bill 1277, “Teachers Collaborative for Holocaust and Genocide Education” is a professional development program for teachers focusing on knowledge of the Holocaust and other historical genocides.

Notably, SB 1277 cynically focuses on “the Holocaust and the genocides of the Armenian, Bosnian, Cambodian, Guatemalan, Indigenous American, Rwanda and Uyghur peoples.” The last is a complete fabrication crafted by the US State Department as part of its war planning against China. Moreover, the bill deliberately makes no mention of the actual well-documented genocide of the Palestinian people by Israel and the NATO powers.

Should principled teachers and professors seize the opportunity presented by the bill to educate students about Israel’s military occupation, the brutal leveling of Gaza and the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, school districts and universities could be stripped of state funding as a result.

The four bills are part of an ongoing counteroffensive by the ruling elite against the democratic rights of workers and youth and their growing hostility to US dangerously expanding wars for global hegemony. They follow a battery of anti-democratic measures instituted at campuses and cities in the wake of the outpouring of mass protests against the Gazan genocide.

The political strike by University of California student workers last year raised the ruling class’s fear of the unity of workers and students against US imperialism. Academic workers were responding to police and Zionist thugs brutally assaulting students protesting the Gaza genocide. The UAW bureaucracy isolated the strike and ultimately shut it down, caving in to an Orange County superior court judge injunction.

As the US wars across the Middle East expand and coalesce with the war against Russia and plans for open conflict with China, so have the attacks on the right to protest.

In August, both the University of California (UC) and California State University (Cal State) systems issued harsh restrictions on the student protests starting during the current academic year. These included a Cal State prohibition on all tent encampments on campus and a ban on all overnight demonstrations. Erecting makeshift barricades, such as those used by students to protect themselves from rampaging police and Zionist thugs, is also prohibited.

In the UC system, protesters are not allowed to “block pathways” and the wearing of masks is prohibited even though the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing. To the extent that protests are allowed at all, they are to be officially restricted to small areas of campus during limited hours of the day.

Emboldened by these acts, university administrators in California and across the country have been implementing even more vicious attacks on free speech.

In September, Cornell University in New York state temporarily suspended British-Gambian student Momodou Taal simply for participating in protests against the Gaza genocide. While the suspension itself was a gross violation of free speech rights, the suspension put in jeopardy his F-1 visa status meaning that the university was able to effectively initiate deportation proceedings against a student whose views they disagreed with. Thanks to broad support on campus and outrage more generally at Cornell’s attack, Taal was able to beat the suspension.

At the University of Michigan campus, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality were banned from campus after a Zionist professor complained to police after observing the supporters distributing literature in opposition to war and genocide and in support of the presidential campaign of Joe Kishore and Jerry White.

The decision was ultimately reversed after a protracted campaign by the SEP and IYSSE, however, such incidents are poised to only continue and accelerate.

Perhaps the most significant of the recently enacted California legislature measures in this regard is AB 3024 or the so-called Hate Littering Act. The act, while ostensibly meant to protect from the threat of violence, leaves the question of what could be considered violent hate speech intentionally vague.

Given the fact that capitalist politicians of both parties have absurdly claimed that the anti-genocide phrase “from the river to the sea, Palestine shall be free” calls for the extermination of Jews, the new bill allows for the arrest of those using such a slogan. Similarly, the Arabic word “intifada,” often shouted by protesters and meaning uprising or rebellion in English, could be subjected to the same willful misinterpretation and associated consequences.

With the 2024 presidential election now two weeks away, Harris and the Democratic party have hesitantly mentioned the dangers of fascism under a possible Trump presidency. However, should Trump assume office once again, the extent to which his regime can carry mass deportations, arrests, and other acts of political repression will be thanks to the groundwork laid for him by the Democratic party, including those recently issued by the state government in California. Even among campuses that Trump and his pro-Zionist supporters despise, they will find a ready-made legal and organizational framework to carry out his assaults.

Students and workers must create their own rank-and-file organizations of struggle to advance the fight in defense of democratic rights, independent of the trade union officialdom and both capitalist parties. With more than a year having passed since the events of October 7, it should be clear to all those serious about ending the genocide that no amount of pressure campaigns against university administrations or Democratic party politicians at the local, state, or federal level will convince them to change course.