

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Dispatches from the Encampments and Beyond: Teaching and Student Protests for Palestine

by Bob Rosen and Joseph Entin



IMAGE: THE PEOPLE'S CIRCLE FOR PALESTINE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO (2024). PHOTO COURTESY OF JENNA MAINGOT

**B**ack in May, when we sent out the call for “Dispatches from the Encampments and Beyond: Teaching and Student Protests for Palestine,” the race for the US Presidency was close, public pressure for a permanent cease fire in Gaza seemed to be building, and Palestine solidarity encampments were blossoming on college campuses.<sup>1</sup> Now, as we write this in mid-November, Donald Trump and a horde of right-wing fanatics are set to take over the government, the death toll in Gaza and the West Bank continues to rise gruesomely, Israel has bombed Lebanon, and the encampments have been shut down or abandoned. It seems clear that the United States and other Western governments will continue to support Israel’s genocidal slaughter with arms shipments, money, and diplomatic cover, and that the corporate media in these nations will continue to serve as channels for Israeli propaganda. Palestine support protests continue, for sure, on and off campus, but the outlook is bleak.

Since the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, at least 43,000 Palestinians, including 16,000 children, have been killed in Gaza alone.<sup>2</sup> Even were the killing to stop today, the death toll would continue to rise, as thousands are missing, buried beneath the rubble, as hunger and disease have weakened many more, as doctors have been killed and hospitals have been destroyed, and as food aid has been blocked. Survivors will have to deal with crippling injuries, disease, the loss of family members, psychological trauma, homelessness. In addition, Gaza’s institutional life has been devastated, including the destruction of all Palestinian universities in the territory, in what scholars have described as scholasticide. The 75-year history of displacement, occupation, expropriation, and killing of the Palestinian people continues relentlessly.

In the midst of this, we want to remember the campus encampments, ephemeral as they were, as a source of hope. According to BestColleges.com, at least 121 encampments were set up on US college campuses, and many more at universities around the world. Tens of thousands of students (and some faculty members) participated, often at considerable risk to their physical safety and academic careers.<sup>3</sup> We hoped to create a record, however partial, of this inspiring movement. We weren’t sure how many people would have the energy and desire to write for us, after living in tents, facing the police, and recovering from the destruction of what they’d built, but people did write, and we’re pleased to present dispatches from Portland State University, San Jose State University, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, the SoCal for Palestine Coalition, and the University of Toronto. We make no claims that these dispatches are representative, but we believe they shed light on what was so important about the encampments movement.

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Palestine support encampments on college campuses were above all about solidarity. The protests against funding and arms for Israel, and the demands for divestment from companies that do business with Israel,

were highly visible acts of solidarity with the victims of Israel’s horrific violence. But they also involved mutual solidarity, between Muslim and Jewish protestors, between white students and BIPOC students, between students and professors, who often came to each other’s defense. An ethic of generosity and care grew out of the necessity of living and working together in often difficult conditions, and in opposition to the competitive and individualist values that dominated the institutions the protestors were challenging.

The personal and group connections forged in the encampments accompanied connections made between political issues, as protestors – through readings and discussions and teach-ins -- deepened their understandings of the parallels between North American settler colonialism and Israeli’s history as a settler colonial state. Students came to understand the connections between the increasingly obvious US imperial aims in the Middle East and earlier imperialist wars, whether in Vietnam or Afghanistan or Iraq, as well as the long traditions of anti-colonial resistance.

The encampments were also centers of learning about the university itself. College presidents and other administrators claimed to champion free speech while insisting that criticism of the state of Israel was antisemitic hate speech that needed to be squelched and punished. Institutions supposedly dedicated to the disinterested pursuit of truth succumbed rapidly to the pressure of politicians and large donors. The intensity and cruelty of the police crackdowns, which administrators allowed and often invited, and in which over 3,100 protestors were arrested at universities across the country, drove home forcefully these lessons about universities.<sup>4</sup>

However briefly and however haltingly, the encampments offered a vision of a different kind of higher education, one undeterred in seeking critical understanding of the world, one based on community not individualism, on cooperation not competition, one unafraid to follow its critiques of capitalism and imperialism to their logical conclusion. It’s no surprise that university officials, their image stained by their support of Israeli genocide, wanted to crush these encampments.

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The attack on protestors was particularly fierce at Portland State University. In “Taking up Space and Making Demands,” Aaron Roussell and an anonymous co-author describe “police in soldier costumes” sent in to remove students from the campus library, which they’d occupied and renamed in honor of slain Palestinian poet Refaat Alareer. Protestors had “built community through art, poetry, and free expression,” but the PSU administration, heavily involved with the Boeing corporation, saw them as “an enemy insurgency.” The protests may have been suppressed, but students had

been able to “shake off the mental bonds” of a university education.

