

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

BEHIND THE BARRICADES AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY: "THE ENCAMPMENTS" FOR GAZA

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LAURA FLANDERS: In "The Encampments", filmmakers Michael T. Workman and Kei Pritsker deliver an intimate portrait of student protest at Columbia University. A story that's very different from the commercial media's version and crackling with implications for right now. The film's lens embedded in the fabric of the encampment captures the chaos of police raids and the arrest of protestors, but also the community that students built across diverse backgrounds, as they demanded transparency and divestment from the US Israeli weapons flow to war in Gaza. "The Encampments" interrogates the role of universities as democratic spaces and asks who gets to define the boundaries of free speech. It also profiles people like Mahmoud Khalil, who many heard of only after he was arrested by ICE for his role. To look more closely at the documentary this month in the feature we call "Meet the BIPOC Press," I'm joined by co-director Kei Pritsker of BreakThrough News and two of the students at the heart of the film, Sueda Polat, a graduate student studying human rights, who was one of "The Encampments" student negotiators alongside Khalil. And Grant Miner, a former PhD candidate and president of the Student Workers Union, UAW Local 27-10. He was expelled by Columbia for his part. Here is the trailer for "The Encampments."

- We're here to discuss the little Gazas that have risen up on campuses across America.
- There is a movement to radicalize young people.
- Can you believe they are chanting about the Intifada in New York City?
- [Senator] I really believe they are brainwashed.
- There was a very concerted effort by the media to portray things a certain way and refuse to discuss Gaza. Columbia is materially invested in the genocide in Gaza. We don't want our money to go towards Palestinian death.
- I was born and raised in a Palestinian refugee camp. The university was cracking down on Palestinian activism on campus.
- It's completely farcical to imply that in any way, like Jewish people were being persecuted.

- I have never felt more proud to be Jewish than when I was pushing our university to divest from genocide.

- They would just criminalize anyone who would participate in a protest. That was the moment where students were like, we need to do something more. ♪ [Macklemore rapping] The people, they won't leave, ♪ ♪ What is threatenin' about divesting and wantin' peace? ♪

- The university would say like, "Oh, you're overestimating your power." I remember like telling them there are 60 universities setting up encampments across the United States.

- We got you holding it down right now online. ♪ What you willing to risk, what you willing to give ♪ ♪ What if you were in Gaza, what if those were your kids ♪

- In '68, the students at Columbia took over the campus mainly in protests of the war in Vietnam. Columbia talks about how it was okay then, but not okay now.

- Bravery is very contagious. We kind of watched Columbia in awe and we knew we were next.

- The only weapon they have is fear and we've called their bluff. They have nothing.

LAURA FLANDERS: That was the trailer for the documentary "The Encampments" presented by Watermelon Pictures and BreakThrough Media with Executive Producer Macklemore and directed by Michael T. Workman with our guest Kei Pritsker. I'm so glad to have you Kei and Sueda and Grant joining me today. And first, I just wanna thank you for this extraordinary piece of work and begin where the story has to begin, which is Gaza and Palestine. Sueda, let me just ask you, what's the latest as we speak today, who is living uppermost in your heart and on your head as we start to talk?

SUEDA POLAT: I'm really glad you started the story with Gaza Laura, because that's really the motivation of every student who's been protesting on these campuses for the past two years up until today, even as we speak, Gaza is about 70 days into a siege. There's no water in Gaza, no food in Gaza, no flour in Gaza. Prominent journalists are still being killed in Gaza. Women, children, men are being murdered en masse in Gaza today. Which is why people are still protesting. Last at Columbia University, there was a protest at Butler Library now named in honor of a Palestinian scholar and activist Bassel al-Araj. Gaza has always been, you know, at the center of the story, both in the media, hopefully as well as in this documentary and in the hearts of students.

LAURA FLANDERS: And what about you, Grant, as we begin to talk, who is uppermost in your mind and what is the latest on the students arrested, detained, still protesting there at Columbia?

GRANT MINER: Yeah, I mean, as Sueda said, I think it's really important that we focus first and foremost on Gaza, and the conditions that we were protesting at Columbia are still ongoing, and that's the reason why student protest hasn't slowed down. We just had a huge action at Columbia and you know, even though I was far away from campus when it happened, it was really inspiring to see, but also at the same time, you know, the same repression that we faced is still ongoing. There were, you know, arrests, there were beatings by campus safety officers. And so, you know, at the same time, I'm also thinking about all the students who are, you know, thinking of sacrificing their futures are sacrificing their futures to protest.

