

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## Fighting for Palestinian Justice at a Hostile University

by Dr. Lucy Arnold, Adelita, Chaviv, Lea Howarth, Mia Randall



ENCAMPMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHARLOTTE 2024. PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR

**O**n April 29, 2024 student protestors erected a Gaza solidarity encampment on the quad directly in front of the student union at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. On May 1, sprinklers were turned on in this area for six hours, which flooded the encampment. The encampment was forced to relocate to a quad on the other (less visible to visitors) side of campus in front of Fretwell, a building housing English, math, and other traditional academic departments, surrounding the statue of a man carving himself from stone, who normally hangs out in that quad alone. On May 5, student representatives of the Gaza encampment met with university officials to present their demands, which, not unlike in the other Gaza solidarity encampments on campuses around the U.S., requested disclosure of funding to Israel, divestment from any projects engaging in colonization and genocide of Palestinians, defense of student activists on campus, and declaration of the genocide in Palestine as a humanitarian crime. Around 6 AM on May 6, the day after this meeting with the administration, campus police raided the encampment and students were forced to leave, under threat of arrest. One student was arrested.

*This piece is a dialogue between a professor at UNC Charlotte and a group of students who were involved in the Gaza solidarity encampment on campus.*

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**LA: Could someone start by providing a bit of context for the encampment, including numbers, interactions with administration, and other general information?**

MR: When I first joined, the numbers were small, and the school was attempting to stifle the movement from growing in many ways. That didn't stop people from pushing forward. Students continued to put up tents and take them down every day to avoid violating "campus policy." We even attempted multiple times to follow campus procedure through student government and administrative avenues, both of which simply caused delays in progress for the movement. It had become blatantly clear to me that the school's plan of action was to "wait us out" and hope we would give up or fizzle out by the end of the semester. We continued to receive community donations, food, art supplies, and hygiene products that allowed us to remain in the space. We moved locations after the administration ran sprinklers for over five hours; they did the same thing in the new location as well.

**LA: What did you learn from your experiences with the encampment and the development of this collective? Who and what were your teachers?**

MR: As someone who had very little knowledge or context coming into the encampment, I learned so much about the history of the collective struggle and how far back the roots run both within this struggle and interconnected struggles globally. I actually just went to the encampment one day and was welcomed in by many

people. I've been passionate about speaking up and advocacy for many years, so when I heard about the encampment from social media, I wanted to see what I could do to get involved. News outlets often tell the stories of the oppressed in a way that is digestible to the oppressors, and it is something that never sat right with me. I wanted to know what was going on, on my campus, with my own eyes. Being exposed to professors teaching, books and movies, and even the storytelling of Palestinian classmates and experts: it allowed not only an opportunity to learn, become more conscious and more aware, but an opportunity to be involved, to make a difference, to put my passion into action.

At the height of the encampment, we had well over 200 students, professors, and community members helping and participating in the protests AND the teach-ins. There were teach-ins from professors, professionals, and even students. There were readings and movie showings. We ate meals together at least once a day, if not multiple times. There were arts and crafts, music, soccer, and football, just to name a few activities! I remember one of the first teach-ins I attended was about Guantanamo Bay and the interconnectedness of different struggles and movements around the world; it opened my eyes to the patterns of oppression I have seen in my past (many of which I saw before even knowing anything about Palestine at all), and the similarities were showing up all over. When an entire population's existence is this politicized, activism and protest become a building block of the movement. But it was just one brick in the foundation of Palestinian liberation and total liberation. That is why people such as myself, who have come from a very different background with very little knowledge, can see themselves with a place in this movement, with allies who are willing to fight for my liberation in the same way I am fighting for theirs.

C: I came into the encampment with a solid knowledge base of Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, revolutionary philosophy, and the like; however, I did not have as solid a base in genuine praxis, which is what drew me to the encampment in the first place. Books and writings from decades, even centuries, ago can only take you so far in the process of liberation. My biggest teachers were my comrades, for they too were learning from one another. We all came into this space with different relationships with revolutionary ideas, different relationships with Palestine, different relationships with imperialism; but through our ability to connect as a collective we began learning more than what theory could ever teach.

