

May Day: On the undermining of student organizing at Oakland Tech

On May Day 2024, Oakland Tech students organized and led a walkout and rally at their school. Their motivation was not only to continue speaking out and protesting the genocide that has been underway in Gaza for seven months, killing over 35,000 Palestinians - 13,000 of them children; but also to stand in solidarity with their peers being brutalized on college campuses across the country, whether by armed mobs or militarized police units.

This walkout marked the second such action taken by Oakland Tech students in the last four months, and was one of several student-led actions happening on May Day in support of Palestine.

Several OUSD parents and community members arrived at Tech before the start of the walkout, at student leaders' request, to support their efforts (including tech support). As noon approached, hundreds of students exited Oakland Tech, and rather than leaving campus, they stayed on the lawns in front of the school, standing in solidarity with Gaza, with their peers at Tech, and with students on college campuses nationwide.

Three speakers had been scheduled and while none were students, all were connected to the student organizers through other initiatives in the community, including in OUSD schools. In light of the police violence initiated by college administrators against student protesters across the country, the first speaker criticized the tendencies of institutions like schools to promote conformity, to censor oppositional viewpoints, and to police speech seen as threatening or challenging to power. This reference was made to schools and institutions generally. In response, several administrators on the steps began shaking their heads and voicing their disapproval as the first speaker made their remarks.

As the second speaker began—linking students' activism in Oakland to the broader fight for liberation and self-determination in Oakland, Palestine, and worldwide—an administrator unplugged the microphone cable, cutting the second speaker off mid-sentence. When the speaker resumed, this same admin switched off the loudspeaker. Those present ignored this behavior and the second speaker continued their remarks without a microphone.

These behaviors from multiple administrators and culture keepers continued to escalate over the course of the rally, showing a total lack of support and an intention to disrupt the students' walkout and rally.

Administrators began insisting they did not know that students had invited guest speakers, and that they did not know that the walkout involved a rally on the front lawn. By the students' own account, this contradicts the fact that they had put up hundreds of fliers the previous day around the campus with text stating, "we will have guest speakers come to educate students on the situation in Gaza" and that the location for the walkout and rally was the "Front Lawn" at Tech.

Students confirm that administrators took down all of these fliers, citing campus rules about posting material. The idea that administrators were not informed about the student action and details does not add up. As student and adult supporters were navigating this disruption during the rally, some school staff stood directly across from the first speaker. A heated verbal exchange occurred in front of hundreds of students and at least one media crew. Fortunately, this did not escalate to a physical altercation.

While parent supporters stayed focused on the student organizers, a culture keeper began

yelling at one parent. He made it clear that he was taking his directives from Oakland Tech's principal, stating, "My principal is telling me what to do, and I'm telling you what to do". The parent responded that they heard them, and that they would discuss next steps once they had checked in with the student organizers. This staff then shouted: "Why are you doing this to me? I'm telling you what to do and you need to do it. I can pick up all of your sh*t and throw it into the street right now, if you want, or you can move it to the sidewalk."

This was not the only threat of violence to come from an OUSD staff member during the May Day walk out. A parent also heard an Assistant Principal say: "I have already called the police." Those of us present were in disbelief that an assistant principal at Oakland Tech claimed to have called the police to respond to a peaceful gathering of students outside of their school building.

This behavior and response is a violation of the George Floyd Resolution passed in 2021, which rightfully raised the criteria for situations in which OUSD administrators call OPD. The student walkout and rally was not a situation that called for police escalation. Fortunately, OPD did not show up to Tech, but this does not excuse the judgment on the part of the AP, and their attempt to intimidate and discourage those participating in the rally.

As parents, teachers, and community supporters close to OUSD, we are deeply concerned that the behaviors of school staff that unfolded during this rally came too close to mirroring what we have been witnessing on campuses across the country recently.

We witnessed Tech staff and administrators disrespect, talk down, ignore and intimidate student leaders, several who are a part of Tech's Muslim Student Union, and their student supporters. We heard comments to students such as, "You don't know what you're protesting," "You're saying what they want you to say," "You're going to end up getting arrested." We could not have imagined seeing these types of interactions at Oakland Tech, or seeing strong student leaders—a majority of whom are young women of color—work so hard to find common ground only to be disrespected.

We also want to call attention to the accusations that staff engaged in by claiming that those of us adults present were outsiders to the community—implying "outside agitators". This rhetoric is being used by leaders in power and media outlets across the country to discredit peaceful student encampments for Palestine, to justify the violence used to remove them, and to silence

people of conscience who are protesting the genocide. This is a time-tested tactic for discrediting and diminishing courageous actions and historic activist movements since the Civil Rights Movement.

Those who were present are either part of known local organizations and businesses serving Oakland communities, or have had ties to Tech students or the district for many years. This claim and language is false and only used to undermine the important organizing that student leaders at Tech have done.

What we saw at the student organized rally dishonors the tradition of student activism and political organizing in Oakland. It disrespects students that OUSD should be lifting up. And it generally creates a hostile environment for student organizing and for the teachers who wish to support it. Perhaps the most difficult thing was to have seen Oakland Tech leaders, who are also community leaders in service of our youth, engage in tactics and behaviors that are not in line with our collective values of student expression, leadership, and critical examination of the world

around us.

We are saddened by what we witnessed and by what we are hearing about Tech, and we are concerned about the chilling effect this has on the student leaders who are rising to organize their peers in this moment. In the strongest possible terms, we condemn the actions of Tech administrators and staff on May Day. We uplift and celebrate the courage, commitment, and clarity of Tech student organizers, and we call on OUSD leadership to support student organizing against a genocide in which we are all complicit.

[Click here](#) to read OUSD's policy on students' rights to freedom of speech and expression, and read the relevant excerpt below. We call on adults who care about the leadership and organizing work of the student leaders at Oakland Tech to keep your eyes on what is happening there, listen to the voices and testimonies of the students, and support any efforts and work being done to address what student organizers are dealing with at Oakland Tech.

Sincerely,
OUSD Parents, teachers & community for Palestine

OUSD Board Policy 5145.2 - Freedom of Speech/Expression

The process of inquiry and learning, of acquiring and imparting knowledge, and of exchanging ideas is basic to the educational development of students. Students have the right to express opinions, to take stands, and to support causes, publicly or privately. There should be no interference in the school with this freedom of expression, except that school authorities shall prohibit materials which (1) are obscene, libelous, or slanderous; (2) encourage actions which endanger the health and safety of students; (3) would subject the District to criminal or civil liability, including but not limited to liability under California Penal Code, Section 272; (4) would create a clear and present danger through the commission of unlawful acts on school premises or the violation of lawful school regulations; or (5) would cause the substantial disruption of the orderly operation of the school.