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Universities are continuing to retaliate against staff for participating in Gaza campus protests

Columbia University staff are being suspended and terminated for participating in last Spring's Gaza Solidarity Encampment, even if they were off the clock at the time. Similar cases are being seen across the country.

BY [CLAUDIA GOHN](#) AND [ANNA OAKES](#) - DECEMBER 10, 2024 -  13



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY STUDENT ORGANIZERS SET UP THE GAZA SOLIDARITY ENCAMPMENT ON APRIL 17, 2024.
(PHOTO: SOCIAL MEDIA)

Clara C. began working at Columbia University one month after the start of the genocide in Gaza in October 2023. She was hired in the Germanic Languages Department as a Department Assistant. Like many incoming members of the Columbia community, she had high hopes for her time at the university. Seven months later, the illusion of Ivy League ambition and a rich intellectual environment vanished when she was suspended from her post, ostensibly because of her involvement in the Gaza Solidarity Encampment. By early summer, she was terminated.

Clara pushed back. No evidence had been presented in her dismissal, and – against university protocol – there was no union representative present when she was fired on May 10, less than a month after her participation in the encampment. Together with her union, Clara filed a case arguing that she was wrongfully terminated and demanding reinstatement and back pay.

“I wanted them to know that this was bogus and that we understood it to be a part of a targeted campaign that was, of course, already going on against students,” Clara told *Mondoweiss*.

Employees often face certain restrictions on their freedom of speech. In the past year, retaliation against employees or future employees for expressions of solidarity with Palestine has repeatedly made headlines. Law firms have [rescinded](#) their offers to graduating students. Tech companies, including [Google](#), have fired employees for organizing. Last year, Starbucks and its union [sued each other](#) over a disputed social media post by the union.

But the response of universities, with their long standing reputations of creating space for intellectual engagement and dissent, stands out. Faculty at Columbia and other universities have described a [growing climate of academic suppression](#). And staff, like Clara, have fewer protections.

Clara is one of many students and staff at universities across the United States who have been disciplined for participating in pro-Palestinian protests. Her story shows that the crackdown on staff members extends to when staff is off the clock and reflects the uneven enforcement of murky speech policies by universities.

In April, Clara joined the Gaza Solidarity Encampment when it sprung up on the southeast lawn of Columbia’s campus. Clara had participated in pro-Palestinian activism since her undergraduate college years and continued after joining Columbia. “I felt like I had a little more experience under my belt and really wanted to stand with these undergrads,” she said.

Zachary Valdez, shop steward at Columbia’s UAW 2110, speaks to the importance of staff—not just students—being involved in these protests.

“It’s important for those people to speak out and speak up and make themselves seen and known and heard,” Valdez said.

In the middle of the afternoon on April 18, then-university president Minouche Shafik ordered the New York Police Department to enter campus and arrest the protesters in the encampment—just hours after Shafik gave congressional testimony about the university’s response to antisemitism. Clara was one of more than 100 activists who were dragged off the campus in handcuffs.

Up to this point, Clara said her supervisors had been supportive and understanding of her activism. On the day of the raid, she had been in the encampment on her lunch break. When Clara realized she would likely be arrested, she messaged her superiors telling them she would take the rest of the day off and logged her paid time off. When she was released later that night, she texted her boss again letting her know that she would be back in the office the next morning.

But even though Clara’s participation in the encampment and subsequent arrest all happened during her time off, this did not stop her from being disciplined by the university. The day after the raid, on April 19, Clara was called into a meeting with her direct supervisor and the chair of her department. “And [I] was told essentially ‘We’re not trying to fire you, we just wish that this hadn’t taken place, and to please try not to get arrested again.’ But [said] that they were not going to go to HR to complain about me,” Clara recalled.

On May 1, Clara said she was called into a surprise meeting with Human Resources. She immediately requested to invoke her legal right, as a union employee, to have a union representative at any interrogation, investigatory, or disciplinary meetings. “They [HR representative and supervisor] said that would not be necessary,” Clara said.

The meeting was over quickly. She was suspended. “I was never given the opportunity to hear the evidence presented against me,” Clara said.

Later, Clara’s union filed a formal complaint about their exclusion from the proceedings. The university never responded to this grievance.

By May 10, Clara was terminated. She wasn't given a detailed reason for this until after she filed a third grievance. "Columbia claimed that I was fired not for being arrested, but for entering and remaining in the encampment on April 18th," she said. But no rules at her job had made it clear whether she would get in trouble for protesting.

Clara is not the only union employee at Columbia who has faced consequences for engaging in pro-Palestinian activism. Linnea Norton, a graduate student worker at Columbia in the Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, was, like Clara, arrested on April 18 in the encampment protest police raid. Norton is part of the Student Workers of Columbia 2710 union and was asked to sign a resolution with the university, "admitting to all of the alleged violations that they charge you with in your interim suspension, which were mostly, again, all bogus charges. And then it would put us on disciplinary probation until June 30th, 2025," she described.

"I felt that having to sign this sort of plea deal situation that would restrict my ability to be a part of activism that I care about," Norton said.

The cases against Norton and the others arrested during the raid were dropped—but those who didn't sign the agreement were asked over and over to sign a resolution. "It made me think, like, 'oh, well, maybe internally there's something going on where they realize that we have some sort of agency or power in this situation, and if we just sign it, we're just giving all that up,'" she told *Mondoweiss*.

Norton, along with many of her colleagues, had her interim suspension lifted, and she went back to work. But the disciplinary charges had not been dropped. Norton said that she is working with her colleagues to fight back. "We're getting a lawyer team who are pro bono lawyers who will collectively represent us and hopefully we can get our charges dismissed because our criminal charges were all overturned anyway," she said.

In an interview with *Mondoweiss*, Dylan Kupsh, a PhD student at UCLA, member of UAW 4811, and organizer with [Labor for Palestine](#), spoke of differing levels of protection by different unions. More academically oriented unions like UAW, he said, tend to be more

protective of their members. The unions representing facilities and service workers like AFSCME-3299, he said, are less focused on their members' ability to engage in political speech. These differing levels of protection, he said, have led to a class divide; some university employees feel more at liberty to join the protests than others.

Columbia is not the only university where employees have faced retaliation for engaging in protest. According to Kupsh, employees have faced consequences on the West Coast, as well.

Kupsh cited the example of Denise Caramagno, former director of the UCSF Campus Advocacy Resources and Education program, who was [given an "intent to dismiss" notice](#) connected to her support for a colleague who had criticized Israel.

At UCLA, Kupsh described a sense of surveillance by security staff. "If you wear a keffiyeh on campus, you're constantly photographed by private security," he said. "It feels like you're constantly being watched."

This feeling of surveillance and suppression has been observed across the country. An October [lawsuit](#) filed by students and faculty claims that the University of California restricted their ability to freely express themselves. "By shutting down the encampment because of its speech content, UCLA and University of California (UC) administrators undermined the role of universities to foster critical thought and expression," the American Civil Liberties Union stated in an October [press release](#).

On October 1, Clara was offered a settlement of \$10,000 if she dropped her grievance. Her arbitration was set to begin the next day. She spoke with family and friends and carefully weighed the decision. \$10,000 is a lot of money, especially since Clara had been unemployed all summer. But, despite the price tag, she turned down the settlement.

The next day, when Clara sat down in the conference room, she was joined by the union's lawyer, the local union president and vice-president, the unit chair and two shop stewards, including Valdez, and the arbitrator. No Columbia counsel was present in the room.

After several hours of negotiation, Clara was finally offered a \$50,000 settlement. She was not reinstated. However, she was also not required to sign a non-disclosure agreement, which had been non-negotiable for her.

Columbia University declined to comment in response to questions from *Mondoweiss* about its policies regarding staff political expression, disciplinary cases stemming from last year's protests, or labor-related grievances filed against the university.

“When I realized that it was pretty obvious Columbia felt I had a very good case and a strong possibility of winning reinstatement, I felt terrified at the idea of actually having to return,” Clara said. “The colleagues I wish had stood up for me, did not. And the idea of putting eight hours a day into an institution that I feel so cynical about felt really scary.”

That cynicism had once been excitement for working and learning at the university. But after a year of seeing how the university administration has talked about and treated pro-Palestinian protesters, and then months of tension and arbitration, Clara has become disenchanted with the Ivy League institution.

“What is the point of studying genocides and making a career of understanding the long-lasting effects on the German society who partook in genocide and enacted one? What's the point of studying and writing about this if we cannot put into practice this knowledge?” she said.

“I see the real risks that students have taken, the things they have put on the line, the risks that workers have taken. And it makes me feel very cynical about what an Ivy League institution really means.”

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