

University of Michigan police violently clear anti-genocide encampment

Jacob Crosse
21 May 2024

Early Tuesday morning, dozens of riot cops with the University of Michigan and Michigan State Police violently cleared out the Ann Arbor Gaza Solidarity encampment. According to multiple reports, including from demonstrators, police arrived shortly after 5:00 a.m. and gave protesters roughly 10 minutes to clear the campus grounds or face assault and arrest.

After the protesters refused, police began to violently attack them. At least four people were arrested, three of them students, while nearly all 50 participants in the encampment were hit with pepper spray. The UMich Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine reported that “two undergraduate students were rushed to the [Emergency Room]” following the police rampage.

The Ann Arbor encampment was one of nearly 100 established in the United States in the last month following the arrest of 108 anti-genocide protesters at Columbia University on April 18. The anti-war encampments, like the mass protests against the US-backed Israeli ethnic cleansing campaign, are not limited to the US. On May 20, students at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand established an encampment.

According to a tracker maintained by the *New York Times*, in the last month police in the US have arrested students protesting the genocide on at least 65 campuses. Triple-digit arrests have taken place at City College of New York, New York City, (173 arrests); Columbia University, New York City (217); Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts (118); State University of New York at New Paltz (132); University of California, Los Angeles (243); University of Massachusetts, Amherst (130); University of Texas at Austin (136); and Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri (100).

In a statement to the *World Socialist Web Site*, a UM research staff member wrote:

When I arrived on campus this morning it looked like a militarized zone. The buildings were locked to staff, and there were dozens of police still in riot gear on the

corner in the center of campus, surrounding the perimeter of the Diag. Apparently they had been pepper-spraying and physically attacking students just two hours earlier, and President Santa Ono sent out a letter while it was happening.

These are students who were peacefully protesting against the university’s connections to genocide and militarism, and who have broad support. All the mealy-mouthed public relations talk by Ono and the Board of Regents about “respecting and upholding freedom of speech” is so cynical, and it is all blatant lies. The proof is in the anti-democratic pudding.

They have been thwarting every attempt by students to solidarize the student body and the institution against an ongoing, highly visible and well-documented genocide in Gaza. At first, it started with shutting down student body resolutions against genocide, and now it is reaching the point of physically attacking these protests. The university takes its marching orders from the Democratic Party, Wall Street and the Pentagon.

After the Ann Arbor encampment was cleared, university President Ono released a cynical statement justifying the siccing of cops on students. Declaring that “rights are not limitless,” he said:

The university can and must regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure one group’s right to protests does not infringe on the rights of others, endanger our community or disrupt the operations of the university.

The violent attacks on students are part of a global attack on the democratic rights of the working class. So-called “democratic” governments from North America to Europe to Oceania are banning expressions of solidarity with the Palestinian people and against war as part of a global counterrevolution aimed at erasing previously won rights and

militarizing society, as the ruling classes, spearheaded by American imperialism, escalate already raging wars against Russia (in Ukraine) and the Palestinians (in Gaza) and prepare wars against Iran and China, i.e., a new world war.

For peacefully calling for an end to the slaughter, students on the UM campus, like others across the world, including many Jewish students, have been slandered as “antisemites” and “terrorist sympathizers” by college administrators, billionaire donors and regents, and capitalist politicians, including President Joe Biden.

While the students have taken a brave stand against the genocide, the arrests at UM and other campuses prove that the students cannot fight alone. In capitalist society, the only social force capable of ending war and police violence is the working class, armed with a socialist perspective to unite workers and young people around the world against the capitalist system.

But the nationalist, pro-corporate and pro-war trade unions, tied to the Democratic Party, are working in lock-step with the politicians to block industrial and mass action. At UM, students were deliberately isolated and left to be assaulted by the police by the leadership of Lecturers’ Employee Organization (LEO), which is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

As student protesters across the country were being attacked by the police, and President Ono was threatening to unleash the police against the UM encampment, the LEO kept its members on the job after their contract expired on April 20, betraying the labor maxim “No contract, no work!”

Even after the rank and file of the 1,800-strong LEO voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike, the union officials refused to call a walk-out and instead quickly pushed through a sellout contract. The disgust and hostility of the majority of lecturers was expressed in a mass abstention in the contract ratification vote, with less than half of the union members casting ballots.

Political responsibility for the police assault Tuesday at Ann Arbor rests not only with the LEO but also with the AFT. Shortly before the contract expiration, AFT President Randi Weingarten joined Biden in smearing the protests as “horrific, unacceptable examples of antisemitism.”

The same role is being played by the United Auto Workers (UAW). On the West Coast, despite an overwhelming strike authorization vote, United Auto Workers Local 4811, the bargaining agent for 48,000 academic workers in the University of California system, has only called out 2,000 academic workers at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

By limiting the strike to only one campus, the UAW and its president, Shawn Fain, a top campaign surrogate for “Genocide Joe” Biden, are doing everything they can to smother the UC strike in order to prevent broader mass action. In this way, the trade union bureaucracies work with Biden, the Democrats and

their fascistic “Republican colleagues” to suppress mass and growing opposition in the working class to war, genocide and the mounting attacks on social and democratic rights that accompany them.

The bureaucracies that run the UAW, the LEO and the AFT, and the ruling class they serve are terrified that the example of workers using their industrial strength to oppose war and defend student protesters will spread to other sections of the working class.

This is precisely what must be done to defend democratic rights and end the wars. It requires an all-out struggle against the union bureaucracies.

In a joint statement issued on May 3, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at the University of Michigan and the Michigan Educators Rank-and-File Committee (MERFC) warned that the refusal of the LEO/AFT to call a strike amounted to a green light to Ono, the regents and the Democratic Party to call out the police to suppress the student encampment.

They wrote:

In refusing to call a walkout despite an overwhelming strike authorization vote by the rank and file of the 1,800-strong LEO, the officials of both the local union and the parent American Federation of Teachers are deliberately isolating the student protesters, even as President Biden endorses police raids and arrests to tear down encampments and crush protest actions at campuses far and wide.

The IYSSE and the Michigan Educators R&F Committee explained that the struggles on the campuses and in the workplaces “must be unified.” The statement continued:

What is key is the formation of an independent rank-and-file organization, not to pressure the union bureaucracy, but to overthrow it. Put the power into the hands of the workers themselves!



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact