

# The University Intifada

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## ABSTRACT

This article argues that the police attack on and dismantling of Gaza Solidarity Encampments at Columbia University and the City University of New York in the spring of 2024 is just the latest iteration of a Right-wing assault on universities and critical thought in general in the US. These now openly fascist attacks on universities also targeted Critical Race Theory, Critical Ethnic Studies, and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies in an effort to purge US education of antifascist intellectual production, cultural work, and movement building. All too often, the putatively liberal administrators who run universities in the US have been willing to go along with this Right-wing attack on their institutions, particularly when it is carried out in the name of fighting anti-Semitism. But the contradictions of such complicity are blatant and mounting.

## Keywords

Encampment, intifada, academic freedom, censorship, Students for Justice in Palestine, fascism, universities

On a sunny Sunday afternoon in spring 2024, I stood in a circle of people at a Gaza Solidarity Encampment in upper Manhattan. We gathered around a flagpole on the campus of City College, a branch of the City University of New York (CUNY). Above us, a stars-and-stripes US flag flapped in the wind; underneath, the black, white, and green bars and the red triangle of the Palestinian flag hung midway up the pole. We had assembled for the daily afternoon speak out, when attendees at the City College encampment came together to listen to voices raised in defiance of the unfolding genocide in Gaza. Shortly after the beginning of the meeting, a young woman explained the encampment's **five demands**: divestment from companies and military contractors complicit in the Israeli genocide in Gaza and the broader occupation; boycott of academic institutions complicit with Zionist settler-colonialism; solidarity with the Palestinian national liberation struggle; demilitarization of CUNY campuses; and a return to a fully-funded, tuition-free CUNY. As one of the organizers commented, the defiant encampment was a "demand that CUNY clean its hands of Palestinian blood and return to being a people's CUNY."

Although all the people whom I heard speak expressed anger and deep sorrow about the unfolding genocide in Gaza, they also seemed energized by the struggle at CUNY and convinced of the righteousness of their cause. As one speaker put it, "The people of Palestine

are calling this the University Intifada!” The Palestinian-solidarity movement that became a national and then international phenomenon was sparked by an encampment at Columbia University, just down the road from City College. But the encampment at CUNY was an outgrowth of a long and rich history of radical antiracist organizing at CUNY, which stretches back to the fight by students of color for open admissions at City College in the late 1960s and 1970s (Savonick 2024). As CUNY Gaza Solidarity Encampment organizer Hadeeqa Arzoo put it,

We understand that the struggle for Palestinian liberation is the struggle for workers’ rights, it’s for all people’s rights. This is the people’s revolution. And so we feel a really strong responsibility, being a public institution, to find this intersection of liberation between so many different movements because we’re all fighting against the same beast and we’re in the belly of the beast. (Keys 2024)

CUNY’s long legacy of activism manifested in Palestine solidarity organizing long before the current genocidal assault on Gaza. For example, Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) began organizing on multiple campuses across the CUNY system during the 2014 war in Gaza. Then, as now, repression of dissent from Israel’s genocidal policies and US support thereof was swift. University administrators reacted to the SJP protests of 2014 by commissioning an investigation by a prominent law firm into alleged antisemitism. However, the final report of the investigation, released in 2016, concluded that student organizers’ words were protected speech, and that “die-ins, mock checkpoints, and the SJP banner may offend some, but the First Amendment does not permit a public university to take action against them” (Steinbaugh 2016). Advocates for censorship responded to the investigating commission’s affirmation of free-speech rights by calling for the defunding of SJP. As New York state senator Jack Martins put it in *The New York Post*:

The First Amendment guarantees the right to free speech, no matter how objectionable others may find the message. But it does not guarantee the right to receive taxpayer dollars to support or further that message. And that is where CUNY can, and must, be more aggressive in addressing this problem. CUNY must immediately set a policy that student groups who promote or incite violence, intimidation or harassment against Jews or anyone else will lose their funding, period.” (quoted in Steinbaugh 2016)

But student organizations like SJP receive their funding from student fees – that is, from money that students themselves pool through the university and allocate via student government. The US Supreme Court has unequivocally held that viewpoint-discriminatory funding of student organizations is not permitted at public universities and colleges. It is worth noting that, prior to writing this opinion piece, Martins had introduced a bill into the New York State Senate that threatened to strip student groups of funding if they did so little as to encourage boycotts of some countries, or used speech seen by anyone as “intolerance” or “hate speech” (Steinbaugh 2016). Luckily, Martins’s bill was never passed by the legislature, but this was not because of fervent opposition to its efforts to silence dissent but simply because the bill was not taken up for discussion in the New York State Assembly.

Efforts to censor and defund pro-Palestinian student groups at CUNY have multiplied in subsequent years. When students at CUNY Law School, led by SJP and the Jewish Law Students Association, successfully pushed the faculty there to adopt a Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) resolution in 2022, New York City Council member Inna Vernikov pulled \$50,000 earmarked for the law school. New York congressman Mike Lawler, in turn, introduced legislation in the House, threatening to strip CUNY of every “single dollar of federal education funding if they peddle in the promotion of anti-semitism at an event on their campus” (quoted in Jindia 2024). These efforts leave little doubt that SJP is seen as a dire threat by Zionist advocates, who intend to do everything within their power to shut down dissent on campus.

