

Nazis on Campus: A Union and Community Responds

by Susan Hegeman and Paul Ortiz

In the fall of 2017, the University of Florida (UF) and the city of Gainesville were part of a coda to a terrible event in recent U.S. history: the violent torch-wielding rally of white supremacists and extreme far-right groups in the college town of Charlottesville, Virginia, that left three people dead and at least 33 injured. These events reminded the nation of the presence of organized and often violent racist extremism in the U.S.—and alerted us to its increasing normalization and possibly growing power. Indeed, a recent *ABC News/Washington Post* poll revealed that nearly 10 percent of Americans today “call it acceptable to hold Neo-Nazi or white supremacist views, equivalent to about 22 million Americans.”¹

In this essay, we will draw on our experiences as members of the United Faculty of Florida (UFF)-University of Florida to discuss what unions in higher education can do to respond to domestic extremism, and why it’s more important than ever for union members to engage in labor-community coalitions.

SPENCER COMES TO TOWN

Our account begins on August 12—the day of the Charlottesville violence—when UF President Kent Fuchs alerted faculty, staff, and stu-

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dents that Richard Spencer, a self-proclaimed “identitarian” and a ring-leader of the Charlottesville rally, had reserved an on-campus speaking venue at UF. The University of Florida is a racially and ethnically diverse campus where more than 40 percent of students identify as something other than white and approximately 20 percent are Jewish. It also is located in north-central Florida, in a part of the country that has a long history of white supremacy, Jim Crow, and racist violence.² A wide coalition of

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groups, including our chapter of the statewide faculty union, quickly understood the threat that Spencer and his followers posed to student and employee safety, and mobilized to pressure UF administrators to cancel the event. For their part, Spencer’s group invoked their “free speech” rights and threatened to sue. He ultimately spoke on campus on October 19.

Instead of standing up to Spencer and paying for a legal battle, UF chose to turn part of campus into a militarized zone at an esti-

mated expense of at least \$600,000 to the university, plus millions more to the state and surrounding community.³ With Charlottesville likely in mind, Florida’s governor declared a state of emergency, and hundreds of police, sheriff’s deputies, and National Guard reservists from around the state traveled to Gainesville to create an armed, human barrier between Spencer’s followers and anti-racist protesters. Snipers patrolled rooftops, while police helicopters circled campus. Laboratories, museums, and one of the university hospital’s largest medical clinics closed their doors for the day. Parents pulled their students from campus days in advance of the event, and faculty canceled hundreds of classes. Many UF employees lost a day or more of wages due to the closures and disruptions.

On the day of the event, despite urgings from UF administrators and city officials to stay away from the speaking venue, thousands of students, faculty, and community members gathered outside to protest and chant

down Spencer and white supremacist hate, while audience members inside heckled, mocked, and drowned out his speech. Though the protests themselves were peaceful, there was violence that day when, after the event, a group of white supremacists confronted and shot at anti-racist protesters sitting at a bus shelter. Three of the attackers were arrested. One currently awaits trial on charges of attempted murder.⁴

Much of the press coverage of Spencer's speech at UF sought to minimize the sense of incipient menace to our community and to downplay the known dangers of violent racist extremism. Many reporters cast the entire event as nothing more than well-intentioned over-reaction by university administrators, Governor Rick Scott, and activists. By several accounts, our alarm appeared needless. Indeed, some coverage suggested the whole event was a win for Spencer, who garnered lots of free publicity and raised

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the significance of his movement by inciting disproportionate fear and disruption. In these narratives, the real heroes of the day were the hecklers in Spencer's audience who put him and his "right-wing carnival act" in its place.⁵ What the media overlooked in these reports were the weeks of coalition building, anti-racist education, and movement organizing that ensured that Gainesville would not be a replay of Charlottesville.

As activists and union leaders who helped organize the attempt to stop UF from permitting the Spencer event and also the protests of the event itself, we will, obviously, offer a very different account than the mainstream media. Richard Spencer is not a harmless political "carnival act." His racist, white supremacist views are part of a worldwide movement that has ascended to quasi-legitimacy through the presidency of Donald Trump, who is widely understood as supportive of its ethno-nationalist views.⁶ Spencer's appearance, alongside his violent followers on our campus, represented a direct physical threat to many UF students and employees,

some of whom, in the wake of Trump's election, had recently experienced racist intimidation on campus.⁷ Furthermore, it has become clear that Spencer's cynical invocation of free speech rights is part of a larger far-right assault on higher education. Contrary to media reports, what happened here in Gainesville was not at all a victory for Spencer or his racist cause, as it showed that his message—and the potential violence posed by his entourage—could be peacefully refuted and resisted through superior

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organization and community mobilization. It is especially gratifying to us that other universities have cited the events in Gainesville to justifiably deny Spencer's requests to rent space on their campuses.⁸

WHAT WE LEARNED ABOUT 'FREE SPEECH' ON CAMPUS

Beyond presenting our perspective of the events, we wish to offer some lessons from our experi-

ence that we hope will be useful to colleagues who find themselves in similar circumstances as Spencer continues what he calls his “danger tour” of universities.⁹ The first lesson is this: we learned early in the process that the university is centrally concerned with protecting the institution—not its students or employees. Second, we recognized that if university administrators won't directly address a situation that creates real and reasonable fear and anger among members of the university community, it is incumbent upon union members to do so. In taking up and addressing these concerns, we believe we did the right thing—not only as concerned colleagues and activists, but as unionists. In some part, our efforts last fall amounted to a matter of contract enforcement, as the legally binding, collectively negotiated agreement between UFF-UF and the university enjoins the university to provide a safe and non-discriminatory working environment. By organizing around this issue, UFF-UF members helped to develop the kind of goodwill and support that is crucial in right-to-work environments such as ours. Finally, our potentially most controversial

point: this situation presented a classic case of a conflict between two things we value and wish to protect, freedom of speech and community safety. As the situation regarding Spencer's event evolved, our position on how to balance our concern for these values also changed. As a matter of strategy, we believe that we were right, at different times, to fight to protect both.

In the wake of Charlottesville, national contempt for Spencer and his movement soared. Nevertheless, in the lead up to his speech at UF, Spencer knew several things were working in his favor. His main goal, of course, was to promote himself as the cleaned-up leader of an increasingly powerful movement. But, even a forceful show of resistance to him and his followers could be used to garner press attention, and to make the movement seem politically significant. Additionally, any protest or opposition to his appearance could serve the broader political interests of those who seek to undermine higher education in the U.S. and public education in general.

Since the 1960s, campus free speech has migrated from being an issue on the liberal left to being a hot-button topic for the far right. For decades, anti-intellectuals have pushed a narrative of universities as hotbeds of liberal indoctrination and political intolerance, rather than havens of free inquiry. This argument has been used as a pretext to defund public higher education and to attack whole programs, as well as individual professors and students.¹⁰ As recently as last fall, U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions complained in a speech at Georgetown University that "freedom of thought and speech on the American campus are under attack," and that universities are becoming "echo chamber[s] of political correctness and homogenous thought, a shelter for fragile egos."¹¹ Recently, the libertarian Goldwater Institute has promoted model legislation aimed at addressing this putative attack on freedom of thought, versions of which

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have been put forward in several state legislatures, including Florida's.¹² It would outlaw campus "free speech zones," prevent schools from blocking controversial speakers such as Spencer, and impose civil penalties on those found to be restricting free speech on campus.

