

UNITED STATES

New York State's Report on Antisemitism at CUNY Is an Attack on the Palestine Movement

New York Governor Kathy Hochul's long-anticipated investigation into antisemitism at CUNY is finally out, and it's a 146-page attack on academic freedom and the Palestine movement.

Tatiana Cozzarelli and James Dennis Hoff | October 12, 2024



Photo: Luigi Morris

The Fall 2024 semester has been marked by an onslaught of repressive measures against the Palestine movement and free speech on campuses. **Professors have been fired, students have**

been suspended, and universities have banned pro-Palestinian groups, including **Students for Justice in Palestine** (SJP) and Jewish Voices for Peace (JVP).

At the City University of New York (CUNY), **some community members are still facing felony charges** after 28 people were initially charged with felonies for their participation in the City College encampment for Palestine last semester.

Nearly 11 months ago, in the wake of October 7, and in the middle of a national attempt to equate the movement for Palestine with antisemitism, New York governor Kathy Hochul commissioned an investigation on antisemitism at CUNY. The results of this report, put together *pro bono* by Judge Jonathan Lippman, have just come out, and have been greeted with strong support from CUNY administrators. The leadership of the PSC-CUNY union also **offers support** for the report, failing to even indicate that this is an attack on the academic freedoms of our faculty and students.

Despite Lippman's measured language, the spirit of the findings are accurately summed up by the right-wing *New York Post*, which has unsurprisingly already started to use it as a club to attack faculty and students, arguing that "CUNY needs a top-to-bottom overhaul to combat 'alarming' antisemitism fanned by its own faculty and do-nothing higher-ups."

In other words, the Lippman report is a serious attack on the movement for Palestine and labor protections for professors and staff, one that is already causing changes in CUNY and being picked up and used by right-wing forces. Throughout this year, Jewish people, including organizations like JVP, have **played a central role** in pointing out that anti-Zionism is not antisemitism and speaking out against the genocide. Yet, this report repeats this false equivalence, as well as the false idea that the movement for Palestine is an attack on Jewish people. The students and workers at CUNY, including PSC-CUNY, should absolutely reject the proposals in the Lippman report, and instead continue to fight to build a mass movement at the institution and on campuses and workplaces everywhere that can finally put an end to the United States' bloody, imperialist military and economic support of Israel.

What's in the Lippman Report?

The Lippman report begins from the political framework that CUNY has an antisemitism problem that is the result of a small but vocal sector of students and faculty, and calls for "solutions" that mostly involve more repression and more policing.

We read the report, so you don't have to. Here are some of the main resolutions, which CUNY has promised to implement. Some of the 13 main proposals are highlighted below:

- "Increase Centralization of Resources for Dealing With Antisemitism and Discrimination by Establishing a University Wide Center, Including an Internal Monitor," where Lippman says, "While I am not averse to CUNY forming a center that deals with issues, beyond antisemitism and discrimination, I do believe it is important for the major focus of the center to be, at least in the

near term, dealing with issues of antisemitism and hate.”

- “Provide Additional Resources to Victims of Antisemitism and Discrimination Through Establishment of a Victims Advocate Program,” which involves hiring a “victims advocate” who can help victims of antisemitism navigate the system of lodging complaints.
- “Coordinate at All Times with Law Enforcement to Protect Everyone at CUNY,” which calls on CUNY administration to feel comfortable calling the police on students, faculty, and staff.
- “Increase Consideration of the Relationship Between Israel and the Jewish People When Adjudicating Whether Conduct Constitutes Antisemitism,” saying that CUNY should “put significant focus on IHRA [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance] definition” that equates anti-Zionism with antisemitism.
- “Overhaul CUNY’s Current System for Lodging Complaints Regarding Discrimination and Harassment.” The report calls for a “best in class” portal to be built by an outside consultant. It says, “The questions within the Portal must be revised so that complainants are not limited in the types of incidents that they feel they can report.” In addition to encouraging Big-Brother-like reporting of faculty by students, it’s clear that CUNY has endless money for initiatives like this, while the PSC is a year and a half without a contract and CUNY administration refuses to give us raises that keep up with inflation.
- “Hold Faculty and Others Accountable for Violative Conduct,” including the threat that “when students or faculty, including tenured faculty, violate CUNY’s policies and procedures, or otherwise engage in antisemitic conduct or conduct that creates an unsafe environment at CUNY, they must be held accountable.” What constitutes “violations” remains unclear given that the IHRA definition is given “significant focus” and that a new portal is being created to gather complaints — and that students reporting antisemitism will be provided with a “victim advocate.”
- “Recruit and Hire to Foster Inclusiveness,” which, in the context of this report, means to hire more Zionist professors. It says, “The CUNY Law School, widely regarded as one of the most ethnically diverse law schools in the country, is a prime example. But when it comes to openness to differing views and tolerance, campus environments do not appear to always foster inclusive dialogue. If CUNY is going to create an environment of tolerance and respect, it must examine its faculty recruitment and hiring processes and ensure that it recruits and hires those who will encourage and promote inclusivity, constructive dialogue and tolerance.” CUNY Law has graduated important leaders of the movement for Palestine who were voted by their peers to speak at graduation, resulting in massive attacks by the New York Post, doxxing by Zionists, and harassment. It is no wonder that the report singles out this school.

Equating anti-Zionism and antisemitism, as this report does, conflates clear instances of antisemitism, which we all would rebuke — like the drawing of swastikas on public walls — with the movement for Palestine, which has actually stood clearly and strongly against this prejudice. It claims that “faculty must do more,” and says there are “too many incidents in which faculty fell short,” citing an incident in 2021 when faculty members at Hunter College allegedly participated “in incidents that involved disrupting sessions of a required college course by commandeering the scheduled course discussion, which was occurring over Zoom, to call for the decolonization of Palestine.” This is obviously not an example of antisemitism in any way, so why is it coming up in a report about antisemitism?

Lippman, like other apologists for Israel, is using the IHRA definition of antisemitism as a guide, which explicitly conflates anti-Zionism and antisemitism.

The report also claims that students at CUNY have been made to feel unsafe as a consequence of Pro-Palestinian protests, claiming that students not only have the right to be safe, but to “feel safe.”

“During the course of my review,” Lippman writes:

I heard some advocate that while it is critical that students, faculty and others in the CUNY community be safe on campus, it is less important that everyone feel safe on campus. The argument, as it was presented to me, is that whether an individual feels safe on campus is subjective, and can lead either innocently or intentionally to the blocking of permissible speech and conduct. While I certainly recognize the possibility that an individual might choose to express that they feel unsafe in an effort to censor speech or conduct that individual disapproves of, I nonetheless believe it is critical that all students and others feel safe on campus. While visiting various campuses, my team heard from students that they felt unsafe because they were forced to walk through active protests in order to attend classes or enter campus buildings. We also heard from others that they felt unsafe when local law enforcement came on campus in response to their attempts to protest peacefully. Issues like doxxing, which unfortunately has become prevalent in recent months, only add to feelings of a lack of safety.

The idea that students have the right not only to be safe but to feel safe is a dangerous proposal that can justify curtailing protests and discussion in the classroom. He specifically cites that students feel unsafe walking through peaceful protests for Palestine that do not threaten students at all, implying that this is a problem.

It also ignores that it is the protesters themselves, students and faculty, that have the most reason to feel unsafe when the university calls the police on them, or when it threatens to expel or fire them for their constitutionally protected right to protest and their academic right to discuss such issues as the genocide in Gaza in their classes. In fact, pro-Palestine protesters

are overwhelmingly on the receiving end of **doxxing attempts**. While Lippman does acknowledge here that students should feel safe protesting on campus, this is not at all what the report is about, and if the university were to implement Lippman's suggestions, they would have a considerably chilling effect on student and faculty speech and protest and lead to more police repression and administrative punishment of those who hold pro-Palestinian views.

One of the most outrageous recommendations that Lippman makes is a call for increased policing of students and faculty. "During my review, I learned that certain presidents were hesitant to employ uniformed officers to protests where there were fears of potential safety incidents because they believed doing so would likely result in bad publicity." Lippman goes on to say "that is unacceptable," but what's really unacceptable is calling violent cops in riot gear to **assault and arrest your own students and faculty**, as City College President Vincent Boudreau did on May Day, just shortly after the Columbia University encampment was violently raided by the tactical unit of the New York Police Department in full riot gear.

CUNY has already enthusiastically responded to the report, **promising to institute these changes**. As the Chancellor's response to the report touts, CUNY has already resulted in hiring more public safety officers to repress students on campus. Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez said, "Amid a rising tide of antisemitism nationwide, CUNY has already taken critical steps to combat hate and discrimination. Recognizing there is always more to do, we look forward to working on implementing Judge Lippman's recommendations..."

Erasure of Palestinian Genocide and Islamophobia

Among the most jarring aspects of this report is the near complete erasure of Palestinian students and the genocide in Palestine. Over the past year, many CUNY students have lost dozens of family members in Gaza. As Israel **escalates** towards a regional war, Lebanese students are experiencing similar terror at the loss of family members and bombing of their family's homes.

