

On the student movement for Palestine in the US

Pungolo rosso, 5 May 2024

We publish below two articles that came out a few days ago in *Counterpunch* concerning the struggle in US universities. For the avoidance of any misunderstanding, let us immediately state that we do not share the radical democratic and pacifist ideology that inspires them; in fact, unlike *Counterpunch* publicists, we are not at all surprised that US democracy is what it is, *and that it cannot be anything other than that, since* both in Israel and throughout the world, as well as on US territory (the home front), it defends the interests of imperialist capitalism, of which it is the armed political arm. The articles we have translated are nevertheless useful as a summary of the main events and for the insights they offer.

The events are in full swing, in the US and elsewhere in the world. Even the most sympathetic and attentive commentators are lagging behind them. This is also our difficulty, so this is only an initial framing contribution. We will need to follow the further unfolding of this protest movement, and look deeper within it to grasp its articulations and contradictions.

However, its importance is clear. It flared up in the space of a couple of weeks, like a prairie fire. It will be in the tens of thousands of young people involved, judging by the 2,100 arrests so far. Demonstrating an unsurprising, but really uncovered, communion of intent, the government of 'genocidal Joe', in full agreement with Netanyahu, who rants about anti-Semitic mobs, with the managers of the dozens of universities involved, and of course with good old Trump, has opted for the hard line. The violent suppression of the protest, which emptied out liberal-democratic rhetoric and political calculations in an instant, shows that for the American *establishment*, at the moment, there is no middle ground. We speak of the United States, but the same script has been repeated in [France](#). However, the question remains whether there are even very limited fractions of the ruling class that see such a movement as useful, or usable, to their own interests.

Mazza's article questions the reasons for the repression. Let us follow this cue. It is good to first touch on the extent and rapidity of the spread of the protest with an *Aljazeera* article, [Mapping pro Palestine Campus Protests around the World](#) (3 May). This captures an aspect that is overlooked in the news: the *campus* protest is only the latest manifestation of a student agitation that dates back to the aftermath of the Israeli aggression against Palestinians after the 7 October attack. This is what emerges from an interview that gives voice to the agitation at Columbia - ['I've never seen anything like this momentum before': a Columbia student organiser on the Gaza Solidarity Encampment](#) (M. Arria, in *Mondoweiss*, 24 April): in this epicentre of the movement, the students have been the protagonists of a *radicalisation process* fuelled by the university administration's attempts to stifle their protest, which started at the beginning of October.

Moreover, the spotlight is now on universities, and even more so on *elite* universities, but apparently the ongoing wave of protests has [not spared high schools](#). In this context, it is useful to recall the labour unrest of last autumn in favour of a ceasefire, in particular that of the [teachers](#) (see also the references at the bottom of this [Labor Notes piece](#)). The current university protests are therefore not a sudden outburst. They seem to indicate a *resumption of* last autumn's mass mobilisations. Virtually, they may also have a connection to sectors of American society outside the *campuses*.

This is the gist of Baroud's article, *American Intifada* - an emblematic title, perhaps exaggerated, but this seems to be the right perspective in which to look at events in the universities; we shall recall, for instance, the ongoing electoral protest [movement of the uncommitted](#) - the potential Democratic voters who, by the hundreds of thousands, refused to vote for Biden.

These contextual facts can explain the harshness of the repression of student protest because they give, even in the eyes of the *establishment*, even greater depth to the strengths of the university movement highlighted by Mazza and Baroud.

- The determination shown by the students. Repression did not bend them, it fuelled their will to fight. While this game of action and reaction cannot apply as a general principle, it is true that, if there is fertile ground outside the *campuses*, repression may prove to be a blunt weapon;
- The generational issue. A *leak* by the director of the *Anti-Defamation League* speaks of a 'major generational problem'. The problem, for him, is the growing distance, if not resentment, of the younger US generations towards the military-industrial complex, the political system, the state;
- The strength of the watchwords, which are summed up in a true denunciation of the *genocide* perpetrated by the West against the Palestinians: put an end to university investment in companies that are profiting from the extermination; more generally, put an end to US support for Israel by denouncing US complicity in the ongoing massacre, together with the imperialistic, as well as colonial, nature of Zionism. Finally, and crucially, the spirit of the mobilisation is not only purely humanitarian. It is militant, because solidarity with the Palestinian *liberation struggle* is among the watchwords that identify the movement. This is often passed over in the background even by the information winking at the students.
- The prominence of the anti-Zionist components of the North American Jewish world (in some universities up to 15% of the young demonstrators are Jewish). It is a tangible refutation of the vulgar [identification between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism](#). It deprives the state of Israel, and its star-spangled godfather, of any remaining legitimacy. The king is naked, for he who has eyes to see. "We have chosen to be arrested in the movement for the *liberation of Palestine [italics ours]*," say young Jewish students, "because we are inspired by our Jewish ancestors who fought for freedom 4,000 years ago" - a call that, thus formulated, nevertheless contains ambivalent elements.
- The 'multi-ethnic' composition of the movement, i.e. the presence, alongside whites, of students from the black, Native American and young Arab-Muslim communities. It is a potential critique and struggle against the simultaneously classist and racist structure of US society. It is a replication, in a small way, of the mobilisations against racist police violence, whose lifeblood had been the African-American community and the younger generation.

These are things that need to be explored, particularly with regard to the political tendencies and options within the movement. For example, this [document by Palestine Action US](#), a group very active in the struggle against Israel's largest war industry, Elbit Systems, beyond the sloppy or sometimes vague way (the indication of *escalation* regardless of everything else) in which it treats the issues it indicates, names some of the essential questions that the movement will be called upon to resolve in its further course: resistance to police repression, opening the gates of the universities, building networks of organised militancy, the revolutionary and international perspective in which to place this struggle, so that it does not remain a 'theatre' of 'bureaucratic students'.

Our hypothesis is that the campus protest should be traced back to the multiple processes of social, cultural and political polarisation that are tearing US society apart. At presidential election time, it could contribute to further destabilising the already shaky political system, resulting in further radicalisation in an anti-establishment sense. A relevant factor in this process of radicalisation and the movement's exit from the universities could be a more convinced engagement of the resurgent combative trade union militancy (pivoting to the UAW) in the foreign policy terrain of US imperialism - at the recent packed, and enthusiastic, [Labor Notes conference](#) there were some signs in this direction: many speeches and a dedicated meeting emphasised 'the urgent need for the labour muscle to support the call for a ceasefire' in Gaza, but it is still too little.

[**American Intifada for Gaza: What Should We Expect?**](#), by [**Ramzy Baroud**](#) (May 2, 2024)

[**Vilification and Violence Hurlled Against Gaza Protests Shows They Hit a Nerve**](#), by [**Patrick Mazza**](#) (May 2, 2024)