From our experience, such legislation to protect controversial campus speakers is hardly necessary. As we learned, the general consensus of legal experts is that settled First Amendment case law largely supported

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Spencer's request for a venue at UF.¹³ It is no accident that his "danger tour" of college campuses has explicitly targeted large public universities, including the University of Michigan, Michigan State, Auburn, Texas A & M, University of Cincinnati, Ohio State University, Penn State, and Louisiana State University, in addition to UF. Unlike some speakers whose campus appearances have led to controversy, such as Milo

Yiannopoulos' and Ann Coulter's appearances at the University of California, Berkeley, Spencer is not typically sponsored by anyone affiliated with the university.¹⁴ Nevertheless, public universities are state actors who must abide by the First Amendment, and therefore must honor his request to rent a venue as they would any group's request, regardless of the renter's viewpoint. Even if the renter—or those protesting him—poses a credible threat of violence, the legal bar for preventing their presence on campus is very high. When Auburn University canceled Spencer's speaking event in spring 2017, citing "legitimate concerns and credible evidence that it will jeopardize the safety of students, faculty, staff and visitors," Spencer's representatives immediately sued, and a federal judge required Auburn to allow Spencer's event to go forward.¹⁵ When other universities, including Ohio State, Penn State, Michigan State, and LSU, denied Spencer a speaking venue, more lawsuits followed.

The ironies of Spencer posing as a champion of free speech rights should not be overlooked. As a wealthy white man, whose organization,

the National Policy Institute, was founded and funded by other wealthy individuals, Spencer has the resources to ensure access to free speech that many without his wealth or privilege lack. His ready use of the courts is proof of that. Even as Spencer makes common cause with libertarians and First Amendment absolutists in his legal pleas for his rights to speech on campus, his stated goals are explicitly to deny rights—including First Amendment rights—to others. An avowed racist and anti-Semite, he is a proponent of what he calls “peaceful ethnic cleansing.” He has said, “Our dream is a new society, an ethno-state that would be a gathering point for all Europeans. It would be a new society based on very different ideals than, say, the Declaration of Independence.”¹⁶ His invocation of free speech protections is parasitic on laws and norms he would gladly brush aside for others. Moreover, his charade of presenting his hateful ideas as a kind of pseudo-academic lecture makes a mockery of the concept of academic freedom.

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A MISHMASH OF MESSAGES FROM THE UNIVERSITY

The legal situation in Florida was different than Auburn’s, in that, on the heels of Charlottesville, there was a more clear-cut case to be made for the potential danger around Spencer’s event. Anxiety on campus and in the community was heightened, to say the least. Countless parents, alumni, employees, and local community members—on campus and off—phoned, e-mailed, and otherwise contacted university officials to urge them to deny Spencer a venue. At the urging of members, UFF-UF also issued a statement. Reiterating the manifest reasons that we might be concerned for our safety, we reminded the UF administration that our collective bargaining agreement requires the Board of Trustees and administration

to “Protect faculty from attacks on our academic freedom; Protect faculty from those who wish to discriminate against us; and ensure at all times a safe working environment.”¹⁷ A few days after Fuchs announced the Spencer event, the university then cancelled it, citing Charlottesville and specific, recent threats to our community.¹⁸ Spencer’s organization responded with the expected lawsuit, and the university scrambled, reversing course again. One member of the UF legal team stated, “it was never

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the intention of the university to permanently bar Mr. Spencer from speaking at an appropriate time and location.”¹⁹

The university’s strategy turned to minimizing the potential for violence and—poised as it was to begin a \$1.5 billion capital campaign—to mitigating a possible public relations disaster. As university spokespeople repeatedly stated, no one at UF invited Spencer, and no one at UF expressed anything

but contempt for him and his hateful views. But the university’s goals for the event were themselves confused. They sought to defend against the conservative talking point that universities are hostile to free speech *and* to prevent a dangerous disaster like Charlottesville. They wanted both freedom of speech for a speaker who attracted dangerous, violent, racist followers *and* community safety.

