

The Encampments: A new documentary focusing on the pro-Palestinian protests at Columbia University

John Conrad
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The Encampments is a new documentary film recounting the Gaza Solidarity Encampment protests that took place at Columbia University in New York City in April 2024. Originally slated for release in the fall, the film was rushed out for early showing after the Trump administration's immigration enforcement apparatus kidnapped one of the film's main subjects, Mahmoud Khalil, for his role in the protests.

In a sign of the enormous popular opposition to the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the moves toward dictatorship, *The Encampments* has been met with significant support and enthusiasm. The film has broken the box office record for the highest per-screen average ever for a documentary on an opening weekend, making an anticipated \$80,000 at the box office with back-to-back sold-out screenings.

Directed by Michael T. Workman and Kei Pritsker and co-produced by Macklemore, *The Encampments* documents the Columbia protests from the perspective of three student organizers: Khalil, a graduate student who acted as the lead student representative in negotiations with university officials; Khalil's co-negotiator and fellow graduate student, Sueda Polat; and Grant Miner, president of the graduate student union (Student Workers of Columbia-UAW) and protest organizer who was expelled from the university last month.

On April 17, 2024, at 4 a.m., Columbia students erected the Gaza Solidarity Encampment in the center of the university's Morningside campus, located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The encampment was organized by Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), both of which had been banned by the university several months earlier, as well as the Columbia University Apartheid Divest (CUAD) coalition.

Students demanded that Columbia financially divest from any company with business ties to the Israeli government. Hundreds of students, joined by staff and faculty supporters, participated in the protests, confronting threats of mass expulsions and arrests from the university administration and brutal assaults by NYPD riot police.

Repeated provocations by the university administration, the NYPD and local, state and federal governments over almost two weeks led to the student occupation of Columbia's Hamilton Hall, renamed Hind's Hall by protesters in honor of six-year-old Gazan Hind Rajab, who was murdered by the Israeli military. After less than 24 hours, over 100 heavily armed NYPD riot officers, on the orders of the university administration and directed by the city's Democratic Party-dominated political establishment and the Biden White House, rampaged through Columbia's campus and arrested over 100 students.

The encampments at Columbia sparked a wave of pro-Palestinian encampments at over 180 universities and colleges across the US and internationally.

One of the directors of *The Encampments*, Kei Pritsker, a member of the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL) and journalist for BreakThrough News, organizations heavily promoting the movie, reportedly spent 12 days living in the Gaza Solidarity Encampment. He collected video footage of day-to-day student activity, the occupation of Hind's Hall and the violent breakup of the encampment by police. This original footage is mixed together with videos shot by students, news media footage and interviews with students to document the protests from beginning to end.

Columbia University's financial ties to weapons manufacturer Lockheed Martin and other companies invested in Israel's war machine are briefly reviewed. Columbia Board of Trustees member Jeh Johnson, former Secretary of Homeland Security under Barack Obama, is singled out for his membership on Lockheed's Board of Directors.

Footage from Gaza, detailing the genocidal onslaught by Israel on the Palestinian population, is placed effectively in the film. An audio recording of a phone call between Hind Rajab and an emergency response operator before her murder is presented at length in the most moving sequence of the film.

There are also informative scenes of Khalil speaking about his own background—growing up in a Syrian refugee camp and then in Lebanon—and the struggles of his family dating back to the *Nakba* of 1948.

Brief sequences of various leading Democratic and Republican politicians, including former President Joe Biden and New York City Mayor Eric Adams, denouncing the demonstrations and slandering the protesters as “antisemites” are intercut with scenes of police brutality. Footage from former Columbia University President Minouche Shafik's appearance before Congress's McCarthyite Task Force on Antisemitism is included, and a significant portion of the film is dedicated to opposing the slander that opposition to Israel's crimes is antisemitic.

A longer sequence places the encampment in the tradition of the 1968 occupation of Columbia University by students protesting the institution's ties to the Vietnam War. At that time, students occupied various university buildings, starting with Hamilton Hall, demanding that Columbia end its institutional affiliation with the Institute for Defense Analyses, a weapons research think tank.

The Encampments clearly shows the courage and determination of

the student protesters.

Sequences showing students at Columbia and other campuses standing their ground against government-backed police violence are scenes familiar to millions internationally. Riot police throw students down stairs and against walls, beat protesters with batons and fire “non-lethal” ammunition at the demonstrators. It is to the credit of Khalil and others that they continued to defy this repression.

Those attending the screenings include many students, sympathizing faculty and others also determined to fight, who are looking for a way forward against the murderous criminality in Gaza and the drive toward war and fascism of the Trump administration.