**LA: I am a lover of theory. I would love for you to say more about how your connections helped you learn about revolutionary ideas. Any specific stories?**

C: One of our biggest issues was with structure: when that many people come together with varying levels of knowledge regarding leftist ideology(ies), it's bound to happen that disagreements arise about the best way to organize ourselves and work together. For this, Engels's

"On Authority" was incredibly beneficial, because it helps remind and educate us that while authority is a scary word, and often used to describe violence committed by the state, a sense of collective authority is required to best allocate resources and facilitate education.



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LH: The easiest way to answer is that we all learned from each other. I came into the space with a revolutionary ideological backdrop, roughly based in the teachings from liberation movements such as the Zapatistas or the Algerian National Liberation Front. We have looked to a lot of Palestinian literature and media as well as other various revolutionary texts. We are a diverse group of students and our collective ideologies do not represent a monolith. But we unite on the front of calling for a liberated Palestine. During the time of the physical encampment space, we would organize daily readings or teach-ins. We have had reading sessions on the martyred poet Refaat Alareer and we have held readings excerpted from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. We have held various film screenings, in and outside of the encampment, inviting everyone to join, such as *Fedayin: George Abdullah's Fight*. We have had multiple teach-ins

led by a healthcare worker who had volunteered in Gaza. We have incorporated religious teachings as well, coordinating Jumu'ah prayers at the encampment with local mosques. Jewish Voice for Peace was also very active in leading public relations teaching sessions, to guide students into the best mechanisms of presenting our movement. We coordinated with *withinthemargins\_* on Instagram and community members to facilitate a mobile liberation library where students and community members alike were encouraged to join us in the encampment space for independent reading sessions. We had a teach-in on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Day led by an Indigenous UNC Charlotte professor. We have overseen collective research in relation to UNC Charlotte's funding and academic ties to the colonial settler state of Israel; this has meant orienting our understanding of a variety of fields: archaeology, historiography, property laws, etc. The experience in and of itself was all-around conducive to new learnings daily.

A: For me: I came to the encampment with basically nothing. I did my best to know the basic history of Palestine, and I paid a lot of attention to what's happening in Gaza and the West Bank to keep myself up to date. I learned a lot within the encampment, so I guess my teachers were my comrades within the space. We had a lot of speakers come talk and teach, and those were so informative, and I enjoyed going to them when I had the chance during the encampment.

There were many teach-ins led by professors such as one led by an Indigenous professor on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Day. A teach-in was held by a medical volunteer who worked in Gaza. Daily readings were held, centering theory and similar revolutionary ideologies. We had a couple of film screenings as well.

**LA: On a related but perhaps parallel note, safety has been a concern voiced by administration and other institutional actors around the encampments, both locally and globally. How do you frame the issues around "safety"?**

LH: Safety within the encampment being framed as an issue of concern by academic institutions across the country is, at its core, a purely laughable issue. As university students, we are all aware of the historical significance of student protests as well as standard practice responses implemented by the state and its subordinate institutions. It wasn't students who posed issues of safety at Kent or Jackson State Universities, and the same is true today. It wasn't the universities who led initiatives to abstain from enabling genocide, and the same is true today.

Safety amongst encampment members was an issue of discussion that was constantly centered and focused

on: we had a rotating safety committee that served to patrol the encampment for potential agitators, as well as to educate and lead other encampment members in relevant practices of safety. Agitators were a constant issue, between students driving university golf carts on the encampment field, hecklers from Turning Point USA, or Zionist hecklers; most alarmingly, an individual would drive past the encampment on a longboard late at night in order to flash encampment members. These instances were not prioritized as an issue of safety by UNC Charlotte officials, despite their being wholly aware of these occurrences; one must imagine why. Continually, the abhorrent statements issued by the chancellor insinuated that encampment members were potentially violent— in a letter to the 107 UNC Charlotte faculty members<sup>1</sup> who had argued for free speech and academic freedom in a letter to the editor published in the student newspaper, she intentionally chose to construct an image of the encampment reminiscent of the same Orientalist fear-mongering used to describe Palestinians or any social movement that challenges the status quo: “Knives, boxcutters, baseball sized rocks, and a mattress used to collect and store feces.”<sup>2</sup> How sensationalistic could she possibly be -- insinuating domestic and biological terrorism when we just want our university to be in line with our ideals for a school we pay tens of thousands of dollars to attend? Additionally, a common narrative forced by universities is that a bulk of individuals present at the encampment are non-students. These are speculations made to render our demands illegitimate. A majority of encampment members were students or alumni. Community members (non-students) were present, but state