LAURA FLANDERS: And Kei, coming to you, I'd like to say the media coverage is utterly transformed, but I doubt that you would agree.

KEI PRITSKER: No, of course not. I mean the media has shown time and time again in the last 19 months and beyond that, that they are completely incapable of telling the story of Palestine, honestly. And the reason for that is because the media, the corporate media is bought and paid for by corporations. They have to align their views with whatever the advertisers that run ads on their programs want them to say. And, you know, they don't want to say anything contrary to the beliefs and interests of the people that own these companies. They're obviously embedded with many departments of the government. I mean, most of these mainstream outlets take their talking points directly from the Pentagon Press Corps or the State Department Press Corps, and they just uncritically repeat what they're told by the government. So, you know, of course we haven't seen any difference. That is their role in society is to parrot the talking points of the Trump administration, of the Biden administration of the US Government and the State Department and the Pentagon. I will say, I hope that this film has highlighted the huge disparity between the voices of independent media and the corporate media.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, let's talk more about BreakThrough News and who you are, what you aim to do differently. And I will just say you gave me a perfect opportunity to say, this is why we treasure public television, which at least in principle is advertising free and long may it remain that way. That doesn't mean it's not influenced by interests, but it is distinct in that regard. BreakThrough News, where you started, what is its mission and how did you come to be so deeply embedded there in the fabric of the encampment?

KEI PRITSKER: We started BreakThrough News to talk about these issues from a working class perspective. As for how I got embedded, I've, you know, been a journalist with BreakThrough

News for five years now. I've been covering, you know, protests, movements, I've been covering issues facing the working class in America from our perspective, from the perspective of workers. So this has always been an issue near and dear to my heart. I went to a protest that the Columbia students held after SJP and JVP, two pro-Palestine groups at Columbia were banned. So I went there to cover that because it was just an absurd attack on free speech and on anti genocide protest. And I met some of the students. I met Grant, I met some of the other leaders at Columbia. I did not meet Sueda unfortunately that day, but I stayed in touch with them and they reached out to me when they were setting up the encampment and they said, "Hey, you know, the administration's not listening to us. They're not taking us seriously. We feel the need to escalate. We're setting up this encampment." So I went there and you know, I don't wanna speak for the students, but I think they were familiar with my reporting. They knew that I wasn't going to twist their words, that I was actually going to report what their motives were and why they were trying to center Gaza. And I think that's why they let me stay with them, live with them in the campus.

LAURA FLANDERS: Grant, did you have any qualms about having a documentary maker there at the encampment? Because this was not a place that was open to journalists as a whole. I know 'cause I tried to get in there.

GRANT MINER: One of the reasons why students are so wary of journalists is that oftentimes we see people, you know, come in with a camera and record only the things that work for them and their narrative or even they just, you know, they'll ask you friendly questions, they'll soft ball you, and then they will either cut your answers or just completely ignore what you said and report it anyway. Like you know, I had a journalist like publicly insult me and like comment on my appearance. He called my beard scruffy, uncalled for, but, you know, point taken. But, you know, one of the things that I think sets BreakThrough apart is that we knew that the reporters at BreakThrough come from an activist background. And so first and foremost they are activists and activists who are committed to telling the truth. And you know, that is a form of activism is coming into it and saying, okay, we are not going to go with the media narrative that everybody is pushing.

LFL And the film does that brilliantly. We're talking about "The Encampments." Sueda coming to you, I imagine that the qualms were many when it comes to participating in the documentary, not least the fact that we hear routinely even in the film from SJP students for Justice of Palestine, JVP members and encampment participants, that they don't want themselves to be the topic, they don't wanna be the subject. So how did you make peace with that in order to participate in a film called "The Encampments?" It is not called the War in Gaza.

SUEDA POLAT: I frankly haven't made peace with it, to be quite honest. I think by nature of the fact that, you know, your media personnel, your journalists not just, you know, the documentarians during the encampments, but people coming to the encampment themselves,

even if they wanted to tell the story of a protest, they wanted to sideline Gaza entirely and wanted to make even documentaries about, you know, the right to freedom of speech. You know, college campuses is a site of protests, the American nature of protest, whether or not where, you know, time, speech, and manner restraints on protests, so on and so called. So I still fully haven't made peace with it, in addition to the fact that, you know, it feels, I would like to humble myself and not speak so much and rather have Gaza heard. With regard to the "The Encampments" as a documentary, what I really, really loved about it and which, you know, kind of assuaged some of my ethical concerns about documentary making is the fact that it at least half by half included footage of Gaza and not just, you know, footage of ruins. Not just footage of debris, footage of bombing, which, you know, might just be like documenting violence for the sake of violence. But it included interviews with people in Gaza, notably Bisan, who's been a journalist reporting tirelessly from Gaza every day, displaced from her home for two years. Her colleagues killed. And I think just giving room for Gaza to speak for itself is what essentially sets this documentary apart from a number of others.

