

College administrators escalate crackdown on students who protested against the Gaza genocide

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As the new school year resumes, college administrators are implementing policies and measures to deter and inhibit student protests like those that swept the campuses last spring against the Israeli genocide in Gaza.

In California and across the country, colleges are enforcing new codes of conduct that greatly limit where, when and how one can protest, as well as rules prohibiting encampments and the use of masks or other face coverings during protests.

University administrators are using suspensions and banishing students from campus, however, as their primary weapon to prevent students from exercising their right to free speech.

Nationwide last spring more than 3,000 students were arrested for protesting against the Gaza genocide and to defend the rights of the Palestinians. Most of these arrests involved low-level misdemeanors such as trespassing or failing to disperse, and in most cases no formal criminal charges were ever filed, or if filed, were generally dismissed shortly thereafter.

College campuses, however, now have become the preferred venue for the ruling class to exact its retribution on these students who had defiantly opposed the genocidal war policies of the United States government.

College administrators are able to take advantage of a much lower administrative hearing standard of proof, a preponderance of the evidence, rather than of being burdened with the much higher criminal standard of proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

Moreover, they often utilize vague, overly broad, and ambiguously worded conduct rules instead of precisely defined criminal statutes, or if relying upon criminal statutes, they will often apply them far beyond their intended scope. Lastly, such college proceedings lack fundamental due process protections, making it difficult if

not impossible for students to prevail.

California has become one of the main locations for such vicious repression against the democratic rights of students opposed to war and genocide.

Elizabeth Howell-Egan, a third-year University of Southern California (USC) law student is experiencing what so many student protesters across the country have been enduring for exercising their right to “free” speech.”

Howell-Egan explained recently to the *Los Angeles Times* that although she had taken part in two pro-Palestinian encampments last spring, she had never been arrested. More than four months later, however, she is now facing repercussions worse than a misdemeanor criminal charge: She has been banned from campus and classes as part of a suspension that could last through next spring.

USC now claims that her participation with these encampments violated USC codes of conduct that involved her allegedly obstructing campus safety officers, failing to comply with officer instructions and disorderly conduct.

As part of its process, USC’s Office of Community Expectations has directed her to craft a four-page “reflection essay” about her behavior.

Other students have received similar apology assignments, due in late September, to write “personal thoughts, experiences, and insights” from the protest and “how you might make different decisions in the future.” The papers “may not serve to justify your own actions or evaluate the actions of others.”

“USC’s really leaning into the idea that the process is the punishment,” said Howell-Egan, who is also charged with being a leader of USC’s protests, although she described her role as a public liaison to police. “I don’t

know if their intention is to make me regret our activism, but what it really does is strengthen my beliefs.”

A hearing date has not been scheduled, and she is applying for leave to avoid missing more classes. “People are being killed in Gaza,” she said. “That’s why we protested. Is that wrong?”

Many other students are in the midst of their own disciplinary process at California campuses—including USC, UCLA, UC Irvine, UC Santa Cruz and Cal Poly Humboldt. These students have likewise complained that the charges against them are vague, and they are being denied an opportunity to meaningfully refute their charges. Moreover, several students who “graduated” are still awaiting diplomas because of record holds that have not been lifted.

Earlier this week in response to these flagrant attacks on free speech and due process, the ACLU and civil rights lawyers filed a lawsuit against the University of California Santa Cruz for banning more than 100 students and faculty members from campus after they were arrested at a pro-Palestine protest this past May.

This lawsuit describes how on the night of May 30, UCSC officials sent in over 100 law enforcement officers dressed in riot gear to clear a pro-Palestine encampment that had formed at the base of campus in an unpaved parking lot. Students and faculty who were not directly involved in the encampment came out to observe, protest the deployment of militarized police and support the encampment’s message.

In addressing the crowd, police officers gave unclear or inaudible dispersal orders and used violent policing techniques. “The officers forced us together so tightly that some of us were dry heaving from batons being thrust violently into our abdomens,” said Plaintiff Christine Hong, who is a professor of Critical Race and Ethnic Studies and Literature at UC Santa Cruz.

“Officers in full riot gear grabbed people by the neck. Some people were later hospitalized,” she said. UCSC police arrested people who allegedly failed to disperse, placing them in zip-tie handcuffs and holding them for hours without access to a bathroom.

Elio, a plaintiff in the suit and a UCSC undergraduate, detailed how this ban rendered him homeless, cut him off from his on-campus job, and prevented him from going to a long-planned on-campus doctor’s appointment, which delayed important medical treatment to the fall.

“It was terrible to miss that appointment and be cut off from my home, the library, and my notes,” he said. “This all happened during final exams and, even though I had

been on the honor roll for the last two quarters, I struggled to complete my coursework, and my grades really suffered.”

Laaila, another plaintiff and UCSC undergraduate, was also banned: “I was a Resident Assistant living and working in campus housing, so the ban was devastating. I failed my school courses as I could not access my computer, attend classes, or complete assignments.”

“The bans were incredibly punitive and profoundly unfair,” said Rachel Lederman, Senior Counsel with the Center for Protest Law & Litigation. “They went into effect on the spot, instantly cutting students and faculty off from classes, jobs, and other school resources, such as meal plans and health care. On-campus residents were rendered homeless. Academic performance suffered.”

These bans were also “unconstitutional and over broad, depriving students and faculty of their due process rights,” said Chessie Thacher, Senior Staff Attorney at the ACLU Foundation of Northern California.

Also this week, Boston Moreland, a USC undergraduate who was struck by a police-fired rubber bullet during a campus protest on April 24, 2024, filed a lawsuit against the city of Los Angeles.

“Boston was merely filming the police with his phone when he was shot without any warning. He was not doing anything violent or disruptive. The projectile struck him in the stomach, leaving a large, lasting bruise,” his attorney said in a news release.

“These so-called less-lethal projectiles are not toys, they can cause very serious injuries. If you are struck in the mouth, it can knock out your teeth. If you are hit in the eye, it can blind or kill you. Students have a right to exercise their right to free speech and assembly on a public walkway without fear of being hit with one of these things for no reason.”

Suspensions, banishments, apology letters and physical assaults have now become the price students must pay to exercise their right to “free speech.”



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