

RADICAL TEACHER

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

Notes from the People's Circle for Palestine

by Jenna Maingot



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO ENCAMPMENT 2024. PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR

Operating from May 2nd to July 3rd, 2024, the People's Circle for Palestine at the University of Toronto (UoT) was a space for learning, community building, and resistance at the centre of campus. The main demands of U of T Occupy for Palestine, the student group that set up the encampment, are for UoT to "disclose investments, divest from endowments that have direct and indirect investments sustaining the Israeli apartheid, occupation, and illegal settlement of Palestine, and terminate all partnerships with Israeli academic institutions" (UoT Occupy for Palestine, 2024, pp. 2-3).

I am a white female settler of European descent and graduate student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at UoT. I study adult education and community development. I'm writing this less than a week after having to clear the encampment following a court order and amid the looming threat of violent police action and arrest. What follows is a series of reflections about my experience at the encampment.

With a background in climate justice organizing, I am relatively new to Palestine solidarity work. Being at the People's Circle for Palestine encompassed learning far beyond my studies and previous organizing experience. I participated in the space as a student, marshal, supporter, facilitator, and camper. Stepping into the People's Circle for Palestine was like stepping into another world where care, compassion, and learning were central. It was a world where people were paying attention and actively calling for justice.

The encampment was a space to enact different ways of living and being with each other. Learning came from being in the space, organizing activism, and navigating daily life with others. The experiences of collective living, storytelling, cross-cultural learning, problem-solving, mutual care, and support will forever stay with me. Many students that I talked to didn't have the opportunity to talk about Palestine in their classes. Entering the encampment allowed these important conversations to happen. Care, compassion, and support were also central at the encampment as evidenced by the flourishing of mutual aid and peer support. In the first few days following the establishment of the encampment, there was an overwhelming amount of food, supplies, and support from the wider community. There was so much support that student organizers had to ask the community to stop bringing supplies. Instead, any time something was needed such as food, water,

and camping supplies, the organizers would put out a call out and within a couple of hours the supplies would be brought to the encampment. Spiritual care, Afro-Indigenous care, and first aid were also provided onsite by peers and community members.

As well, cross-cultural learning and storytelling emerged through various cultural ceremonies and activities. There was a sacred fire at the encampment for multiple weeks that was maintained by Indigenous firekeepers, and which was a site for storytelling and knowledge sharing. Daily prayers and a weekly Shabbat ritual were also held for anyone wanting to participate. Despite not being Jewish, on a few occasions I participated in the Friday Shabbat ritual. As a camper, I found it was important to learn how to live together collectively. Everyone had a role or way that they contributed to the space. These roles included working at the food tent, organizing and managing supplies, acting as a marshal, medic, or legal observer, or being on one of the various teams, including the garbage, social media, urban planning, and programming teams.

I also took a course which was held at the encampment. The course, titled "Social Action and Popular Education," was taught by Dr. Clelia Rodriguez. This was a unique course because the central learning activities involved being at the encampment, experiencing teach-ins, helping with everyday tasks, and creating art. The course moved beyond theoretical discussions in the classroom and instead invited us to be embedded in social action and popular education on campus. One assignment for this class was to present our own teach-ins. The teach-ins covered various topics, including activism, the environment, and islamophobia. Since the class was often held at the encampment, other students, community



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members, and supporters could join and participate in the discussions too.

Beyond my weekly classes, I also participated in numerous teach-ins, workshops, and events at the encampment. The teach-ins and workshops were led by students, faculty, and community members. For instance, a South African lawyer led a teach-in on the legal implications of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) case brought forward by South Africa against Israel. Numerous teach-ins touched on settler colonialism and Indigenous resistance in so-called Canada. Other teach-ins focused on student activism, labour organizing, and pinkwashing. As well, there were teach-ins about Sudan, the Armenian genocide, and the persecution of Afghans in Pakistan. Creative workshops were held, including Tatreez (embroidery), drumming, and Dabke (dance), and various art installations were constructed within and just outside the encampment. For example, painted banners lined the outside of the fences surrounding the encampment. Many student groups created their own banners to show their support for the encampment. As well, a large olive tree, constructed from paper-mâché, wood, and wire and then painted with phrases and symbols of resistance was the final structure standing in the encampment. The tree was a collaborative art piece, as anyone visiting the encampment was invited to contribute to it.

The daily workshops, teach-ins, creative activities, and conversations made the opportunities for learning endless. A major part of my learning also came from being in the space with others, problem-solving, listening, and reflecting on my role within and outside the space. During my time at the encampment, I had many conversations with campers, students, and community members.

