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USA

Amidst Violent Attacks, Pro-Palestine Protests Go On, Disrupting Graduation Ceremonies

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At the University of Michigan graduation ceremony on May 4, a beautiful spring day, 62,000 friends and family well-wishers gathered to watch as 8,500 undergraduates, and 6,622 graduates received their degrees. As the handing out of diplomas began about fifty graduates, wearing keffiyehs and carrying Palestinian flags chanted, “Disclose, divest! We will not stop; we will not rest.”

Many graduations would not be normal this year. At the University of Indiana, some students walked out of the commencement event. The University of Southern California moved its graduation ceremony off campus to the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. Other graduate protests are expected this month.

Over the past week, the pro-Palestine student movement spread to 43 college campuses in 25 states, the largest such student movement in decades. These protests often initiated by Palestinian students, were supported by progressive Jews and many others. The students on most campuses were asking their universities to divest from Israeli companies, especially those producing military equipment, to cut ties with Israeli institutions, and support a ceasefire. They set up encampments calling for solidarity with Palestine and by and large their demonstrations were peaceful, didn't disrupt the campus routine, or threaten other students. While anti-Zionist, they were not anti-Semitic, though there was some anti-Semitic speech.

Many university administrators, under pressure from politicians and their donors, called in police, leading to some 2,300 arrests nationwide. At Columbia University where the movement began, 112 people were arrested; at the University of Texas at Austin 135; at the State University of New York at New Platz, 130; at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, 100; and at Northeastern, Boston, 98.

At the University of California at Los Angeles, where violent counter-protestors attacked the pro-Palestinian camp, some 200 were arrested. The mother of one student, who had gone to UCLA to be with her son, described the scene in an email we received.

“The ‘counter protest’ was actually a joint rally of raging Zionists and white supremacists, a couple of thousand of them. Following that, for three nights, gangs of Zionist men and their Proud Boy allies attacked the protesters all night long, blasting loud music, shining bright lights, spitting, screaming racist and homophobic epithets, throwing wood and iron pipes, spraying mace and bear spray. The cops were there. Right there. But they did nothing. A couple of dozen kids hospitalized. The administration used the attacks as an excuse to clear the encampment,” wrote the mother. “I am very proud of my kids and all the tens of thousands who have protested and the 200 who have been arrested. This is not over. Free, free Palestine!”

Not all college administrators called in the police. Several administrators said that their job was to protect free speech and maintain a campus where it could take place. They negotiated with students, generally agreeing that the students' demands would be presented to the college board of directors, including at Vassar, in New York, at Brown University in Rhode Island, at Northwestern University in Illinois, at the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, at Rutgers University at New Brunswick in New Jersey and at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

President Biden spoke about protests. “First is the right to free speech and for people to peacefully assemble and make their voices heard. The second is the rule of law. Both must be upheld.” But, said Biden, the protests would not change his position.

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Students say they will go on with their protests. But after graduation, the campuses will empty. If the movement is to go on, students, now back at home, will need new strategies.

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