

Democratic Party-aligned groups organize protests at University of Michigan against fascist Richard Spencer

By Genevieve Leigh
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This week, Democratic Party-aligned groups are organizing a series of protests at the University of Michigan campus in Ann Arbor over the possibility that the university administration will permit fascist Richard Spencer to speak on campus.

Spencer, who is the head of the National Policy Institute, requested to rent a space on the campus earlier this semester. The university stalled for weeks on its decision to grant the request before announcing that it would “enter into negotiations” with his organization the day before Thanksgiving break. While the announcement does not indicate definitively that Spencer will be permitted to speak, the process of negotiations suggests that the request will eventually be granted.

Spencer has made the same request at universities across the country, including Michigan State University, Ohio State, University of Cincinnati, Auburn University and Penn State, among others. Michigan State is currently facing a lawsuit from Spencer’s organization after denying his request to speak.

In the past, Spencer’s events have drawn very limited support. Counter-protests have been large, with hundreds of youth, students and workers protesting Spencer’s speech at the University of Florida in Gainesville in October. This was the first held by Spencer since the “unite the right” rally at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, which culminated in the death of one protester, Heather Heyer, who was run down by a car driven by a neo-fascist.

The protests at the University of Michigan are being organized by Stop Spencer at the University of

Michigan. Among the groups participating in planning sessions are several that operate in the orbit of the Democratic Party, including Students4Justice, the Campus Antifascist Network, College Democrats, and the Young Democratic Socialists of America.

The week-long campaign includes a student “speak out” Tuesday; a student walk-out and rally Wednesday; an all-day student-faculty-employee strike Thursday; and a “conversation with elected officials.”

The broad hostility among youth, students, and workers to Spencer and his racist, xenophobic politics is certainly welcome. However, those involved in organizing these protests are doing so to obscure the fundamental political issues at stake.

The two most revealing aspects of the campaign have been the domination of racialist politics and the absence of any evaluation or criticism of the role of the Democratic Party.

At the student rally held after the walk-out on Wednesday afternoon, organizers repeatedly reminded the crowd of about 300 students that, above all, this is a fight against the “white supremacist University administration.”

One speaker started out by telling the students to segregate. White students were asked to go to the back of the crowd and the black students to come forward. “White folks” who were “willing and able to use their bodies to protect black people” were directed to a designated area to await further instruction. Other white people were asked to volunteer to perform activities such as opening doors for black students later in the day.

In a vicious diatribe against her white classmates, one of the later student activists began by saying, “I am not

going to applaud any of the white people. You don't get a cookie for coming out here today to do what you should already be doing—defending black and brown people.” She later demanded that the white students must, “handle your people, and we will handle ours.”

In addition to the overtly racist undertones of the ostensibly “anti-racist” campaign, there was also a palpable hostility to any political discussion that challenged the politics of the Democratic Party. The first teach-in held on Tuesday night on “Free Speech not hate speech” was opened by alerting those present that, “we will not allow for a debate to take place here tonight.”

The various panelists mostly discussed the legal issues involved, arguing that the First Amendment does not apply to Spencer. The “positive atmosphere” created by the Obama administration was recalled, and the need to rebuild the unions was put forward. At the end, the organizers opened the floor to questions but remarkably stated that the questions, “would most likely not be answered,” explaining that the event was just meant to start a discussion.

The goal of the campaign has been limited to preventing Spencer from coming to campus—stifling any discussion of the origins or threat posed by the far-right. Those involved in both the rally and teach-ins did not openly state their affiliations. The attempt to keep the discussion “apolitical” was used as a cover to exclude any politics that did not fit in with the Democratic Party.

Absent from the week's Stop Spencer events was any evaluation of the broader framework of which Spencer is only a small part. The global tendencies out of which Spencer has emerged are much more significant than the individual himself, who in fact commands the support of a tiny minority.

Countries throughout Europe and the world have seen significant growth in far-right parties over the past decade. The fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party gained substantially in the recent elections marking the first time since the end of the Third Reich that outright fascists and racists will participate in the national legislature. The far-right, anti-immigrant UK Independence Party (UKIP) in Britain, the neo-fascist Freedom Party in Austria, and the National Front in France, have made similar advances.

This phenomenon has taken the most grotesque form

in the Donald Trump administration in the US, who just yesterday retweeted racist posts from a leader of the fascist Britain First organization.

These tendencies arise out of the crisis of the global capitalist system: the colossal growth of social and economic inequality, 25 years of virtually uninterrupted war, and above all the enormous vacuum created by the absence of any challenge to the capitalist system. Labor and Social Democratic parties in Europe and the Democratic Party in the United States have abandoned even the pretense of fighting for social programs and the rights of the working class, allowing for right-wing demagogues to fill the void.

This was expressed most openly in the 2016 election, which saw the defeat of Hillary Clinton, who ran as the candidate of the status quo, campaigning wholly on issues of identity politics directed at privileged layers of the upper-middle class.

Moreover, as has been proven in previous incidents, any appeal to the university administration to combat the right wing will be seized upon to restrict the democratic rights of all students. The template for these measures has been set at the University of California, Berkeley, which used a similar event surrounding right-wing figure Milo Yiannopoulos to institute a policy that authorizes the UC Berkeley Police Department to review all student events, determine whether or not they deem that these events require a police presence, and compel student organizations to pay the cost of the police presence that the police mandate.

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