In one conversation, I spoke to a law student from Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU) who was visiting the encampment to attend a teach-in. She spoke to me about her experience being part of a small group of law students who wrote an open letter on Palestine in October 2023 that was signed by over 70 students, and which condemned the law school's neutral position on Palestine (Chaudhary, 2023). She spoke of how she and her peers

faced professional censorship and lost opportunities for internships at many Toronto law firms and with the Ontario government, which screened law students who signed the letter. I spoke with her almost 7 months after the letter was released, and she explained that while she knows she has greatly reduced her options of future employers, she would not have wanted to work at places that are refusing to hire students who signed the open letter. A few weeks after our conversation, on May 31st, 2024, TMU released a report on the external review of the letter, which concluded that the students did not breach the code of conduct and cannot be sanctioned (MacDonald, 2024). The TMU student's story, along with many others I heard, speaks to how many people participating in the encampment were facing negative repercussions or making sacrifices to be there. Despite these sacrifices, people continued to show up every day for two months to support the encampment. Being a full-time student who was frequently on campus, I felt that being part of the encampment was an important way for me to show up and fight for the social justice that I study and speak about in my program.

Additionally, at the encampment, anyone could teach, and anyone could learn. Formal roles, degrees, and titles disappeared. Often, I didn't know anyone's real name, or whether they were a student, faculty, staff, or community member. Everyone brought knowledge to share, no matter what level of formal education they had. Someone helped me set up

my tent. Another person helped sort the trash. Others handled the meals each day. People stepped into roles and provided their skills so the encampment could function. I often floated between different roles and stepped in when support was needed with marshalling, rearranging the layout of the encampment, cleaning, and fixing damaged tents.

Most of the time, I found myself listening. I listened to people's stories and experiences as well as debates about how to keep up the momentum and achieve our demands. The more I talk to fellow students about their experiences at The People's Circle for Palestine, the more evident it is that the community space created through the encampment was something new that many people



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hadn't experienced before. UofT is known for not having a close-knit community, since most students commute from outside the city. The encampment changed this. The encampment was a space for building community. I met dozens of people beyond the boundaries of my academic department and the university. I even bumped into someone from high school, whom I had not seen in over eight years. Importantly, the space allowed for connecting and reconnecting.

Learning also happened during times of difficulty and conflict. The encampment wasn't perfect. Racism, sexism, transphobia, and ableism are deeply embedded in our society and the encampment was not an exception. It's important to recognize these issues and find ways to address them. For instance, one evening I was present for a tense community meeting in which campers spoke of witnessing and experiencing anti-black and anti-Indigenous racism in the encampment space. Some campers left due to their experiences of racism. This was difficult to hear. Addressing these issues immediately and effectively was a challenging task for the organizers. Following the revelations, space was made for listening to black and Indigenous voices. Experienced organizers, including black and Indigenous community members, stepped in to provide support. There are many ways the encampment could have been improved and it's important to recognize the harm caused and hold each other accountable. However, one lesson I have taken away is that just because the encampment wasn't perfect, doesn't mean it wasn't worth doing. Many of these lessons can be taken from this encampment to future organizing spaces. While perfection is not feasible, it's important to recognize and address harm in new and existing organizing spaces.

Lessons from previous encampments and student activism were also brought to the People's Circle for Palestine. For instance, the student-led fossil fuel divestment campaign at the university taught organizers that UofT's president, Meric Gertler, could and would refuse to listen to recommendations put forward by a committee. In 2016, following consistent student activism, UofT created a committee to put forward fossil fuel divestment recommendations (Alexander & Anielska, 2021). When the committee produced a series of recommendations, Gertler rejected all of them. Five years later, in 2021, the university changed its commitment and announced a plan to divest from fossil fuels by 2030 (Alexander & Anielska, 2021). The same tactics that delayed fossil fuel divestment for years was not going to work for divestment from companies complicit in Israel's genocide in Palestine. When UofT's administration offered to create a committee to review the school's current investments and make recommendations, the students refused to accept the offer. The students explained that divestment must be immediate and asked for a clause to prevent the president from rejecting the committee's recommendations. The students held out and forced the university to go to the courts if they wanted the encampment to end.

