

University of Michigan confirms filing of complaint against campus chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine

James McDonald
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The University of Michigan (Umich) has confirmed that it filed a formal complaint against the campus organization Students Allied for Freedom and Equality (SAFE), the local chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). The student newspaper, the *Michigan Daily*, reported on November 18 that the complaint was filed on October 31 with the university's office of Student Organization Advancement and Recognition (SOAR). According to the *Daily*, SAFE was notified of the complaint by the university's Center for Campus Involvement.

SAFE announced that it had received notification of the complaint in statements it posted online on November 7. The substance of the complaint has not been made public, but SAFE spokesperson Tarana Sharma has said the organization is threatened with a two-to-four-year suspension. If Umich suspends SAFE, it will mark the first suspension of a legacy student organization in the university's history.

The move to effectively ban SAFE is the latest in a series of flagrant attacks on freedom of speech and political expression carried out by the university as part of the nationwide assault on campus protests against the genocide in Gaza and the complicity of the US government and Zionist-linked universities and other institutions. At Umich this includes police attacks on peaceful protests, the dispersal of a protest encampment last spring, and the filing of felony charges against 11 Umich students who participated in the demonstrations.

In its November 18 article, the *Daily* reported that the complaint was submitted by Stephanie Jackson, "an outside consultant hired by the University." The article explained that the vendetta against SAFE is being carried out under the university's Standards of Conduct for Student Organizations. The complaint was issued by the Office of Student Organization Advancement and Recognition (SOAR). Rigo Gutierrez, the associate director of the Center for Campus Involvement, SOAR's parent office, notified

SAFE of the complaint.

The move against SAFE takes place in the context of major revisions in the university's rules of conduct unilaterally adopted in July to remove due process protections for students, faculty and staff who seek to exercise their free speech rights and their right to protest against war and mass murder. The revised rules, laid out in the "Statement of Student Rights and Responsibilities (SSRR)," ride roughshod over basic constitutional rights and facilitate political repression on the part of the university and its Board of Regents. The latter is dominated by wealthy corporate figures for the most part aligned with the Democratic Party.

The revised SSSR purports to protect freedom of speech, stating:

Students at the University have the same rights and protections under the Constitutions of the United States and the State of Michigan as other citizens. These rights include freedom of expression, press, religion, and assembly. The University has a long tradition of student activism and values freedom of expression, which includes voicing unpopular views and dissent.

But university spokesperson Colleen Mastony gave away more than she intended when she wrote to the *Daily*: "This summer the board updated the U-M Statement of Student Rights and Responsibilities to clarify existing university powers and ensure that the disciplinary process moves with efficiency."

Mastony went on to say, "Every student will still receive due process, including notice of a complaint, the opportunity to be heard, and the reasonable opportunity to appeal." This is a cynical lie. The clear purpose of the new SSRR is to

deny students the due process they previously enjoyed under the Center for Campus Involvement Accountability Procedure Manual (APM), compared to which the revised SSRR resembles a Star Chamber proceeding.

For example:

· Under the revised SSRR, the university itself is empowered to initiate a complaint. Previously, under the APM, only faculty, staff, or another student could file a complaint. The SSRR revisions now permit the administration to hire someone outside the university to be a complainant.

· The new rules allow Umich to file a complaint even when the only “harm” is “[o]bstructing or disrupting classes, research projects, or other activities or programs of the University; or obstructing access to University facilities, property, or programs...” This provision is deliberately drawn so broadly as to cover virtually any protest action.

· Previously, students responding to formal complaints could do so in a public hearing. Under the revised SSRR, however, all parties must approve of people attending the hearing other than witnesses and advisors. Thus, at the discretion of the university, the proceedings of a hearing, like those of a Star Chamber, can be carried out in secret and behind closed doors.

· Hearings under the APM were held by a Student Governing Body (SGB). The SGB would then present its findings and its recommendations to the Dean of Students. The revised SSRR ensures no such student input. Rather, while the student respondent may choose for the case to be heard by a student panel, the complainant may simply veto this choice in favor of a resolution officer to act as arbitrator, overseen by a resolution coordinator, a university administrator.

· As for the right of appeal, the previous system provided for an Appeals Board comprising one student, one faculty member and one administrator. This board would present its recommendation to the vice president for student life. Under the revised SSRR, however, either party may submit a request for appeal to the resolution coordinator, who will judge the request’s merit and may then submit the appeal to the vice president for student life. That is, administrators act as both arbitrator and appellate court in a case brought by the university.

Technically, SAFE is being persecuted under procedures and administration offices dealing with campus organizations that are distinct from the provisions of the revised SSRR. However, the punitive application of the Student Organization Advancement and Recognition rules by the university’s Center for Campus Involvement against SAFE is entirely in line with the repressive changes enacted by the university last July to crack down on protests.

Last month, the Umich faculty voted to support resolutions passed by the Faculty Senate to censure the university and its Board of Regents for the revisions to the SSRR and related attacks on free speech on campus. The resolutions accused the Regents of “increasingly exhibiting authoritarian tendencies” to silence free speech.

At a November 4 Faculty Senate meeting at which the resolutions were adopted, Associate Professor of American Culture Leila Kavar said:

As faculty members concerned about free expression, we must express our strong disapproval of the authoritarian procedural turn that is increasingly taking hold at this institution and for which the Regents bear primary responsibility.

SAFE is not the first chapter of the SJP to come under official attack. In October of last year, Brandeis University banned its SJP chapter, and days later Columbia University banned the university’s SJP chapter alongside that of Jewish Voice for Peace, an anti-Zionist Jewish student group. The fascist governor of Florida, Ron DeSantis, banned the SJP throughout Florida’s state university system.

This is part of a nationwide and, in fact, international attack on anti-genocide protesters, who have rallied in the millions, on the basis of the filthy lie that they are espousing antisemitism. All of the imperialist powers have fully backed and continue to back, with arms, money and diplomacy, the war of extermination being carried out by the Israeli government. In the US, the attack on free speech has been spearheaded by the Biden administration and joined by the Republicans, and it will be sharply intensified under the fascist Trump.

Students cannot stop the genocide and the unfolding global war of which it is a part within the confines of the campus and appeals to the war criminals and their university accomplices to change their policies. Those students who are opposed to genocide and war must make a turn to the working class, the only force that can bring down the capitalist system, which is at the root of the drive to world war and the existential catastrophe it threatens.



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