appropriations fund state universities. In 2020, for example, \$3.1 billion of taxpayer funds were appropriated to the UNC system— every North Carolinian absolutely deserves a say in understanding and dictating what is done with their tax dollars. In short, concerns about safety are narrativized by state institutions to irreverently slander the solidarity encampment movement.

A: I agree with Lea. The administration seems very quick to denounce these movements, including our own, as violent, disruptive, and unsafe. But I have felt so incredibly safe and respected within our encampment compared to any other time I have been on campus. I rested easy knowing that we had a team that served as security for us, and there was always someone or a group of people still up to take care of us at night. These bigger

groups were usually hanging out pulling all-nighters for exams or just having fun, and hearing them laughing, softly speaking, and enjoying themselves made me feel easy and safe when I went to sleep within the encampment.

In fact, when other protestors, such as the anti-abortion and right-wing religious groups, come to campus, I feel incredibly unsafe. And it’s comically alarming that these groups who actively go up to students and heckle them and harass them aren’t getting any sort of reprimand or public statement from the university to students about the safety risk like our encampment has gotten. Or even have the police intervene, not that police intervention is desirable in any of these situations.

MR: The manner in which administrators across the country have framed safety within conversations of the protests has, in my opinion, shown not only which students’ safety they value over others, but also which



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humans are more deserving of their protection or “safety.” Encampment participants included many students of color, many students working to support themselves and their families while going to school, and many juggling educational, financial, and personal responsibilities while working to keep the encampment alive and safe. Yet, we needed our own safety team because the school was actively working against our safety, whether flooding us with sprinklers or being complacent about counter-protestors and agitators. It echoes institutional messages worldwide that those who speak against oppressive structures of any kind are not safe to do so. The school’s attempts to discredit or stifle us only emboldened solidarity because the school chose to protect the oppressor. We chose to reframe the safety of the encampment as a necessary component when different

threats arose and as it became more apparent that we would be vulnerable without the organized protection of each other. It was our own safety team who mitigated harm when police showed up in the early hours while everyone in the camp was sleeping, who allowed people within the encampment to feel safer while being there, and who kept our various campus events safe. And one of the beautiful things about the space of the encampment was that safety wasn't born out of fear or control but respect, autonomy, and communication.

**LA: Some of you are using aliases or partial names. Would anyone be up for sharing your perspective on names in the context of this dialogue?**

C: In Jewish culture, a name isn't just what you are known as -- it is what you are known for, so the meaning of a name is incredibly important for one's spiritual life. I have dedicated myself to Palestinian liberation and will continue to do so until the Zionist state has crumbled. Chaviv is the Hebraic equivalent to the Arabic Habibi -- "my love" -- and is the masculinized version of Chava -- "life." I chose it to symbolize the inseparable truth of Jewish and Muslim, Jewish and Palestinian solidarity and struggle.

In a political safety sense, my alias separates my day-to-day life from my organizing. The UNC Charlotte admin keeps a very close eye on student activism (especially for Palestinian solidarity) and has gone to great lengths to censor and block revolutionary progression. By using an alias, I create a counter-block for myself and others; Chaviv, as an idea, is the shield I need to fight another day and stay safe doing it.

**LA: What lessons do you think our university specifically should take from the experiences with the encampment? What's your most hopeful vision for the university?**

A: Well, my main takeaway is to actively listen to your students and what they are demanding of you. We are students who are actively paying this university; we have a right to know where our money is going; and, if we don't like it, we have every right to ask our university for divestments and disclosures.