The report hardly acknowledges, nor do CUNY officials mention in their regular missives about antisemitism, the terror of being Palestinian right now — maligned as a terrorist even while bombs rain down on your home and family. It also shamefully ignores the fact that there has been a massive increase in violence against Palestinians and Arab-Americans in the United States since October 7, including the murder of a 6-year old Palestinian American boy, **who was stabbed 26 times** by his landlord just ten days after Israel started its assault on Gaza. It ignores the fact that **three Palestinian-American college students** were shot near their college campus in Burlington, Vermont in November for wearing keffiyehs and speaking Arabic. It says nothing about the CUNY administration's silence as its students and faculty have been doxxed, including having their faces put on trucks in front of and around CUNY campuses. And it blatantly ignores the fact that last year, on a CUNY campus no less, right-wing city council woman and genocide-denier Inna Vernikov, came to a Brooklyn College campus pro-Palestine

protest with a gun on her hip to stand against the Palestine movement. Vernikov has since helped pen a statement from the [City Council Jewish Caucus](#) in support of Lippman's report.

Lastly, the report fails to acknowledge CUNY's long history of repression of Muslim students, as well as the broader context of Islamophobia on its campuses. It ignores the fact that the NYPD has an extensive history of surveillance at the institution, including being profiled by the NYPD intelligence division. Undercover police officers were hired to spy on Muslim student associations on several campuses, including Brooklyn College, where in the course of four years an undercover police officer went to Islamic education classes, social gatherings, museums, aquarium trips, and bridal showers with students, [reported Gothamist](#).

Instead of giving Islamophobia and the genocide in Palestine its due weight, the report is concerned that some students may "feel unsafe" while walking near students speaking out against the genocide.

And of course, the report does not even acknowledge the fact that Israel has murdered tens of thousands of Palestinians, [likely over 100,000](#), in its ongoing genocide in Gaza, or that such attacks are being carried out with the material and political support of the entire U.S. regime, from Biden, Harris, and Trump, to Hochul and the leaders of our universities, many of which have massive investments in Israeli bonds. It does not acknowledge that it is not only our right, but our duty to stand up against this brutality – or the fact that the movement to end the genocide includes a significant sector of anti-zionist Jewish people.

Anti-Zionism Is Not Antisemitism

Antisemitism is real and there is indeed an alarming rise of Holocaust deniers and antisemitism across the world. However, understanding, organizing, and speaking out against antisemitism does not mean supporting Zionism. In fact, forces linked to Israel have organized a large march in Washington, D.C. with far right antisemitic figures like the [U.S. pastor John Hagee](#), who spoke at the March for Israel in Washington last November. And we have not forgotten the antisemitic Charlottesville right-wing mobilization, and Trump's support of those "very fine people on both sides." Antisemitism is real, but it's not coming from the Palestine movement; [it's coming from the Far Right](#).

As over 100 Palestinian and Arab academics, journalists and intellectuals wrote in [The Guardian](#),

Through examples that it provides, the IHRA definition conflates Judaism with Zionism in assuming that all Jews are Zionists, and that the state of Israel in its current reality embodies the self-determination of all Jews. We profoundly disagree with this. The fight against antisemitism should not be turned into a stratagem to delegitimize the fight against the oppression of the Palestinians, the denial of their rights and the continued occupation of their land.

This definition is employed to repress and suppress Palestine speech across the U.S. and across the world. And now it is being employed at CUNY.

An Attack on Labor and the Palestine Movement

The Lippman report is an attack on the Palestine movement and will only embolden the CUNY administration to increase policing and repression of the movement and all struggles against oppression and exploitation on our campuses. It is an attack on our labor rights by limiting our ability to speak about Palestine in class, equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism, and creating an online system for Zionists to attack professors.

Already, the repression of pro-Palestine speech has had a chilling effect across CUNY and across the country, with a clear waning of the movement on university campuses. This report and CUNY's embrace of it is meant to continue to silence professors, students, and staff, and us by stopping faculty from speaking and acting for Palestine.

The faculty, staff, and graduate worker union has had a shameful response to the Lippman report. In a statement issued just shortly after the report was made public, our union leaders said that they “welcome those recommendations from Judge Lippman that promote sincere dialogue across political differences and education about the history of antisemitism and other forms of discrimination/bias.” They say that CUNY should not adopt a formal definition of antisemitism, but ignore the fact that the report says there should be a “significant focus” on the IHRA definition. They say that, “Protocols to discipline university employees are a mandatory subject of collective bargaining and must uphold their academic freedom and rights to protected speech under the First Amendment” — but this is a passive approach that seeks to merely put limits on the Lippman report rather than directly confronting it.

This is unacceptable from our union. The PSC-CUNY needs to name the Lippman report and its implementation for what it is: an attack on the movement for Palestine and on faculty's right to academic freedom inside and outside the classroom. As long as the union does not call for assemblies so that all workers can decide how to confront this report and the CUNY administration, it is only facilitating future attacks. Already, CUNY on Strike has held an assembly that voted to **repudiate the report**. But we need our union to take a stand, organized in campus-based assemblies to discuss and reject any persecution of those of us who fight against the genocidal state of Israel, and strengthen the unity between teachers and students.

 **CUNY** | **Higher Education** | **Repression of the Palestine Movement** |





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