LAURA FLANDERS: The constant experience I had watching the film, and I saw it there in New York and what I understand was a sold out run at the Angelika Cinema, was how much I had allowed myself to forget, in particular how much I had allowed myself not to forget, but not to have thought for a while about the killing of the five-year-old Hind Rajab.

- (SUEDA POLAT) She was in a car fleeing Gaza City with an aunt and uncle and some cousins when they were shot at. She was alive while the rest of the family was killed, and she called the Palestinian Red Crescent Society. They dispatched an ambulance to save her. 355 bullets were used on the car that Hind Rajab was in.

LAURA FLANDERS: You're telling of that story in particular reminded me of how important this work is because how much has happened since that happened in January of 2024 and how without meaning to we do become kind of inured. So I guess I would ask you Kei to talk about that. Sueda has talked a little bit about, you know, you don't wanna do war porn, how do we keep having feelings, which is what "The Encampment" was all about.

KEI PRITSKER: We put scenes of people being pulled out from under the rubble. That term has been used so much and I don't even think people know what that fully means to be trapped under a destroyed building. We had to remind people there was no scenario in which we would make a film about the encampments without talking, without showing exactly what it was that moved these students to protest in the first place, which is Gaza. And we wanted to remind people, you can't look away from this. You can't look away from this, especially because you're paying for it, and it's your silence that allows it to continue.

LAURA FLANDERS: Let me bring you back into this Grant. I mean, you are participating as a Jew, as an outspoken Jewish participant in this encampment. How would you say your participation, not in the film, but in "The Encampments" changed you and particularly your sense of, I don't know whether you had that sense of being protected or different or on a different side of the story because of your Jewish heritage?

GRANT MINER: Well, I mean, I would say I don't really participate, like as a Jewish person, I participate as like an activist and a person of conscience that is Jewish. And something I like to say a lot is that like I deeply respect a lot of like the work that people do within the Jewish community to change people's minds. But I mean like there's Jewish people don't have like a special license to talk about this. In fact, there's like a very insidious narrative that, you know, prior to October 7th and afterwards was basically if you're not Jewish and you're not Palestinian, then talking about this is strange. You having an opinion on this conflict is strange and you should just stop talking about it 'cause you're probably only motivated by anti-Semitism. And you know, I wanna push back on that and say that like, you know, anybody can have an opinion on this. It's the world's first, you know, livestream genocide. And it's really, you know, at the same time, I think it's important to speak when Jewish people speak up about this to sort of disarm the myths of antisemitism around this movement. But I'm always wary of privileging myself in that way and, you know, how did "The Encampments" change me? I mean, I think that there, it changes me in the way that any sort of action together with other people changes you. I mean, I'm a union organizer and being, acting in concert with other people towards, you know, making the world a better place to improving people's lives, to, you know, to stopping a genocide, to trying to stop a genocide really does, it changes you because you realize that you can join up with other people. Like you're not alone in these thoughts.

LAURA FLANDERS: One thing that for-profit media does constantly is tell us how complicated everything is, especially with respect to the Middle East. Oh, it's so complicated. The conflict is so ancient. What I particularly respected about those who speak in this documentary is how simple they keep things. And in particular, Mahmoud Khalil keeps things very simple. What the protest is about, what the problem is and what the aims are of the negotiators like himself.

- (MAHMOUD KHALIL) I was approached the night of the encampment that I would be the person communicating with the administration. The organizers trusted me, given my background in terms of like working in diplomacy, there at the British Embassy or here at the UN. We discussed who's best to support me. And we felt that Sueda is the perfect person.

- (SUEDA POLAT) The university wanted to shut down the encampment in any way that it could. When it first started, they were like, "Let's not let them bring in water. Let's shut

down all of the gates. Let's not let them bring in tents, let's not let them bring in blankets," because it was cold, it was freezing.

