Three Jewish students sue UCLA, saying protesters blocked access to campus facilities

By David Zahniser, Staff Writer
June 6, 2024

Three Jewish UCLA students filed a federal lawsuit against the UC regents and several university officials on Wednesday, alleging that anti-Israeli protesters blocked them from crucial parts of the campus.

In the 74-page filing, the plaintiffs — two second-year law students and a sophomore history major — described UCLA as a “hotbed of antisemitism,” with activists carrying signs with threatening messages, chanting “Death to the Jews” and obstructing passage to campus facilities.

Lawyers for the students said pro-Palestinian protesters established checkpoints at their encampment on Royce Quad, providing entry only to those who condemned Israel.

“With the knowledge and acquiescence of UCLA officials, the activists enforced what was effectively a ‘Jew Exclusion Zone,’ segregating Jewish students and preventing them from accessing the heart of campus, including classroom buildings and the main undergraduate library,” the lawsuit said. “In many cases, the activists set up barriers and locked arms together, preventing those who refused to disavow Israel from passing through.”

The filing against the University of California comes roughly six weeks after demonstrators set up an encampment at UCLA, demanding that the university sever ties with Israel over its war in the Gaza Strip.

Some Jewish students voiced dismay over the checkpoints, saying they were excluded from the encampment simply because they supported the existence of Israel. Other students defended them, telling The Times they were needed to keep “agitators” from entering and endangering protesters.
Lawyers for the three students said UCLA’s handling of the situation caused their clients to be denied of their right to free speech, their freedom to practice religion and equal access to educational facilities, among other things.

“If masked agitators had excluded any other marginalized group at UCLA, Gov. Newsom rightly would have sent in the National Guard immediately,” said Mark Rienzi, president and CEO of the nonprofit Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, which provided some of the legal representation in the case.

In a statement, UCLA officials said they were aware of the lawsuit but had not yet been served.

“We will review and respond in due course,” said Mary Osako, UCLA’s vice chancellor of strategic communications. “UCLA remains committed to supporting the safety and well-being of the entire Bruin community.”

Yogita Goyal, a UCLA professor of English and African American Studies, rejected the claims in the lawsuit, calling them “patently false.”

“I spent many days walking around the whole area and never saw anyone excluded from the encampment unless they came with clear intent to disrupt and harm the students inside,” she said in an email. “No student was barred from taking classes or entering the library. It was campus security that set up alternate routes.”

Goyal, whose office is near Royce Quad, said protesters in the encampment were “constantly being threatened by outsiders and hecklers.” Getting around the encampment, she said, simply took an extra two- or three-minute walk.

The lawsuit names several university officials as defendants, including UCLA Chancellor Gene Block, who was recently called to testify before members of Congress about the demonstrations. Attorneys for the three students have seized on some of Block’s statements, noting that, at one point, he publicly acknowledged that students on their way to class had been “physically blocked” from accessing parts of the campus.
On April 30, counterdemonstrators attacked the encampment, using fireworks and crude weapons, with law enforcement failing to intervene for several hours. Police tore down the initial pro-Palestinian encampment the following night, arresting more than 200 people.

The Los Angeles chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a civil rights and advocacy organization, condemned the arrests, criticizing UCLA for carrying out a “militarized police response” to an “anti-genocide encampment.” The organization also denounced police for failing to protect protesters from violence.

In mid-May, one pro-Israeli counterdemonstrator was arrested in connection with the attacks.

Jewish students make up about 8% of UCLA’s undergraduate students. In the wake of the demonstrations, Goyal said, dozens of UCLA’s Jewish faculty and staff members signed an open letter seeking amnesty for the arrested protesters and arguing that critiques of Israel are not “presumptively antisemitic.”

“While the signatories have profound disagreements about the State of Israel, we agree that it is dangerous to frame all critiques of the state or government of Israel, or all critiques of Zionism, as antisemitic,” the letter states.