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USA

Pro-Palestine Student Protests Spread Despite Repression

- IV Online magazine - 2024 - IV591 - April 2024 -

Publication date: Monday 29 April 2024

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The protests began at Columbia University, then spread to other elite private universities such as Yale and Harvard, and the University of Southern California, but soon included state universities such as the University of California campuses at Berkeley and Los Angeles and the University of Michigan, At Columbia, at Emory University in Atlanta, and at the University of Texas at Austin, police in riot gear broke up encampments on the campuses, beat and arrested students. On some campuses, police also arrested professors.

The student movement began as a demonstration of solidarity with the Palestinian people, calling for a “ceasefire now” and for an end to U.S. funding for Israel’s military. Quickly students also demanded that their universities divest from Israeli businesses, especially intelligence and arms makers, and some also called for an end to academic ties to Israeli institutions. Students pitched tents and set up camp in university plazas, engaging in peaceful protests. They didn’t engage in violence, did not damage property, and hardly interrupted university operations at all. Many of the protestors were both Palestinians and Jews, but also a diverse range of others.

College presidents, other university administrators, politicians, and some media characterized the demonstrations as anti-Semitic, claimed they were intimidating and threatening Jewish students, and alleged they were violent. Columbia University president Dr. Nemat Shafik was the first to call in the police, leading to beatings and arrests, outraging the students and many faculty members. Hundreds were arrested on various campuses around the country. While there doubtless some anti-Semitic remarks, they were rare exceptions and the demonstrations were fundamentally anti-Zionist and did not threaten Jewish students.

“Students are here because it has been over 200 days of watching a genocide unfold. Because people are tired of seeing their friends get beaten, arrested, suspended, and expelled for daring to use their voices to end their university’s complicity in the system,” says Cyn, a student at UC Berkeley. “Every year our universities send millions and millions of dollars to companies who manufacture weapons and surveillance equipment used to harass, intimidate, and brutalize Palestinians, and then our universities turn those same tactics on us. Our solidarity goes out to everyone fighting for a free Palestine.”

Mike Johnson, speaker of the House, in a shocking and unprecedented political move, went to Columbia University and spoke, calling the pro-Palestine protestors “a mob” that had threatened Jewish students and “supported terrorists.” He demanded that Columbia University president Shafik either bring the protests under control or resign. Republican Senators Tom Cotton of Arkansas and Josh Hawley of Missouri, called for troops to be sent in to crush the pro-Palestine campus protests.

Other protests calling for an immediate ceasefire and an end to U.S. funding for Israel continue to take place, such as the one I joined, a seder-protest held in front of the Brooklyn home of Senate Democratic majority leader Chuck Schumer, which blocked a major thoroughfare and led to 300 arrested.

Despite the repression, students appear to be determined to continue the protests and to force their universities to divest from Israel and to stop their government from aiding the Israeli military. But classes end in May. Where will the movement go? Some plan to go to the Democratic Party Convention in Chicago on August 19–22. Will it be another 1968?

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