- (MAHMOUD KHALIL) They underestimated the will of the students. They literally like feel that these are just kids. Through my conversation, I just felt how much the university is detached from reality. What university in the world want to invest in weapon manufacturers, why would you do that? You're concerned with education. Like we are literally giving you back the university to be a moral university. Every time in the negotiations when we told them that, they would say like, "Oh, you're overestimating your power or your influence." But then after the fourth day, they were just like so silent because clearly it's a global movement. I remember like telling them like at this point there are 60 universities setting up encampments across the United States. They're just like waiting to hear what would happen at Columbia.

LAURA FLANDERS: What can you tell us about Mahmoud's situation? He was arrested by ICE, he's being detained. What else do we know?

SUEDA POLAT: Particularly with Mahmoud, I think the most, I mean, egregious thing is his separation from his growing family. I know how excited he was to be a father and what a soft, soft heart he has. I think people see him as like a very pragmatic, logical kind of person and he kind of hides his feelings a little deeper inside, but he's missed the birth of his son and that's an incredible injustice. And if you've read his latest letter from jail, he points to the fact that his missing the birth of his firstborn son is not any different than the fates faced by Palestinian fathers in Palestine. And I think that speaks to his heart and our hope that we'll have him back. Me personally, I am technically speaking still a student at Columbia University, though suspended for the time being, but I don't think any of us, I mean not to speak for Grant has been expelled as well as a number of other students have been expelled or suspended. There is not, I think one moment of regret or yeah, not a moment of regret in our bodies, in our hearts. I think especially knowing that the repression that we're facing right now and the increased scale of oppression both at the federal level and at the institutional level at Columbia University is happening because we were so successful at mobilizing such a large mass of people, perhaps for the first time in a very long time in America. Not just college students, but people outside of colleges. And for a lot of people, you know, who may be intimidated by Mahmoud's arrest, who may be intimidated by the crackdown at institutions like Columbia or Harvard or other colleges, I'd like to say that the moment you give into oppression might feel like retreating into safety, but it's the complete opposite. The moment you give into oppression is when you tell the state is when you tell the institution that you're a human being who is able to be bribed into complacency, okay with being a cog in the war machine.

GRANT MINER: For right now, just to catch people up, I'm the president of the Student Workers Union and my expulsion is essentially being used as an excuse to not bargain with the union. Columbia has written to us and said, "Even though the law says that you are allowed to have your own representatives and you're allowed to elect your own representatives, we're not gonna bargain with you if Grant is in the room. And we are the ones who get to decide where you negotiate and who you send to negotiate." And this is, I mean this is crazy. It's completely against the law. And I think if that's happening in universities, like how much more so is it happening on the streets with people who like perhaps are not as privileged as Ivy League university PhD students or undergraduates? And I mean fundamentally like the universities are one of the few places in America, where you can go and study things without necessarily being expected to turn a profit, and they wanna take away everything that allows us to express ourselves even in the limited way that we are able to, I mean like Kei will be the first to tell you that like even these so-called like spaces of free expression are not actually spaces of free expression, which is something that we've, you know, we've learned over the past few years, and there's always been a hard limit in this country. No matter how many, you know, big protests you have, no matter how many big campaigns you have about what, like what you're allowed to say and you're essentially, you know, you're bashing your head into a wall until that wall moves a little bit and you win a little bit and you change a little bit of public opinion.

LAURA FLANDERS: Thank you all three, it's really been great talking with you and I so appreciate the film. Thank you for joining us.

It's no small irony that Columbia University, which hosts both the Pulitzer Prizes for journalism and the prestigious Columbia Journalism Review was just through announcing those prizes, which were all about celebrating bravery and integrity and reporting and the values of free speech. When the university announced the temporary suspension of four college journalists, including several associated with the Columbia Spectator, a campus-based paper declared the nation's best by the Society for Professional Journalists last year. What were those journalists suspected of doing? Well, being too close to the action, that is too close to an action that was causing a disruption. And that makes me think isn't disruption exactly what journalism is about? Isn't disruption of our way of thinking, of our assumptions, of our everyday daily grind, exactly what journalists are supposed to provide? Not to make us jump to conclusions, but to stop us in our tracks and make us think. If you are a journalist out there doing that sort of work, I wish I had a prize for you. In the meantime, if you want to hear my uncut conversation with every week's guests, you can through a subscription to our free podcast and get all the information about all of our archives at the same time right there. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. For "Laura Flanders and Friends," I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us. For more on this episode and other forward-thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast, it's all at lauraflanders.org