Predictably, this led to a confusing mishmash of signals from the administration that left many UF community members even more perplexed and worried. Spencer is a violent racist whose views most everyone disavows; Spencer is not really dangerous. UF will be business-as-usual; stay away for your own safety. President Fuchs urged students “to avoid the Spencer event,” but also to “not let Mr. Spencer’s message of hate and racism go unchallenged.”²⁰ Instead of protesting, students were urged to attend, from the safety of their homes or dorms, an online virtual assembly titled “#TogetherUF,” at which, it was hoped, famous alumni like the football star Tim Tebow would offer messages of “unity, togetherness,

Gator Nation, etc.” (Tebow declined to participate).²¹ While UF administrators officially cancelled classes near the venue, they informed faculty that they could use their discretion to cancel additional classes, if they wished. Many students simply planned to leave town. Many university employees also had concerns for their safety; some were explicitly told by their supervisors to stay home, and some hourly employees lost wages as a result.²²

LESSONS FROM THE
UNION’S PLAYBOOK

Our union chapter, UFF-UF, joined forces with the UF chapter of Graduate Assistants United (UFF-GAU), which represents UF’s graduate students, to continue to push for cancellation on the grounds of worker and student safety. Our thinking, in part, was that if the university was at all considering cancellation, then we could help provide them with more points for a rationale.²³ Faculty affiliated with the union also promoted digital and paper petitions and letter-writing campaigns.²⁴ Some union members, using their expertise as scholars to address issues such as the history of racism, white supremacy, and the Holocaust, contributed op-eds to local newspapers and participated in public fora and teach-ins.²⁵ We began working with a broad array of area activists and organizations, including members of the Alachua County NAACP, Veterans for Peace, National Women’s Liberation, the Gainesville Anti-Fascist Committee, and the Alachua County Labor Coalition, among others.

Meanwhile, we supported the activist students who created and led “No Nazis at UF,” a grassroots organization composed of working class and first-generation college students who worked tirelessly to educate, mobilize, and organize a broad base of on- and off-campus individuals and groups. They used an expansive message of radical inclusivity and anti-racism, welcoming all who opposed Spencer’s ideology of white

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supremacy and ethnic cleansing. No Nazis at UF's big-tent organizing strategy enabled a diverse coalition that ranged from members of the Industrial Workers of the World to local Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities. Their efforts included an anti-Spencer petition drive, as well as news conferences, community rallies, and a march to UF's main administration building in an effort to engage administrators. Ironically, a campus leadership that is supposed to uphold the ideals of dialogue and

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freedom of speech refused to engage with student organizers; Tigert Hall, the central administration building, was in lock-down mode for the entire week.²⁶

As it became clear that university administrators would not cancel Spencer's appearance and that he and his followers were coming to Gainesville, the union, together with student and community activists, shifted tactics. We turned toward the protest and the exercise

of our First Amendment rights. Shortly before the planned event, No Nazis at UF invited UFF-UF members to participate in an event titled "Community Teach-In Led by Professors," where the primary goal was to think about how to put the histories of anti-racism and anti-fascism into practice. (Thought *and* Action!) An African American staff member gave eloquent testimony about harassment of black faculty and staff on campus in the preceding months—incidents that faculty felt had not been addressed satisfactorily by the administration. Students, staff, and Gainesville neighbors shared their strategies to address the immediacy of the Spencer speech. However, all of the attendees agreed on the need to formulate long-term strategies to address economic and racial inequality in Gainesville, which has one of the highest rates of inequality in the nation.²⁷ Suggestions included staff salary raises, new ethnic studies programs and Holocaust education, and a stronger commitment by the university to support living wage initiatives. As educators who work with union and social justice organizing, UFF-UF members were well posi-

tioned to participate in this dialogue. One could judge the success of the event by the scores of well-organized students who walked directly from the teach-in to the UF Student Senate meeting to demand that student leaders call on the administration to cancel the Spencer event.

THE EVENTS OF OCTOBER 19 AND BEYOND

By providing Spencer with a venue, the university also was required to prevent protesters from silencing him via the exercise of a “heckler’s veto.”²⁸ Thus, they chose a date, time and place—a large auditorium on the periphery of campus, at midday on a Thursday—that would minimize attendance at the speech and at any protests or rallies. When it came to light that a Gainesville brewery was offering free beers to anyone who turned in a ticket to the speech, the university conceded to Spencer’s group the unusual right to handle ticket distribution on their own.²⁹ As predicted, Spencer’s assistants cherry-picked potential attendees, refusing to admit those who carried signs or wore t-shirts that indicated opposition to Spencer.

