

The Campus Antifascist Network's United Front Against Fascism

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Since Donald Trump's election in November, 2016, more than 150 university campuses in North America have been posterred or fliered by white supremacist, neo-Nazi, or white nationalist groups. Most common have been flierings by American Vanguard, a Neo-Nazi formation with paramilitary characteristics, and Identity Europa, a self-proclaimed white nationalist fraternity founded by a former acolyte of Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke.



The fliers seek to recruit college students into an aspirant fascist movement. Common themes are white victimization at the hands of racial minorities and immigrants; the dominance of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy; white racial purity and fear of foreigners; and rejection of so-called "cultural Marxism," a term first popularized on the right in the 1980s by anti-semitic and Holocaust denier William Lind. As used by groups like Identity Europa, "cultural Marxism" is a catch-all to describe tolerance of other cultures, respect for religious difference and diversity, especially for Jews and Muslims, gender equality, and a cosmopolitan intellectual and political outlook on the world.

A parallel tactic used by neo-fascist movements are campaigns of harassment, intimidation, smears and bullying of progressive faculty and students. Since last November, Drexel University Professor George Cicciarello-Maher; Princeton University African-American Studies Professor Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor; Trinity University Professor Johnny Williams; Stockton University Professor Adam Miyashiro; Syracuse University Professor Dana Cloud; Dartmouth University Professor Mark Bray, and University of Nebraska-Lincoln Professor Amanda Gailey, have all been targets of coordinated attack campaigns because of their public anti-racist or otherwise progressive scholarship or social media commentary. In the case of Yamahtta-Taylor, an African American woman, on-line death threats, threats of rape, racial slurs, and slurs against her sexuality caused her to cancel two public lectures. In the cases of Cicciarello-Maher and Williams, both were put on temporary "leave" by University administrations that caved to right-wing intimidation and bullying.

The most significant organizing tool by the new fascist movement, however, has been efforts to force Universities to allow fascist speakers a presence on campus. This campaign began with a horrific flourish in August when Richard Spencer, neo-Nazi founder of the alt.right movement, helped lead a march of torch-bearing fascists across the University of Virginia campus. The march brought together disparate elements of the U.S. fascist movement that had come to Charlottesville to participate in the next day's "Unity Rally." That is the rally in which protestor Heather Heyer was murdered when James Fields drove his car into her.

The Virginia march was the "kick off" to a coordinated alt.right effort to seize University campuses as spaces for fascist thought, ideas, and organizing. Since then, Spencer has successfully spoken at the University of Florida and is scheduled to speak at University of Cincinnati. Other campuses, like Ohio State University and Texas A & M, have refused Spencer a platform. In response, Spencer's legal team has sued, arguing that public universities are obligated to represent all political viewpoints under the First Amendment. Critical, generally, to the alt.right's attempts to inculcate fascist ideas on campus has been using "free speech" and First Amendment claims as both cover and protection.

It was in response to such events that the U.S.-based Campus Antifascist Network was formed this summer. Initially a group of approximately 40 U.S. scholars, the Network grew exponentially after Charlottesville. More than 450 people now subscribe to the Network's google group; nearly 2,000 participate in its Facebook page.

From inception, CAN has dedicated itself to a unity politics. Its mission statement defined fascism broadly as an attack on multiple vulnerable populations, including Muslims, Jews, immigrants, racial minorities, LGBTQ+, indigenous and differently abled. Its central organizing principle was a "united front" vision: "CAN looks to mass counter-mobilizations and broad-based coalitions as key to the fight against these forces. We have diverse political views on multiple issues, but are united in our commitment to stopping fascist intimidation from taking root in our campus communities."

In practice, this has meant several things.

Each time CAN members have confronted fascist or alt.right threats at its campuses, its members have worked to build the broadest possible coalitions. For example, CAN members at California State University Fullerton organized against a speech by Milo Yiannapolous by working in close coalition with students who are trans, queer, non-binary, alternatively abled, undocumented, and students of color, or who self-identified as belonging to any number of a combination of those communities. At the University of Michigan, CAN members used a united front approach to protest the appearance of pseudo-social scientist Charles Murray, author of the notoriously racist *The Bell Curve*. CAN members coordinated a collective effort agreed upon by representatives of different groups as equals, with an understanding that not all groups have to agree on political matters beyond the need to fight white supremacy and its fascist tendencies.

In both of these instances, unity politics were an important strategic alternative to create the widest mobilization and minimize the chance for spontaneous disruptions or adventurism by small groups.

CAN has also undertaken direct defense of faculty under attack by the alt.right. It has formed a Defense Committee appointed to respond immediately and directly to faculty under siege. CAN has organized support and petitions of support for several of the aforementioned faculty under attack: Mark Bray, Adam Miyashiro and Amanda Gailey. CAN also sent a letter to University of Florida President Kent Fuchs asking the University to refuse Spencer a speaking engagement. This was consistent with CAN's position that speakers or organizations openly embracing fascist ideas and politics (Spencer gave the "Heil Hitler" salute at an American Enterprise Institute meeting in Washington D.C. last November should not be given a platform to speak.

Because so many North American campuses have been flied, CAN has taken a grassroots or bottom up approach to organizing, encouraging faculty and students to build their own Network chapter on campus in accord with local conditions. As with the national Network, chapters are charged with building alliances on campus around anti-fascist politics, and working to defend individuals and organizations who may be directly targeted, or feel threatened by, fascist propaganda (fliers) or speakers. To date there are 13 CAN chapters in the U.S., Canada and U.K.

Finally, in the service of building chapters and a general anti-fascist presence, CAN has promoted study groups, workshops and Teach-Ins on the meaning of fascism drawing from a broad tradition of writing on the topic. The CAN Syllabus available at its website includes writing on fascism by the likes of Leon Trotsky, Hannah Arendt and Enzo Traverso. The Syllabus is a living public document available to anyone seeking to educate and build a local chapter of CAN or to prepare for a fascist speaker coming to campus. We welcome new, contemporary reflections, which may be sent to cannetwork.fighttheh8@gmail.com.

For more information about CAN, or to build your own chapter, visit the CAN website <http://campusantifascistnetwork.com> or write to cannetwork.fighttheh8@gmail.com

The time for solidarity is now.

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