

Court hearing held for University of Michigan Gaza solidarity encampment protesters charged by Attorney General Nessel

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An initial court hearing was held on Thursday, December 5, for the 11 protesters charged by Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel for their involvement in the University of Michigan (UMich) pro-Palestinian solidarity encampment erected last spring and later torn down by police.

An hour before the hearing, outside the 14A-1 district county courthouse, the UMich pro-Palestinian Tahrir Coalition held a press conference. Nia Hall, a UMich graduate student, explained the motivation behind the event, stating:

Eleven students and community members have been unjustly charged with felonies and misdemeanors. These charges are unprecedented, politically motivated and designed to crush dissent.

A report by the *Guardian* published in October revealed that the UMich Board of Regents requested that Nessel's office pursue charges against the 11 protesters. The article outlined the substantial financial resources provided to Nessel's Democratic Party 2018 campaign for Michigan attorney general by six of the eight regents. One regent served as her campaign's co-chair.

Sammie Lewis, one of the protesters who faces a felony charge with a maximum two-year sentence for trespassing and resisting an officer, made a statement defending the democratic rights of workers and youth to protest. Lewis said:

All of us—students, faculty, staff, community

members—have a right and a responsibility to protest the horrors with which our institutions are funded, and we must defend each other and the Palestinian cause.

Across the country, universities and state governments are colluding to suppress the anti-genocide movement under the Palestine exception; the University of Michigan is the latest example of this trend.

Quoting from a statement written by the 11 charged protesters, Lewis added:

The university's unprecedented pursuit of the charges expresses the determination of the University of Michigan and the Democratic Party to crack down on protests in support of Palestine and obscure their support for the ongoing genocide. Even now, the Biden/Harris regime advances a \$680 million arms sale to Israel for the murder of Palestinians.

Lewis also explained that in early November the attorney general's office offered a plea deal to five defendants charged with felonies. The deal would reduce the felony charges to misdemeanors in exchange for formal apologies from the defendants in the form of written admissions of guilt. From Lewis' statement it was unclear if those offered the deal had formally rejected it, but none have reportedly accepted the conditions.

Members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at Wayne State University and

UMich attended the hearing and the press conference in defense of the 11 charged protesters. In a statement published for the press conference, the IYSSE at UMich demanded that all charges against the 11 defendants be dropped and that a complaint filed by the university against the campus chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine be withdrawn.

The statement was titled: “Drop all charges against the UMich 11! Drop the complaint against SAFE! Defend free speech and assembly!”

It explained the political context of the attack on the UMich protesters. It identified the leading role played by the Democratic Party in carrying out “authoritarian policies directed against peaceful anti-genocide protesters at college campuses in Michigan in conjunction with a national campaign backed by both the Biden administration and the Republican Party.”

It refuted the claim that the protesters were “antisemitic,” pointing to the role played by the Zionist state of Israel, backed by US imperialism, in the slaughter of over 186,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, in a genocidal war across Gaza.

The statement concluded:

Trump’s second term will bring mass deportations, intensified attacks on democratic rights, and sweeping cuts in basic social services and benefits. Trump is assembling a cabinet of billionaires and fascists to defend the rule of the capitalist oligarchy. The Democratic Party, a party of Wall Street and war, paved the way for this disaster and now pledges to collaborate with Trump. The working class, which is carrying out strike struggles in opposition to the pro-corporate trade union bureaucracy, is the central target of the repressive measures.

The development toward world war and fascism cannot be stopped through appeals to the ruling class and university administrations. Instead, students must base their struggles on the international working class. They must turn outward to the factories, schools, hospitals and work places to mobilize the principal revolutionary force in society, the working class, as an independent political force in struggle against war and dictatorship and their root cause, the capitalist system.

Members of the IYSSE spoke with students and workers attending the press conference.

Robin Satori, an Ann Arbor community member, said, “I’m here to support the students protesting the felony charges for trying to support Palestinians.” She continued, “It’s amazing, we are just going back to conditions more like McCarthyism...”

“The Republicans and Democrats are very right-wing, and they have been moving that way since the Clinton administration. I mean, they are not very different. There are no differences between the parties. They throw us a couple of crumbs as far as abortion issues and that type of stuff. When it comes to squashing free speech, the Democrats are just as bad, maybe worse.”

Yosh, a UMich student, said he had come to the press conference “because the state AG is bringing charges against students and others affiliated with the university to suppress their right to protest.”

He added, “These people did nothing wrong other than stand up for what’s right at the university. Workers and students want to carry out a struggle for the benefit of society. They don’t want it going towards genocide and war, as the state does. That’s why we’re here.”

The hearing was for seven of the eleven defendants, those charged by Nessel with felony charges. Six were physically present with their legal teams and one attended remotely. The remaining four protesters charged by Nessel will have separate hearings before city courts on their trespassing and misdemeanor charges.

At the hearing, lawyers for the defendants requested that the judge allow them to depose high-ranking members of the UMich administration such as President Santa Ono. The court did not decide on this motion, leaving it to the next hearing date, which was set for February 12.

On the same day as the court hearing for the encampment protesters, the UMich Student Organization Advancement and Recognition (SOAR) office held a hearing reviewing a complaint filed by the university against Students Allied for Freedom and Equality (SAFE), the local chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine. The complaint could result in SAFE being suspended for two to four years.



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