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It became clear that, in addition to upholding the free speech rights of a man whose views they openly and repeatedly disavowed, the university would minimize free speech opportunities for those with whom they presumably agreed. The massive security operation focused on separating event attendees from protesters. But it also worked to make protesting as difficult as possible. Whole sections of campus, including parking facilities around the venue, were closed, bikes were banned, and public transportation was re-routed. It was very difficult to even get to the protests. Bags and water bottles (no small thing in subtropical Florida) also were banned.

Nevertheless, thousands turned out for a peaceful protest that demonstrated community solidarity against hate groups and with those who felt endangered by Spencer and his supporters. Students and com-

munity members organized carpools, wellness stations to keep protesters hydrated, and communication hubs to monitor and alert people about neo-Nazi efforts to engage in hooliganism. Individuals who were denied the opportunity to protest due to the failure of the university to provide access for people with disabilities—one student near the Phillips Center had his crutches confiscated by overzealous police—continued calling and petitioning the administration to cancel right up to the moment that

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Spencer took the speaker's podium. It is highly probable that the large turnout (estimated by organizers at approximately 3,000 people) scared away many of the neo-Nazis who had planned for weeks to descend on Gainesville *en masse*.

In conclusion, Richard Spencer's speaking tour is part of a well-funded effort to spread a hateful ideology. Its intent, at the very least, is to drain the coffers of public universities, even while it deceptively portrays universities as work-

ing against free speech, one of the central tenets of our democracy. Universities will, all too often, attempt to avoid controversy by allowing this hateful provocateur's request for a venue to go unchallenged, and in the process restrict the free speech of the very people who wish to register their dissent. The union's role here is simple: to stand up for its members and their values, and to argue against this potentially violent provocation, using the tools at hand, including our contract, our organized membership, and our ability to make coalitions with other groups. We were successful in spreading the message that Spencer's presence was a needless danger to our community. And while we didn't stop his appearance, we were seen as standing up for our members, our students, and our community's well-being. In a time when too many leaders abrogate their responsibilities to ensure a safe working environment, free of discrimination, the time-tested tools of community and labor organizing have proven to be the best ones we have to preserve and promote the dignity of all people. [nea](#)