Admittedly, it would be an error to over-emphasize the political importance or efficaciousness of student organizing in places like CUNY. An encampment should not be seen as equivalent to a blockade of an arms shipment or a vote in favor of sanctions at the United Nations against Israel for its genocidal policies. Nonetheless, university and college campuses are key sites of political struggle since they have a disproportionately impactful role in shaping public consciousness. Now more than ever, universities are battlefields in the war for ideological hegemony in the imperial heartland. For this reason, attacks on academic freedom and public education more broadly have been a key element in right-wing organizing in recent decades (Beauchamp 2021). Conservative legislators from both political parties in the US have a long history of cutting state funding to public higher education (Bady and Konczal 2012).

Today, as the efforts to shut down SJP at CUNY over the last decade show, the Right has shifted from simply trying to defund public education to directly censoring curricula and faculty. The blueprint for this attack on putative “woke” propaganda is the takeover of progressive New College of Florida engineered by Republican Governor Ron DeSantis. But Florida is hardly alone in its efforts to purge progressive thought in public education. In spring 2024, for example, a Republican supermajority in Indiana passed a law that effectively abolishes tenure by subjecting tenured faculty members to five-year reviews (Jindia 2024). Under the new review process, faculty can be denied promotion or tenure if they do not “foster a culture of free inquiry, free expression, and ‘ideological diversity’.” Diversity here is right-wing code for conservative ideas, as Indiana state senator Spencer Deery made clear when he defended the bill by arguing that “the current system fails to adequately recruit, retain, and cultivate conservative scholars who are then empowered to foster robust, unretaliated debate” (Jindia 2024).

But the Right is not simply interested in “diversifying” the academy: what they’re actually engaged in is a wholesale purge. For example, in his execrable recent book *Unhumans*, the openly fascist provocateur Jack Pocobiec lays out a rationale for a wholesale attack on universities in the US: “The great American counterrevolution to depose the Cultural Marxists

must occur on all terrains of society they currently possess and on those they aim to seize. It is achievable but only with the resolve of Franco and the thoroughness of McCarthy” (quoted in Goldberg 2024). While this attack might be shrugged off as just another outrageous prank emerging from the darkest corners of the internet, Pocobiec’s book has received fulsome endorsements from most of the Republican establishment, including former Fox News journalist Tucker Carlson, Donald Trump Jr., Trump strategist Stephen Bannon, and current vice-presidential candidate JD Vance. In his endorsement of the book, Vance writes, “In the past, communists marched in the streets waving red flags. Today, they march through H.R., college campuses and courtrooms to wage lawfare against good, honest people.” The solution for “woke” oppression of good, honest people, according to Vance? A purge. As Vance argued during a 2021 interview, “I tend to think that we should seize the institutions of the left and turn them against the left [...] We need like a de-Baathification program, but like a de-wokification program in the United States” (quoted in Goldberg 2024).

As this alarming rhetoric suggests, universities in the US have been identified as primary focal points for a gathering fascist onslaught. Vance’s reference to Iraq’s Baath party underlines the distorted *modus operandi* of this fascist attack, which equates criticism of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia with the dictatorship of the Baath Party under Saddam Hussein. In the name of repelling this supposed oppressive orthodoxy, ideologues like Jack Pocobiec are openly celebrating the violent repression carried out in Spain by fascist dictator Francisco Franco and in Chile by Augusto Pinochet. The dismantling of Gaza Solidarity Encampments is just the latest iteration of this assault, which has also targeted Critical Race Theory and Critical Ethnic Studies, among others, in its effort to purge US education of antifascist intellectual production, cultural work, and movement building.

All too often, the putatively liberal administrators who run universities in the US have been willing to go along with this Right-wing attack on their institutions, particularly when it is carried out in the name of fighting anti-Semitism. But the contradictions of such complicity are blatant and mounting. Take, for instance, the topsy-turvy spectacle at universities such as Columbia this spring, where not just SJP but the student chapter of Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP) was suspended by university administrators for calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. As JVP pointed out, university administrators’ actions amounted to the repression of Jewish students on campus in the name of counteracting anti-Semitism at their institutions (Jewish Voice for Peace 2024).

However, as always, it is students and faculty at public institutions that bear a disproportionate burden of this repression. Public universities, like all public institutions, are being systematically stripped of all funding and legitimacy by the Right. It is institutions like CUNY that have suffered for decades from cuts in funding for public higher education. And, despite the high-profile castigation of elite private university presidents in Congress since

October 7, it is educators, students, and staff at public institutions who are on the sharp end of the gathering fascist attack on universities in the US. CUNY administrators have, for example, launched another investigation into alleged antisemitism within its institutions. This investigation is backed by Democratic New York governor Kathy Hochul and bankrolled by a federal earmark of \$75 million to prevent hate crimes and protect houses of worship.

The attack on the right to critical thinking in public education was made abundantly evident by CUNY's treatment of the Gaza Solidarity Encampment at City College. The five divestment demands at the core of the City College encampment were a direct challenge not just to the university's unjust investment policies but to its punitive policies towards pro-Palestinian activism in general. Administrators, recognizing this threat, sent campus police to dismantle the encampment the day it was organized. Activists in the encampment managed to repel the "peace officers" that first day, but on the night of Tuesday, April 30<sup>th</sup>, university administrators ordered the New York Police Department (NYPD) to shut down the encampment. It was clear that this was an assault coordinated by administrators across multiple institutions of higher education in New York City since that same night, the NYPD also cleared the occupation of Hamilton Hall on Columbia's campus (Karam 2024). But the students at City College were saddled with life-shattering felony charges, while Columbia students were charged with misdemeanors, which university administrators pressured prosecutors to drop (Niarchos 2024). The inequality of this persecution should draw our attention to the fact that university authorities, police, and the Far Right are all at heart worried about the specter not just of growing pro-Palestinian, anti-imperial, and anti-fascist movements, but rather of the growth of a mass decolonial movement in the belly of the beast.

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