

New Jersey teen billed \$2,500 for organizing a protest

By Shuvu Batta and Daniel de Vries
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On July 29, Emily Gil, an 18-year-old recent high school graduate, received a letter in the mail from her town's mayor. "Please promptly forward your payment to the borough in the amount of \$2,499.26 for the police overtime caused by your protest," wrote Mario Kranjac, the chief executive of Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.

Four days earlier, Gil, propelled into action by the murder of George Floyd and outrage over the lack of affordable housing, led a small rally in front of her home. Approximately 30–40 people attended.

Press reports of the fine imposed on Gil sparked public outrage, prompting Mayor Kranjac to inform the 18-year-old last week that he had decided to rescind the bill. Gil told local media that she was relieved by the email from Kranjac, but noted that it did not include an apology. "He didn't apologize," she said, "he also tried to excuse what he did by saying it was the advice of the borough administrator that led him to give me a fee."

In initially attempting to justify penalizing constitutionally protected activity, Kranjac accused Gil of refusing to meet with borough officials before the protest. Gil disputed that claim, saying she offered to meet via Zoom due to COVID-19 concerns, but town officials did not accept.

The mayor's July 29 letter did not attempt to explain why freedom of assembly should be contingent on meeting with local officials beforehand. Nor did it try to explain why \$2,500 worth of police overtime was needed for peaceful protest.

The New Jersey mayor is far from the exception in viewing organized opposition as a threat. It is a near-universal practice of officials in communities throughout the country to dispatch a substantial police presence as a show of force at all demonstrations.

Under conditions of the eruption of mass social anger following the murder of George Floyd, the militarized response to protest has only accelerated.

The mayor initially defended the attempt to fine Gil for organizing a legal and peaceful protest. "We made sure that we fulfilled and satisfied our obligation to make sure that they can exercise their freedom of speech and to peaceably assemble," he told a local CBS affiliate.

The attempt to suppress protest in Englewood Cliffs, an upper-middle class enclave of 5,000 residents across the Hudson River from New York City, reflects processes underway across the country, led by President Trump, who has consistently sought to criminalize opposition to police violence by branding demonstrators as looters, anarchists and terrorists. He has dispatched federal paramilitary forces to kidnap protesters and threatened to mobilize the military to quell unrest.

Kranjac also followed Trump's lead in denouncing affordable housing as an "anti-American socialistic land and vote grab." Housing has become a major political issue in Englewood Cliffs. The mayor has led the opposition to state rules requiring a token number of residences for workers with lower incomes.

Above all, Kranjac expresses the fear of a movement of the working class against social inequality, exemplified by Englewood Cliffs' "billion dollar mile" of corporate headquarters and luxury properties alongside the aging housing of workers in surrounding areas.

Across the Hudson River, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, a "progressive" Democrat, has proven no less hostile to democratic and social rights. The New York City Police Department responded to protests following the murder of George Floyd with nightly

rampages. De Blasio even defended the police after they drove through a crowd of protesters and permitted police to snatch and grab demonstrators accused of vandalism.

The erosion of basic democratic rights has been a protracted process overseen by the entirety of the capitalist class, including both its Democratic and Republican wings.

The *World Socialist Web Site* pointed out in a 2013 article, titled “The Criminalization of Political Dissent in America,” that the Obama administration branded leaders of Occupy Wall Street and anti-NATO protesters as “terrorists.”

The article stated: “As with freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, also guaranteed under the First Amendment, has not been officially repealed. The reality, however, is that political assembly is already a semi-criminal activity in America. Political protests are routinely met with vastly disproportionate police mobilizations, confinement to oxymoronic ‘free speech zones,’ ‘kettling’ (in which protesters are surrounded and forcibly moved in one direction or prevented from leaving an area), beatings, tear gas, pepper spray, stun grenades or rubber bullets. The standard government response to a political protest is a massive show of force, complete with police snipers on rooftops.”

The conditions existing today are far more explosive than they were even during the Obama administration. The new decade has brought with it mass death from the pandemic, an economic and social crisis unequalled at least since the Great Depression and a president openly attempting to construct a fascist movement.

The crisis has also brought with it renewed struggle by the working class, the only social force capable of defending democratic rights in a struggle against the capitalist system.

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