

## GUEST POSTS

# CUNY Workers Should Support the Five Demands of the Student Encampment

As the PSC CUNY Delegate Assembly prepares to debate a vote to endorse the five demands of the CCNY Gaza Solidarity Encampment, members of CUNY on Strike offer the following rebuttal to the bureaucratic union leadership that has been trying to distance itself from the struggle against the genocide in Gaza.

Members of CUNY on Strike | May 22, 2024



Photo: Ricardo Martín Coloma

The City University of New York has emerged as a focal point for the Gaza solidarity movement. One tangible expression of this is the set of **Five Demands** put forth by the organizers of the Gaza Solidarity Encampment at the City College of New York in April 2023. As active members of PSC-CUNY, a trade union representing 30,000 individuals, we pen this letter in full support of the Five Demands. Our aim is to address criticisms from our union's elected leadership that have been directed at us as rank-and-file members organizing in solidarity with Palestine. These criticisms have been cited by our leadership as reasons for their refusal to endorse our efforts and the efforts of our students thus far. We invite all rank-and-file members who share our sentiments to join us in organizing.

Firstly, one of the primary objections to the Five Demands revolves around the use of what some in our leadership deem to be "inflammatory" or "polarizing language," which they argue inappropriately provokes "anger." In the face of an internationally-recognized genocide, we assert that the students' choice of language is not only appropriate, but also incredibly well articulated, and that imposing exacting standards about what "tone" should be used to condemn war crimes, and making support for their movement in part contingent on that, is in poor spirit and counterproductive. What the movement for Palestine has and what many academics lack right now, is a burning sense of urgency to stop an internationally-recognized genocide being aided and abetted by our ruling class. The use of polarizing language properly emphasizes the severity of our situation and invites us to follow our students' moral clarity.

We would like to clarify three of the demands deemed most contentious by union leadership. Firstly, demilitarization of CUNY. This demand is meant to draw attention to the fact that police terror and brutality– as well as vigilantes who have a license to brutalize with impunity (example **1, 2**)– are perennial factors in the lives of many poor and racialized students, and particularly flare up en masse when there are movements to challenge the power wielded by the capitalist class . We will quote **UMass Amherst students** describing why they make the demand to demilitarize their university: "When the demand is made to get cops off campus, it's made in recognition that the police state is far more expansive and insidious than the literal presence of armed officers on campus. The carceral state is hidden in the classroom and in student living quarters. The police do not keep us safe, they invite fear, instigate violence, act with impunity, and protect property over people and serve those in power." We must bring attention to the fact that the NYPD brutalized students, faculty and community members at the CCNY encampment and in the nearby area, breaking someone's ankle, resulting in a concussion and trauma of many CUNY community members. The fight to drop the charges of those at the CCNY encampment is central to this struggle.

Secondly, concerns have been voiced about the ethics of demanding that CUNY establish independence from "zionist donors," with some suggesting that criticism of Zionism amounts to antisemitism. We believe that it does not. Objectively speaking, there are **billionaire donors** with a political agenda, Zionism, and its concomitant war profiteering, that act as a key area of pressure on university administration to **crush** student protests with police brutality. From its

inception, the version of Zionist ideology spearheaded by the Israeli ruling class has been recognized by its own **leaders** as a project founded on racist settler colonial **violence**. It is furthermore impossible to separate the Zionist agenda to exterminate Palestinians from their own land with the billions in profits to be made in manufacturing weapons of war, rendering the project inextricably intertwined with capitalism, imperialism, and US global hegemony. The US ruling class has exploited Zionism to protect its interests and military force in the Middle East, and particularly to expand its sphere of **influence** over the most oil-rich region of the world.

Yuval Mann, a public speaker who identifies as an “ex-Israeli anti-Zionist Jew,” **phrased it beautifully** when he compared the movement against Zionism with the deconstruction of toxic masculinity. In both cases, he argues, the movement aims not to eradicate the existence of the human being, but to deconstruct the *ideology of violence* so that relationships of domination and oppression can be replaced with love and equality. We can see this deconstruction of Zionist ideology in the Jewish people all over the world who are standing against the genocide, the occupation and for a free Palestine. Equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism suggests that all Jewish people are somehow responsible for the brutal **discrimination** and violence committed by the Israeli state against Palestinians, a formulation that is itself inherently antisemitic.

Furthermore, as Holocaust survivor and historian Jacques Hersh explains in this **indispensable history** of the Zionist movement, Zionism has *never* been universally accepted by Jewish people, nor has it ever had *one single definition*. He demonstrates how criticism of Zionism often stems from political, religious, or cultural perspectives, and has historically been disproportionately articulated by Jews *themselves*, rather than being rooted in antisemitism.

An enduring point of contention in Zionist ideology is the establishment of a Jewish ethnostate distinct from pre-existing indigenous populations. Albert Einstein, for example, who identified as a labor Zionist, **opposed** this idea, advocating for peaceful coexistence with Arabs. He would later **criticize** Israel’s “Freedom Party,” the precursor to the modern-day Likud party of Benjamin Netanyahu, as “a political party closely akin in its organization, methods, political philosophy, and social appeal to the Nazi and Fascist parties.”

