

University of Michigan institutes authoritarian attacks on due process and free speech rights

Matthew Brennan
26 August 2024

As the campus reopens this week at the University of Michigan (UM), the position of the university administration is very clear: Those who protest against genocide are criminals. While tens of thousands of Palestinians are being slaughtered by US-backed Israeli attacks, university officials want to suppress any expression of outrage or condemnation by students, faculty or other campus workers.

On August 20 a committee associated with the Faculty Senate at UM exposed these plans for repression, issuing a letter to its 7,300 members and alerting the entire campus population. The letter warned that the university administration has utilized thoroughly anti-democratic means to implement sweeping attacks on policies that previously protected core democratic rights on campus.

The letter was accompanied by recent reports that at least 11 UM student protesters against US-Israeli genocide in Gaza now face a hiring ban on campus. One protester has apparently been fired from a student job for taking part in protests.

Also, the *Michigan Daily* published a letter last week denouncing a university attack on a student, Salma Hamamy, who had her January 2024 Martin Luther King Jr. Spirit Award rescinded by the university on May 21, 2024 for her pro-Palestinian activism. The letter was signed by 65 of the previous MLK Spirit Award Recipients, who returned their awards in protest of this attack.

The August 20 faculty letter was issued by the Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs (SACUA) to the University of Michigan Faculty Senate. SACUA warned of key revisions to UM's "Statement of Student Rights and Responsibilities" (SSRR) that took place on July 18 and August 6, with chilling implications:

"These new policies were adopted without input or

advice from faculty, staff, or students. We believe they were written by the Office of the General Counsel, at the request of the Regents, and then discussed privately by a select few before being adopted without public discussion. Taken together, they deprive students of the right to due process and fair hearings with faculty oversight, curtail freedom of speech and expression, and radically increase administrators' power to prosecute students and limit inconvenient forms of free speech."

The recent revisions extend a previous authoritarian policy announced on March 27 which pledged to ban protest on campus. Collectively the new policies:

- Allow the "university" to file a complaint against a student. Previously all complaints about misconduct had to come from UM staff members, faculty or students. The new policies now appear to provide legal cover to allow for outside consulting firms to gather information and file complaints and sanctions against students on behalf of the university.

Prior to the policy change the anti-genocide student group Tahrir Coalition contended that a member of the consulting firm Grand River Solutions, Omar Torres, had been brought on to pursue and file complaints against student protesters in violation of university policy. Considerable resources are being devoted to enforce the repressive policies. The university now employs Torres in the Human Resources Department and has hired Grand River Solutions through a no-bid \$750,000 contract.

- Assign unilateral and unchallengeable authority to a "Resolution Coordinator" (RC), who can apply punishing sanctions against "student misconduct" without prior discussion with the student being accused of misconduct. This was previously a university protocol. This new policy includes giving the RC arbitrary power to determine whether to allow a student appeal.

- If an appeal is granted by the RC, the Vice President for Student Life is the final arbiter of the merits of the appeal. Previously, students had the right to appeal all such misconduct decisions through an Appeals Board with representation from faculty, students and administration. The new policy eliminates that appeals process.

- The university can ban almost any form of protest on campus. The policies adopt deliberately vague language regarding university facilities and misconduct, which state that individuals and groups may not “disrupt University activities or operations”; neither may people “obstruct human or vehicle traffic, ways of ingress and egress, paths, stairs, aisles and the like.”

One day after the faculty letter exposed these attacks, UM President Santa Ono issued a hypocritical “Welcome Back” message to the entire campus intended to conceal the university’s right-wing attacks on democratic rights.

Ono’s letter declares, “Protest is part of democracy and something we embrace and celebrate. However, one person’s right to protest must not infringe on the rights of others, endanger our community or disrupt the operations of the university.”

He refers to the upcoming “truly consequential election” in the United States but says nothing about the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the escalation of war by the US and NATO with Russia in Ukraine nor the rising danger of fascism. The main concern of the administration is to prevent any protests that would disrupt and fuel further opposition to the war plans of the US government.

Campuses like University of Michigan have become ruling class laboratories for the removal of all democratic rights to free speech, protest and due process across the country. The central drive in eliminating democratic rights is to remove any opposition to imperialist war and social inequality.

Since October 2023, there have been dozens of vigorous protests at the UM involving hundreds and at times thousands of students and opponents of the Gaza genocide. At every step the university has escalated its repressive and anti-democratic measures.

From November 2023 to the present, the university has intervened to shut down and ban all student government anti-genocide resolutions, arrested dozens of student protesters, violently attacked and destroyed a peaceful anti-genocide encampment, and is now institutionalizing sweeping attacks on core democratic rights to free speech and due process.

The actions of the UM administration over this period

fully expose the dead-end of directing campus protests to pressure the university to divest from its financial connections to Israel and any other partner of American militarism. But this has been the outlook of the leaders of the protest groups, particularly those associated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). The University of Michigan has long been one of the central political strongholds for the Democratic Party, which is overseeing the genocide through the Biden-Harris administration.

These attacks cannot be stopped within the confines of college campuses because their source is the capitalist system itself, which is pursuing imperialist war abroad and authoritarian measures against the working class at home.

As Kamala Harris made clear in her speech accepting the Democratic presidential nomination: “As commander-in-chief, I will ensure America always has the strongest, most lethal fighting force in the world.” The central focus of her campaign and the Democratic Party in general will be to defend the interests of Wall Street and its military-intelligence apparatus, and to continue the militaristic foreign policy of the Biden administration to defend the global interests of the American financial aristocracy, including the genocide in Gaza.

The authoritarian attacks on UM protesters are part of a nationwide assault on democratic rights on campuses across the country, involving tens of thousands of students at dozens of schools in California, Michigan, Texas, New York, New Jersey, Georgia, Pennsylvania and many other states.

The campaign against free speech on campuses constitutes an attack on the rights of the entire working class and must be opposed by all class-conscious workers and youth. It demonstrates that the fight against war is inseparable from the fight to defend democratic rights and the fight for socialism. This underscores the urgent need for students and youth to turn to the working class—autoworkers, teachers, healthcare workers and more—and help mobilize the only social force that can end war and social inequality. We urge students and young people to take up this fight by joining and building the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at UM, and around the world.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact