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# Activist Groups Trained Students for Months Before Campus Protests

Left-wing groups and veteran demonstrators provided guidance and support before rise of pro-Palestinian encampments

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The recent wave of pro-Palestinian protests on college campuses came on suddenly and shocked people across the nation. But the political tactics underlying some of the demonstrations were the result of months of training, planning and encouragement by longtime activists and left-wing groups.

At Columbia University, in the weeks and months before police took down encampments at the New York City campus and removed demonstrators occupying an academic building, student organizers began consulting with groups such as the National Students for Justice in Palestine, veterans of campus protests and former Black Panthers.

They researched past protests over Columbia's expansion into Harlem, went to a community meeting on gentrification and development and studied parallels with the fight over land between Palestinians and Israelis. They attended a "teach-in" put on by several former Black Panthers, who told them about the importance of handling internal disputes within their movement.

"We took notes from our elders, engaged in dialogue with them and analyzed how the university responded to previous protests," said Sueda Polat, a graduate student and organizer in the pro-Palestinian encampment.



The pro-Palestinian encampment at Columbia occupied a central location at the New York City campus. PHOTO: SARAH BLESENER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Though there isn't a centralized command overseeing the student movement opposing Israel's invasion of Gaza, there are connections between longstanding far-left groups and the protesters.

The National Students for Justice in Palestine, or NSJP, has been around some two decades and has more than 300 chapters across the U.S., many of which have helped organize the college encampments and building occupations.

NSJP has for months called on students to stand strong against colleges until they divest themselves of investments in entities doing business with Israel. Its social-media pages have become a scroll of encouragement to protesting students, with videos showing activity at encampments and around the world. As early as October, NSJP was promoting a "day of resistance" with demonstrations at colleges.

Over time, the messages from the national group became more pointed. "The Student Movement for Palestinian Liberation will not be silenced; we will escalate until our demands are met," NSJP posted on social media on April 25.

### **'No divestment, no commencement'**

That same day on X, the group posted drawings with "friendly advice" to protesting students. One suggested they wear comfortable clothes and running shoes and bring water, an energy bar and a bandanna in case of surveillance. Another referred to police as "pigs" and offered this advice: "If someone is arrested, don't linger too long or pigs will kettle the march,"

referring to a crowd-control tactic. “Free the comrade, or else get their name and birthdate for jail support and keep it moving.”

On April 29, the group announced a new chant on social media: “No divestment, no commencement.” University administrators have been concerned that coming graduations could be interrupted by protesters.

NSJP didn’t respond to emails seeking comment.



Some students at the Columbia encampment busied themselves on laptops during the days of protest. PHOTO: STEPHANIE KEITH/GETTY IMAGES

Some of the group’s campus chapters have been suspended by universities, including at Columbia.

For the last decade, donations to NSJP have been received and administered by the Wespac Foundation, according to Howard Horowitz, Wespac’s board chairman. The donations are passed on to NSJP “for projects in the United States,” he said, declining to provide further details.

Wespac, a nonprofit based in Westchester County near New York City, is decades old, according to its website. It has supported humanitarian causes, as well as organizations that propagate antisemitism, according to the Anti-Defamation League. Wespac has posted support of pro-Palestinian protests on social media and posted videos in which protesters held signs that refer to President Biden as “Genocide Joe.”

Robert Herbst, a representative for Wespac, said “Wespac has not coordinated, trained or strategized with protest participants, nor do we support organizations that have supported violence, antisemitism or terrorism.”

## Resistance 101

In March, there was a “Resistance 101” training scheduled at Columbia with guest speakers including longtime activists with Samidoun: Palestinian Prisoner Solidarity Network, a Vancouver, British Columbia-based group that celebrated the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel. The administration twice barred the event, citing some of the organizers’ known support of terrorism and promotion of violence. Columbia students hosted the event virtually nonetheless, which prompted Columbia President Minouche Shafik to suspend several of them.

During the session, which lasted nearly two hours, Samidoun coordinator Charlotte Kates encouraged students “to build an international popular cradle of the resistance,” according to a recording posted on YouTube.

“There is nothing wrong with being a member of Hamas, being a leader of Hamas, being a fighter in Hamas,” Kates said. “These are the people that are on the front lines defending Palestine.”

Samidoun didn’t respond to emailed requests for comment. The German government banned the group last November after saying it supported terrorism and antisemitism, and incited the use of violence to enforce political interests.

Robert Pape, a political scientist at the University of Chicago who studies political violence, said outside organizers are only one factor in the protests. He said they are successfully leveraging student anger over the violence in Gaza, which many young people not conversant in the region’s complicated history are watching on social media.

Anne-Marie Jardine, a student arrested in a protest at the University of Texas at Austin, said images from the war on social media helped motivate her involvement in the movement. “It’s one thing to hear it on the news, but another to see children covered in blood,” she said.



Sueda Polat, addressing the media, was among those who negotiated with campus administrators. PHOTO: YUKI IWAMURA/ASSOCIATED PRESS



New York City police moved in Tuesday night and cleared out the encampment at Columbia. PHOTO: JEENAH MOON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Pape said university and national leaders should expect protests to continue through the summer and fall. “You have a major dynamic happening in the world that is a major concern,” Pape said.

Jacob Schmeltz, a senior political-science major at Columbia, went home to Montclair, N.J., for Passover and said he felt so uncomfortable with the antisemitic rhetoric on campus, he hasn’t come back.

“This should be the time I should be able to enjoy my senior year,” he said. “But instead I have felt so rejected by much of the Columbia community that have refused to call out the incidents of antisemitism on campus.”

Protesters have denied assertions of antisemitism, noting that many of those in the encampments are Jewish themselves.

## Discipline and rigor

Polat said student organizers at Columbia learned the discipline and planning needed to pull off an effective protest movement not only from their work with veteran demonstrators and outside groups, but from participating in Black Lives Matter marches or student labor organizing.

Some tools they learned were practical, such as how to raise money via student fundraisers and donations from friends and supporters to buy tents for encampments.



An encampment at the University of California, Los Angeles, on Wednesday, hours before police took it down.  
PHOTO: MIKE BLAKE/REUTERS

Saree Makdisi, a University of California, Los Angeles, English professor and member of the school's chapter of Faculty for Justice in Palestine, said his school's encampment had organized self-defense teams on the front lines. Participants, who were confronted several times by pro-Israel counterprotesters, had to undergo nonviolent de-escalation training. The training was put on by students who themselves had received prior training in nonviolent resistance. "There's a whole set of discipline and procedures that go into it," he said.

UCLA's encampment was taken down following a confrontation with police Thursday morning.

Makdisi said that his generation of pro-Palestinian student protesters in the U.S. during the 1980s weren't nearly as disciplined and organized as the students he encountered at the UCLA encampment.

“We had a lot of affect and feeling. But there’s a different kind of rigor to these students that is really striking,” he said.

—*Erin Ailworth contributed to this article.*

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