At one screening in New York, during a question-and-answer session with the filmmakers, a Columbia student in attendance commented that, “There is immense fear” on the campus now and “many are looking for guidance.”

Unfortunately, this is not what the documentary offers. As one of the co-directors of the movie remarked in response to the student, “We are taking leadership from the students.” This sounds very “democratic,” but in fact it’s rather bankrupt. This side-stepping of political and historical questions, including the question of providing coherent and informed leadership, dominates *The Encampments*.

At no point does the film go beyond the perspective of the middle-class protest politics that has dominated the student movement so far. In other words, it offers no serious critical evaluation of last year’s events.

Near the end of the 85-minute documentary, one student protest organizer suggests that the encampment protests were significant because those participating were children of “the elites who run CNN, Fox News, work at the State Department and sit on the boards of corporations.” She and another interviewee assert that the powers-that-be are terrified of the protests because they mean that “the system” is “losing the elite,” or future generations of the “elite.” In the first place, this is not true (there will always be plenty of human material happy to occupy upper echelon positions). And, in the second, are we being told that the ruling class will disappear through attrition? This is not serious.

The radical demonstrations of 1968 are presented as the blueprint for opposition to genocide and imperialist war today. A thorough examination of that era and its upheavals and, in particular, the vast economic, social and political developments since then is absent.

The decades following the end of the Vietnam War protest movement, particularly the 1990s, saw a sharp shift to the right among the social layers that had led this movement. The financialization of the American economy and the domination of social life by the stock market gave rise to a new, extremely affluent upper middle class that included many of the former “lefts” of the past anti-war movement.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracies, their moral opposition to war turned into open support for war, once these operations were couched in human rights terms. NATO’s break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the imperialist excursions that followed were supported by significant sections of the formerly anti-war middle-class.

These social layers comprise what the Trotskyist movement has characterized as pseudo-left. In the US, these political tendencies and organizations, including the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), seek to strangle serious opposition among workers and youth to imperialist war and dictatorship by channeling all oppositional sentiment behind the big business Democratic Party.

The film ends by saying that the escalating repression—including the

kidnapping of Khalil and others—will only strengthen and broaden the movement against genocide and war. Final frames before the credits roll display the text, “Rather than stopping the movement for Palestine, the repression reignited it.”

This conclusion is dangerous and disorienting. Whatever the courage and willingness to sacrifice of students, the protests have failed to stop a historic, homicidal onslaught. Over the last 17 months, the ethnic cleansing of Gaza has intensified and spread to the West Bank. Donald Trump has declared that the US and Israel will “clean out” the Palestinian population. Broader war is erupting across the Middle East as part of a rapidly developing imperialist-provoked third world war.

As the WSWs has argued, Trump’s election represents the violent realignment of the superstructure of US politics to correspond to the oligarchic character of American capitalism. The administration is working on behalf of the ruling class to eviscerate critical social programs, crush political opposition and establish a fascist dictatorship in the US.

The Democratic Party has paved the way for Trump through decades of austerity, attacks on democratic rights and the waging of countless wars abroad. The Biden administration backed Israel’s genocide and oversaw a vicious crackdown on anti-genocide protesters. At Columbia and other universities, Democratic Party supporters collaborate with Trump in the deportation of students like Khalil and the institution of a reign of terror on campuses. The UAW and other union bureaucracies have done nothing to defend their student members, and have systematically worked to *demobilize* the rank-and-file.

The critical political lesson of the last 17 months of continuous anti-genocide protests—and for that matter, the anti-Vietnam War protest movement—is that fascism, genocide and imperialist war *cannot* be opposed through pressuring the ruling elite and its representatives in the university administrations, the Democratic Party and union hierarchies.

A mass movement of opposition and resistance must be built, but it can only be developed successfully on a new political axis. A fundamental shift in class orientation and political program is necessary—not more of the same.

The courage and determination of the students, dramatically on display in *The Encampments*, must be directed away from the dead end of protest politics (and, ultimately, the Democrats) and toward the independent political mobilization of the international working class. This is the social force able to carry out the revolutionary social, economic and political transformation necessary to save humanity from the death grip of the capitalist profit system.

This requires a serious theoretical and political orientation of young people and their education in the history of the class struggle and of the Marxist movement. It is through the struggle to unify and politically educate and organize workers and young people in opposition to capitalism on the basis of a socialist, Trotskyist political program that the bloody genocide in Gaza and the threat of fascist dictatorship can be opposed and defeated.



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