ENDNOTES

1. Langer, “1 in 10 say it’s acceptable to hold neo-Nazi views.” The Southern Poverty Law Center’s “Hatewatch” research project notes that incidents of racist violence have increased markedly during the first year of the Trump administration. See Janik, “Alt-America Reveals Forces That Revived the Radical Right.” The Anti-Defamation League’s recent report on right-wing terrorist incidents in the U.S. in the past 25 years finds that “right-wing extremists have been one of the largest and most constant sources of domestic terror incidents for many years.” Nearly half of the 150 incidents they document were perpetrated by those espousing white supremacist ideology. See also the Anti-Defamation League’s “A Dark and Constant Rage: 25 Years of Right-Wing Terrorism in the United States.”
2. For an overview of the history of white supremacy in Florida, see Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing in Florida from Reconstruction to the Blood Election of 1920*; and Winsboro, *Old South, New South, or Down South? Florida and the Modern Civil Rights Movement*.
3. The total cost is nearly impossible to calculate, given the disruption to research, teaching, and much more. However, in terms of security alone, UF President Fuchs said costs incurred by non-UF law enforcement agencies exceeded \$3 million. The university has publicly estimated its security costs at more than \$600,000. Kornfield, “UF Gets Spencer Fees Back, Meets with County About Bill.” Meanwhile, UF reported that Spencer paid about \$10,500 to the rent the space. See, Caplan.
4. Harris, “Three Richard Spencer Supporters Arrested on Charges of Shooting at UF Protesters.”
5. See Moser, “Richard Spencer Wins Again.”
6. Thrush and Haberman, “Trump Gives White Supremacists an Unequivocal Boost.”
7. Among other incidents, the building sign for African American Studies was vandalized repeatedly, and faculty and staff subjected to racist harassment in their own offices. Ellenbogen, “Man Trespassed from UF After Confronting Black Faculty Members.”
8. Kang, “Ohio State University Denies Appearance by White Nationalist Richard Spencer.”
9. Mangan, “Richard Spencer, White Supremacist, Describes Goals of His ‘Danger Tour’ to College Campuses.”
10. Schrecker, “The Roots of the Right-Wing Attack on Higher Education,”; MacLean, *Democracy in Chains*, pp. 103-119.
11. Sessions, “Attorney General Sessions Gives an Address on the Importance of Free Speech on College Campuses.”
12. Goldwater Institute, “Campus Free Speech: A Legislative Proposal;” The Koch-backed group Generation Opportunity is heavily supporting this legislative initiative. See Powers, “Group Supports Bob Rommel, Dennis Baxley for Bills on Campus Free Speech.”
13. For summaries of legal cases and principles, see ACLU, “Speech on Campus”; and Cohen, “Exploring Free Speech on Campuses.”
14. For an interesting debate on the legal aspects of campus free speech related to the Berkeley events, see Chemerinsky, “Hate Speech is Protected Free Speech, Even on College Campuses;” and Post, “There is no 1st Amendment Right to Speak on a College Campus.”
15. Andrews, “Federal Judge Stops Auburn from Canceling Richard Spencer Speech. Protests and a Scuffle Greet Him.”
16. Southern Poverty Law Center, “Richard Bertrand Spencer.”
17. Kirm, “UFF-UF and GAU-UF Urge Cancellation of White Supremacist Speaker at UF.”
18. Yan, “White Supremacist Richard Spencer Denied at University of Florida.”
19. Respass, “Spencer’s Organization to Legally Challenge UF’s Decision”; Kam, “University of Florida Opens Door to White Nationalist Speech.”

20. Fuchs, “Personal Message from President Fuchs.” The web site for #TogetherUF may be found at: <http://news.ufl.edu/articles/2017/10/togetheruf-campaign-to-hold-virtual-assembly.php>
21. Clarkson, “UF Sought Tim Tebow in Push to Counter Richard Spencer Speech.”
22. United Faculty of Florida is part of a coalition of labor groups working to restore lost wages due to this event and to Hurricane Irma, which shut down the UF campus for six days in fall 2017.
23. The union also explored the option of filing a grievance on the grounds that the university had failed to provide safe working conditions. But there was no strong consensus about the viability of such a grievance or about what kinds of remedies to propose.
24. One such digital petition that we circulated via e-mail is here: actionnetwork.org/forms/tell-university-of-florida-president-and-trustees-do-not-host-richard-spencer-on-our-campus
25. For examples, see Abend-David, “Propagating Nazi Ideology is not Free Speech;” Schueller, “Richard Spencer’s Visit is not Required by the First Amendment;” Goda, “Universities Must Challenge Richard Spencer’s ‘Right’ to Incite a Race War in America.”
26. Schuyler, “How 5 College Kids Brought Thousands Together to Shut Down Richard Spencer;” Arzola, “No Nazis at UF” Protesters at University of Florida Ahead of White Nationalist’s Speech;” see the “No Nazis at UF” petition here: <https://www.change.org/p/university-of-florida-no-nazis-at-uf>
27. Widespread agreement on this topic includes the University of Florida, which has partnered with the local community to research and address racial disparities. See University of Florida Bureau of Economic and Business Research, “Understanding Racial Inequity in Alachua County.”
28. ACLU, “Speech on Campus.”
29. Rozsa and Svrluga, “A White Nationalist is Coming to Campus. Florida Prepares as though for a Disaster.”

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