Hypocrisy and double standards abound in corporate media coverage and university statements about safety and violence at the encampments. In “Fighting for Palestinian Justice at a Hostile University,” a professor, Lucy Arnold, and four students, Adelita, Chaviv, Lea Howarth, and Mia Randall, discuss the attacks on their encampment at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. The administration flooded them with sprinklers, looked away as counter-protestors harassed them, and authorized a raid by campus police, while making false and inflammatory charges of protestor violence. Students did not fail to notice the racism that informed these charges, which sought to paint a picture of “innocent civilians attacked by evil Muslim forces.”

Hypocrisy and racism also teamed up in the authorities’ response to protest at San Jose State University. In “Islamophobia, Dirty Water Tactics, and Student Encampments for Gaza,” Sang Hea Kil writes as the “only faculty member who camped with the students and openly supported them in the news media,” actions that led to her suspension. She attributes her isolation to a culture of fear among faculty and to the largely Muslim presence at the encampment -- all despite the university’s loudly proclaimed commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

“Decolonized Worldmaking: Campus Encampments for Civic Engagement,” by the SoCal for Palestine Coalition, is a wide-ranging essay that describes encampments at public universities across southern California. Set against descriptions of “police departments, sheriff’s departments, and state highway patrols in riot gear,” noble words from the Chancellor at the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement ring especially hollow. But community building in the encampments, instances of student-faculty solidarity, and “unofficial decolonized graduation celebrations” offered another vision of civic engagement and “forever changed many students and faculty.”

The United States may be the main funder and enabler of Israel’s genocidal aggression, but protest was worldwide. In “Notes from the People’s Circle for Palestine,” Jenna Maingot recounts her experience at an encampment that demanded an end to the University of Toronto’s investments in Israel and academic partnerships. Indigenous voices and culture were central; a “sacred fire” anchored the encampment and was maintained for the duration. Despite an outpouring of support by workers and community members as well as students and faculty, the encampment was shut down. But, Maingot writes, “the experiences of collective living, storytelling, cross-cultural learning, problem-solving, mutual care, and support will forever stay with me.”

Katherine Blouin and Girish Daswani also participated in the People’s Circle for Palestine at the University of Toronto. Their essay, “What Encampments for Palestine Teach Us About Epistemic Justice,” focuses on the question of the ownership of land, not just land in

Palestine but the land the University sits on and claims to own. The Indigenous-led encampment staked its ground right next to Convocation Hall, a classical edifice where a majestic multi-day graduation ceremony took place which included a Land Acknowledgment as part of the “decolonial performativity of the white settler colonial University.”

The last contribution to this collection is “From the Land to the Seeds: Pedagogies of Liberation,” by Clelia O. Rodríguez, a major force in the People’s Circle for Palestine, a faculty member at the University of Toronto whose class, “Social Action and Popular Education,” was held at the encampment.<sup>5</sup> The fierce and loving poem at the heart of this piece captures the spiritual and Indigenous elements of this and many other Palestine solidarity encampments.

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Ultimately the camps were destroyed or abandoned as the spring semester ended. A few were resurrected in the fall, and perhaps the spring of 2025 will bring a new flowering. But whatever happens, they’ve left an indelible mark on those who participated in them. Thousands of students were radicalized by their experience. What they’ve learned and what they’ve felt will inform and energize future struggles, of which there will be many.

## Notes

1. We are grateful to Alex Pittman, of Barnard’s Center for Engaged Pedagogy, for the term “dispatches from the encampments.”
2. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/10/9/israel-hamas-war-in-maps-and-charts-live-tracker>
3. Many student protestors faced academic sanctions, including expulsions. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/free-speech/2024/04/15/punishments-rise-student-protests-escalate>
4. In addition, several faculty members who supported student protestors this past year were arrested, disciplined, or suspended. One of those faculty members, Sang Hea Kil, has an essay in this issue of *Radical Teacher*. See: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/academic-freedom/2024/10/08/faculty-investigated-punished-arrested-oct-7-2023#:~:text=A%20Year%20of%20Investigations%2C%20Punishments,have%20now%20returned%20to%20work>.
5. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/us/pro-palestinian-college-protests-encampments.html>
6. Among the many projects to emerge from this encampment is [\*The Watermelon Diaries Project\*](#).

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