On July 2nd, 2024, an Ontario court ruled in favour of UofT's administration and ordered that the camp be cleared within 26 hours (CBC News, 2024). This ruling was

not a complete surprise and was based on the grounds of private property. We prepared for this decision. However, it didn't make leaving easier. There was always a small piece of hope left. I hoped that the outpouring of community support for the encampment would make those in power come to their senses. The ruling proved otherwise. The ruling proved that private property and maintaining the status quo are held above the right to protest and calls for justice. Now comes the lessons on how to keep going. How do we maintain momentum when so many people are burnt out? How do we keep resisting and organizing until we see a free Palestine? How do we keep going until all people who face oppression are free?

These questions have been in my mind over the last few weeks. Recently, for me, keeping up momentum has meant returning to my community to engage with people and find ways to invite them to participate in this work. Whether it's inviting them to volunteer their time, paint a banner, attend a protest, write an email, or simply have a conversation, I aim to make space for people to join the countless others who have been working non-stop for years to fight for justice. In the last ten months, I have seen the importance of Palestine solidarity work in the collective struggle against power, settler colonialism, oppression, and apartheid globally.

Even though the physical space of the encampment has been cleared, the community, relationships, and learning remain. The activism has also continued. Student groups are continuing to call out the complicity of the university in the ongoing genocide. In August and September 2024, rallies and sit-ins were held on campus and at the University of Toronto Asset Management office. In response, there was police violence and an attempt by UofT's administration to repress students' right to protest on campus. In August 2024, the university released a protest policy that prevents "affixing signs, posters, or flyers (including the use of chalk, marker, paint, and projections) outside designated areas" (University of Toronto, 2024). Despite this policy, protests on campus continue. As well, local organizing groups continue to be active in the fight to end Canadian complicity in the genocide. There is a wide network of local pro-Palestine organizing groups across the country which have been carrying out protests, rallies, blockades, teach-ins, outreach, and national campaigns directed at companies and the federal government. One ongoing national campaign is the Arms Embargo Now campaign that is led by a wide coalition of organizations and which calls on the federal government to enact a full and immediate arms embargo on Israel. The goal of this campaign is to end the flow of all weapons and military equipment to and from Israel (Arms Embargo Now, 2024).

For those of us who are newer to the movement and to organizing, these learnings from first-hand experiences at the encampment are eye-opening. Today, reflecting on these experiences is strengthening my resolve. My experiences are still fresh in my mind, and I imagine I will continue to learn from them for many years. My experience at the encampment allowed me to learn about myself and my role in advocating for change and justice. Importantly, the encampment showed me the potential of

building collective power. A memorable moment for me was the act of solidarity that came from faculty, labour unions, community organizations, and the wider community when UofT's administration threatened to forcibly clear the encampment. On May 24th, 2024, the university issued an ultimatum to students demanding that they clear the encampment by Monday, May 27th at 8 a.m. or be in violation of a trespass notice and face police enforcement. On May 25th, 2024, Laura Walton, the President of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), which represents 54 unions and one million workers in Ontario, released a letter to UofT's president condemning this act and calling on all workers to show up to a solidarity rally on the morning of May 27th (Walton, 2024). In the letter addressed to UofT's president, Walton stated that "if you decide to move against the students, you'll have to go through the workers first" (Walton, 2024). Similarly, Amnesty International Canada published a press release warning the university against criminalizing the encampment (Amnesty International, 2024).

When Monday morning came around, hundreds of workers, faculty, students, and community members showed up at the gates of the encampment in the pouring rain to support and protect the students. From within the encampment, I was listening to the speeches and seeing the outpouring of support. It was inspiring. The act of solidarity gave me hope and reignited my commitment to being at the encampment. Continued acts of solidarity from students, faculty, and the community changed my perspective of what is possible when we come together to push back against oppressive institutions. Building this type of power takes a lot of work and comes with sacrifices. However, I now know that I'm willing to make some of those sacrifices.

The encampment made me evaluate who I am and what I can do. Doing nothing meant complicity and giving in to feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness. I knew I needed to do something. I started by showing up to rallies and visiting the encampment to attend teach-ins and workshops. This eventually progressed as I became more engaged after talking to people and hearing what was needed. The simplest way to support calls for justice is to show up. Showing up is exactly what I did. I showed up to help when and where I could.

Overall, the People's Circle for Palestine was one space that was created in a long and ongoing journey of resistance. We must create more radical community spaces in order to continue imagining and enacting a more just world. Today, the lessons and learnings from the encampment are propelling me forward to continue organizing because they give me hope that justice is within reach. I truly believe that Palestine will be free in my lifetime.

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