C: I, for one, am heartbroken, yet unsurprised, by the university's treatment of protestors, encampment members, and uninvolved students (such as our Islamic student organizations) caught in the crossfires of discrimination and intentional profiling. The spreading of misinformation accusing an encampment/Palestinian solidarity movement, led by Arab, Black, and brown students, of violence and destruction only further reinforces the Zionist narrative of "innocent civilians attacked by evil Muslim forces." Not only is it incredibly racialized in its propaganda, but it is incredibly dangerous for Black and brown students, especially Palestinian/Muslim students.

MR: I think the university was put in a position to prove that history doesn't have to repeat itself, and although they failed miserably, they still have the opportunity to learn better for next time. Whether they choose to or not, that is up to them. Hopefully, the school will learn to listen to students, to hear them when they cry out for help. Hopefully, the school will see that the students are the life blood of school history, culture, and change. Our university very clearly exemplified their colonial, imperial interests, but they will learn that a university campus is capable of change and capable of taking a stance: we are not a branch of corporations but a branch of collective liberation.

**LA: What about next steps for the solidarity and justice for Palestine movement? What are your thoughts?**

A: A majority of those present at the encampment were either current students, alumni, or students from other universities within the UNC system. Due to the nature of how the UNC Management Company allocates funding throughout the UNC system, this allows students more flexibility and solidarity to work together to research funding and call for further transparency. As for those having no connections to UNC Charlotte or other universities in the UNC system, North Carolina's colleges and universities receive annual tax appropriations of more than \$4 billion. On a per-student basis, UNC schools receive more public funding than almost any other schools in the nation. Taxpayers, who are legally bound to provide this level of financial support to the UNC system, are owed transparency both in funding and in decision making by the board of trustees.

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*On the day after the forcible removal of the encampment, the administration described the events in an email to the campus community. Many points were covered in this email, but one part in particular is striking: "Protestors -- many of whom are not members of the University community..." What comprises the University community? We cannot be a community-centered, public university if we decide to declare as outsiders community members and students who choose to participate in activism on campus, especially activism that centers humanity and inclusion.*

*It is not lost on us that the events of April and May coincided with a push from the North Carolina university system to remove all DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) measures and staff from campus. Those offices supporting student identity and equity offer spaces for marginalized students to organize and collaborate in generative ways, but the structures themselves are inarguably stabilized and empowered only as far as, the neoliberal interests of the university allow them to extend. So, when faced with the controversy of the activism around Gaza, the neoliberal university administration sided with conservative power structures seeking to silence all voices that diverge from the White supremacist, patriarchal,*

capitalist, cisheteronormative norms that dominate political power.

*The Palestinian Liberation movement on campus did not hope to organize solely within the confines of the controlled and limited spaces offered by university offices, and these two coinciding events, the Palestinian Liberation encampment and the eradication of DEI offices in the university system, only emphasize the ways in which neoliberalism cannot meet calls for liberation. The hope we have is not embodied by neoliberalism and colonialism; it is the hope offered by the students and community members who built and enacted the Gaza solidarity movement on campus and imagine spaces where liberation for all is possible.*

## Notes

1. This letter to the editor was published in the *Niner Times* on May 7.
2. This letter, which includes additional hyperbolized statements from administration, was reported on by the campus newspaper, the *Niner Times* on May 9.

**Dr. Lucy Arnold** is an Assistant Professor of Education at Wingate University; their research interests include critical pedagogy, writing assessment, community engagement, activism, and critical service-learning. Their first book, with co-author Heather Coffey, is *Transformative Critical Service-Learning: Theory and Practice for Engaging Community College and University Learners in Building an Activist Mindset*, with Myers Press.

**Adelita** is currently a junior at UNC Charlotte; they grew up in the Appalachias and spent their young adult years doing environmental activism work as well as serving their Latino community.

**Chaviv** is a senior and transfer student at UNC Charlotte. They have been a member of the UNCC Revolutionary Student Front since its creation in 2023 and Jewish Voice for Peace since the Gaza Solidarity Encampment.

**Lea Howarth** is an alumna of UNC Charlotte and graduated with a degree in international relations in 2023. They have been involved in activist spaces since their teenage years, having grown up as an Arab-American post-9/11, which is itself a radicalizing experience.

**Mia Randall** is an MA student at UNC Charlotte. They have been involved in activism from youth and got involved with activism for Palestine in April.



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