

Free Palestine! Hands Off Our Students!

Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine formed at Detroit's Wayne State University

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On June 4, hundreds of students, faculty, alumni and community members rallied on the campus of Wayne State University located in the Midtown District of Detroit.

The purpose of the gathering was to send a clear message to the recently appointed **President Kimberly Andrews Espy** who ordered a Palestine solidarity encampment raided and destroyed by campus police on May 30.

Metropolitan Detroit embodies the largest population of people of Arab and Middle Eastern descent in the United States. Consequently, many people within this community have direct familial and linguistic ties to the people most impacted by the settler-colonial regime occupying Palestine.

WSU's chapter of the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) has taken a leadership role at the higher educational institution by demanding the full disclosure and divestment of all financial and other ties between the University and the State of Israel. The movement for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) has spread rapidly across hundreds of colleges and universities in the U.S.

This movement in solidarity with the Palestinian people has been met with repression resulting in the arrest of over 3,000 people. In Detroit at WSU on May 30, 12 people were arrested when the police stormed the encampment at 6:00am.

If the University administration believed that they had finished off the Palestine solidarity

movement on campus, they were grossly mistaken. Later that same day on May 30, a press conference was held where the president of the faculty union spoke in support of the right of the students to protest.

Later that evening a tribunal was held near Eastern Market where testimony from the students involved in the BDS movement from the University of Michigan and Wayne State University exposed the links these institutions have with the genocide taking place in Gaza. At WSU, the Palestine solidarity encampment was labelled “Popular University for Gaza.” It was also designated as a “liberated zone.”

Faculty and Staff Members Call for Espy to Resign

Within a matter of a few days after the destruction of the encampment, a petition was circulating among faculty and staff of the University condemning the actions of President Espy and the Board of Governors. Over 180 faculty and staff members had already signed the petition by June 4 when the rally was held.

The rally was entitled “Hands off Our Students” and the gathering featured a number of faculty, staff, students and community members. Faculty members from the School of Medicine and the Departments of Philosophy, Communications, the Provost Office, College of Education, among others spoke out against the rising repressive and racist atmosphere at WSU.

Earlier after the raid on the encampment, the Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine (FSJP) issued a statement denouncing Espy and the BOG saying:

“The FSJP stands in solidarity with our students and seeks to protect them from harassment, discrimination, and punishment. We are dedicated to reclaiming and protecting academic freedom and free speech within our university, which have become battlegrounds in the propaganda war against Palestinian freedom advocates. We will work in close collaboration with colleagues in Palestinian universities and other universities around the world, supporting public education about the ongoing Nakba and endorsing the principles of Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS).”

After the press conference on June 4, the crowd marched through the center of the WSU campus where the encampment was established beginning on May 23. The crowd chanted “Hand Off Our Students”, “Free, Free Palestine” and “45,000 dead Wayne State Your Hands Are Red.”

At the site of the now-destroyed encampment, facilities had turned on the water sprinkler as people marched around the site. This could only be construed as a hostile action to prevent the establishment of another “Popular University for Gaza.”



WSU Associate Professor of Medicine Morhaf Al-Achkar speaks out against attacks on students and faculty (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

Associate Professor Morhaf Al Achkar of the School of Medicine emphasized in his address to the crowd that:

“The university administration thought that by arresting students and harassing them, they will be intimidating them, they will be intimidating us. They didn’t know that behind those brave students, there are many that are here to say, hands off our students.”

Later at the conclusion of the march and rally, Michigan **State Representative Abaham Aiyash** spoke to the rally participants emphasizing:

“You had students and faculty that wanted to have a conversation about a genocide. But you had folks in leadership that were more outraged about students in a tent than a refugee tent being bombed by the Israelis. Rather than get frustrated that every single university in Gaza has been wiped off this planet, they decided to unleash a police force on students on their own campus.”



Michigan State Representative Abraham Aiyash speaks out against the WSU administration (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

A prepared statement from the WSU faculty union was read to the crowd rallying in defense of free speech and the right to peacefully assemble to protest genocide in Gaza:

“We are deeply troubled by the events that unfolded on May 30, 2024, when WSU police cleared out the encampment and used force to prevent our tuition-paying students from returning to campus. Police tackled demonstrators even as they were complying with police orders, and in at least one instance, forcibly removed a woman’s hijab. This is unacceptable. Twelve activists were arrested during this incident, including six current WSU students, an incoming WSU student, a family member of a student, and at least one legal observer. One student was hospitalized. We condemn these actions in the strongest possible terms. The use of force against students peacefully advocating for their beliefs is unacceptable and contrary to the values of our academic community.”

Espy and the BOG have failed to provide a rational answer to why they ordered the encampment destroyed and students arrested. There was a statement issued last week by the campus administration saying that the student protest created legal and security issues. Yet faculty, student, staff and community observers of the encampment said the demonstration was peaceful and orderly.

The president had already closed the University on May 28 mandating that all students, faculty and staff work remotely. Just two days after locking all campus buildings and deploying large numbers of WSU police and personnel from the City Shield Security Services, a private firm whose clients consist of some of the largest corporations in the Detroit area, the encampment was raided. Faculty and staff members at WSU said on June 4 that they had been asked to resign and threatened with termination for their pro-Palestinian

views.

Palestine Solidarity and Presidential Politics

In this election year, the administration of **President Joe Biden** is attempting to justify why he should be given another term. The administration has initiated and supported two wars.

The Russian Special Military operation in Ukraine has led to the spending of well over \$100 billion in taxpayer funds in a war where there is no clear path to victory for Kiev. Tens of thousands of Ukrainians have been killed since February 2024 while the U.S. government has prevented any negotiations to end the war.

After the beginning of the Al-Aqsa Storm on October 7, the Biden White House has refused to call for a permanent ceasefire and continues to provide warplanes and weapons to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Biden has ignored and ridiculed mass demonstrations and other forms of protests demanding the end of U.S. support for the Zionist state.

Biden even accused the demonstrators of being antisemitic although the war policies against the Palestinians have been categorized as genocidal by billions of people around the world. The president has said repeatedly that U.S. support for the settler-colonial regime is ironclad.

On the Republican side of the political spectrum, **former President Donald Trump** is also a staunch defender of Zionism and genocide against the Palestinians. Trump relocated the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem which is a violation of international law.

Nonetheless, Biden has not reversed this decision after more than three years in the White House. He has continued the funding and logistical support for the racist apartheid regime in Occupied Palestine.

Therefore, the students, faculty and staff members at universities around the country have no alternative than to continue their protest activity. Whether Biden or Trump is elected in November, the same foreign policy towards Palestine and West Asia will remain unchanged until there is a fundamental shift in the structure and character of the U.S. political system.

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