

Amid protests against right-wing figures on US campuses

Wisconsin legislators seek to punish student protesters at public universities

By Nick Barrickman
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On Tuesday, the Wisconsin State Assembly Committee on Colleges and Universities approved a bill making it possible for administrators at the University of Wisconsin to suspend and expel students engaged in protests that result in the disruption of speaking events and lectures at any of the state's UW campuses.

The bill, which is now set to move to the state Senate, represents a draconian assault on the constitutionally protected right of free speech and the freedom to assemble and is aimed at shutting down popular opposition to the right-wing policies being pursued by the Trump administration.

The "Campus Free Speech Act" dictates that a student "who engages in violent, abusive, indecent, profane, boisterous, obscene, unreasonably loud, or other disorderly conduct that interferes with the free expression of others" will be punished, first through a "disciplinary hearing," then through suspension for an entire semester and, finally, expulsion. To trigger such proceedings, the university merely needs to receive complaints about an individual from at least two sources.

The bill is part of a law-and-order response by public officials to a series of developments in which students have booed, protested or shouted down right-wing speakers scheduled to speak at officially sanctioned college events across the US.

Alarmed by surging popular revulsion to the far-right-wing Trump administration, lawmakers in Wisconsin and in other states have seized on hostility to antidemocratic policies and tactics associated with identity politics in order to launch a right-wing attack on freedom of speech.

In a statement released along with the bill, Republican state representative Jesse Kremer, one of the sponsors of the Wisconsin bill, demanded that "American universities maintain neutrality on the public policy controversies of the day. *Invited speakers shall be allowed to speak freely and without interference, regardless of ideology*, and Wisconsin's institutions must have rules in place to ensure that faculty and students are not mandated to publicly express a given views [sic] on social policy, but rather, *to openly challenge popular, politically-correct opinions and Truths*" (emphasis added).

In other words, right-wing figures with unpopular and discredited views are to be invited into the public discourse while protests against such speakers are to be outlawed.

The bill is based on a template proposal produced by the right-wing Goldwater Institute, an organization which bills itself as "a national leader for constitutionally limited government." The Goldwater Institute's bill has spawned similar legislation in Colorado, while other versions are being considered in North Carolina, Michigan and Virginia. Republican legislators have sought to pass bills criminalizing other forms of public protests in a number of states.

Last month, students at Bethune-Cookman University turned their backs on Education Secretary Betsy DeVos as she attempted to give a college commencement speech, while students at the University of Notre Dame staged a walkout during an address by US Vice President Mike Pence. In both cases, students were opposing the virulently antidemocratic and right-wing policies of the Trump administration, particularly those centering on budget cuts and anti-immigrant measures.

Planned speeches by far-right provocateurs Ann Coulter and Milo Yiannopoulos, among others, have been similarly protested and disrupted in recent months.

In each instance, public officials have sought to present the outpouring of popular opposition as “undemocratic,” “intolerant” and even violent. In March, Middlebury College officials seized upon the aggressive actions of a few masked individuals at an address by right-wing political scientist Charles Murray, author of *The Bell Curve*, a racist tract that claims to prove the racial inferiority of African Americans and other non-whites, in order to impose blanket disciplinary sanctions on 67 students who had turned their backs on the speaker and chanted.

The college proceeded with the sanctions, which remain permanent on students’ academic records, despite campus police being unable to identify any of the masked perpetrators involved.

Far from opposing the antidemocratic policies represented by the Trump administration, Democratic Party officials and liberal publications such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have similarly adopted the mantra of “student intolerance” as a problem on college campuses.

Some in the political establishment have alluded to the fears of the ruling class over the outpouring of popular anger against right-wing figures and officials.

The *Washington Post*’s Richard Cohen, writing in an opinion piece titled “Protesters at Middlebury College demonstrate ‘cultural appropriation’—of fascism,” likens anti-racist protesters to Nazis and terrorists in the space of a few sentences: “Campus intolerance is escalating in reaction to President Trump,” Cohen says, “[b]ut Trump’s simian behavior is no excuse for violence. The Vietnam War engendered the same sort of fascistic response. In the name of a good cause—ending the war—the occasional protester set off the occasional bomb.”

“The mad, arrogant virtue that animated the bombers is little different than what drove Manchester’s suicide bomber to wantonly kill kids at the Ariana Grande concert in England. Spare us the true believers,” Cohen, the liberal backer of the criminal 2003 invasion of Iraq, seethed.

Rather than bombs, the Democratic and Republican Party establishment is afraid of the development of a

mass movement of the population opposed to the antidemocratic and warmongering policies of both parties, completely independent of the officially sanctioned channels of the two-party capitalist system. The popular outcry at campus speaking events portends just such a development.

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