Hersh demonstrates that contention also extends to cultural divides, such as Martin Buber’s Middle Eastern-oriented Zionism which advocated assimilation there, versus Theodor Herzl’s Eurocentric approach which prioritized Ashkenazi Jews, advocated for the establishment of a “Jewish entity in Argentina or Africa,” and argued for political alliance with “imperialist powers and presenting the Zionist project as being concordant with their interests.” Other important segments of Jewish society to historically voice disagreement with Zionism included Orthodox Jews worried about nationalism’s impact on religious identity, and Jewish organizations that advocated assimilation rather than Zionism, fearing that the latter would mark Jews as foreigners in the countries in which they lived. On this point, Hersh adds, “a less known facet of the Holocaust is that there was an implicit Nazi sympathy for the Zionist project and paradoxical

agreement with the axiom of Zionism concerning the incompatibility of Jewishness and German citizenship.”

The contentious history of Zionism within Jewish communities themselves unequivocally demonstrates that criticizing Zionism and the state of Israel is *not* inherently antisemitic. This is why Jewish and Israeli citizens, troubled by human rights abuses that the state of Israel commits against Palestinians, persist in voicing their ongoing criticisms of the Israeli government today. This includes **hundreds of thousands** of **anti-Zionist** Jewish and/or Israeli **rabbis** (examples 1, 2), documentarians (examples 1, 2), **labor organizers**, **political scientists**, **novelists**, **historians**, **journalists**, Holocaust experts (examples 1, 2, 3), **Holocaust survivors**, and relatives of **Holocaust victims**.

We offer a final response to leadership concerns over the issue of academic boycott articulated by CCNY’s Five Demands, including those questioning its legitimacy and claiming that it violates “free speech principles of universities.” Objectively speaking, Israeli universities and academics have played a prominent role in **upholding** and abetting apartheid and genocide. The “**Academic Boycott**” section of the BDS website contains a wealth of information to document this, including a **64-page research document** co-authored by both Israeli and Palestinian researchers. This is why **76 universities** in Spain recently suspended collaboration with Israeli academic institutions that have not demonstrated support for international law in Palestine. This is also why the call for an academic boycott has previously been endorsed by Israelis and/or Jews in support of an end to Israel’s crimes against Palestine. Here is one example of **40 Holocaust survivors** placing a NYTimes ad to support “the full economic, cultural, and academic boycott of Israel” in response to its massacres in Gaza. Ilan Pappé, an Israeli academic, has also articulated his support of an academic boycott **multiple** times, arguing that “pariah status will hopefully persuade Israel to abandon its policies of war crimes and abuses of human **rights**.” For similar reasons, Israeli politician Ofer Cassif supported South Africa’s ICJ case *against* Israel, despite it almost resulting in his expulsion from the Knesset. He **stated**, “What I am doing is not anti-Israeli. I think that the government of Israel and the prime minister in particular are anti-Israelis... There is no future for anyone here in this part of the world without ending the occupation... That’s the only way to stop the bloodshed on both sides.”

The academic boycott is intended to bring international pressure to end the occupation, a **crime against humanity**. As explained by the American Studies Association, which has endorsed the call for an academic boycott, the call is intended to target *institutions*, including *official representatives* of institutions or the Israeli government, and, as such, “the academic boycott does not seek to curtail dialogue between U.S. and Israeli scholars. Collaboration on research and publications does not fall under the ASA boycott.” It further **asserts** that the academic boycott will help to extend academic freedom, which is denied to Palestinians due to the occupation, and to Israelis who support the boycott, as doing so is a civil offense within Israel.

The boycott is a well-thought out, long-respected tactic that has emanated from scholars and academics who want to see an end to bloodshed. It is also a strategy that **helped bring an end**

to racist apartheid South Africa. We therefore urge members who have expressed opposition to it to reconsider their position.

Some in our union leadership have been put off by the wording of the demands. Relatedly, they have asserted that their role is to be a “neutral arbiter” in the union and to not “take sides” on a “divisive” issue. Our answer is that the slaughter, traumatization, and deliberate starvation of human beings, including staggering numbers of children, is unequivocally wrong. It’s not “complicated” and there aren’t “both sides” to the issue. Literally no circumstances and no amount of justification can *ever* excuse such atrocities. Understanding the impact of continually dropping bombs on civilian centers and the prevention of humanitarian aid to a population trapped in a piece of land no bigger than Philadelphia doesn’t require expertise in geopolitics, history, or the Middle East. So, signing a resolution in support of a courageous student-led movement to end this should not be something to be ashamed or embarrassed of, even if there are those who would feel uncomfortable that a country they support is being righteously criticized.

But, beyond statements, what else is the union willing to do? Are we willing to mobilize our members to attend a **Board of Trustees meeting** to urge CUNY admin to drop charges against student protestors? Are we willing to join, or at least support, the withholding of final grades as faculty at **some other universities are**? Are we willing to support pickets outside of CUNY admin buildings or other prominent locations? If membership “isn’t there yet,” what are we actively doing to organize and engage members? What responsibility is PSC leadership showing to lead the charge against the attacks on our students, our free speech, and most importantly, against the genocide that our institution and country is materially supporting? Every day we delay means more innocent lives lost and unfathomable suffering. Instead of saying, “the debate hasn’t been had,” what are we doing to educate members, students, and build militancy within our ranks to challenge injustice anywhere and everywhere? Because clearly, putting out mere *statements* has literally gotten us nowhere. *Meanwhile, the clock is ticking!*

How many more Palestinians will have to be murdered by Israel before our union decides to take a more militant, vocal, proactive stance to stopping the loss of innocent lives? If over 40,000 lives lost— including at least 15,000 children— are not enough to spur labor into action, will 50,000 be enough? How about 100,000? Will we just sit by and watch the genocide of Gaza in its entirety and sit on our hands and say, too bad, the issue was “divisive,” we didn’t know what to do?

One of the major lessons of **fascism** is that it happened because **labor did not take a proactive stance towards fighting it** when it first reared its ugly head in Italy. They did not go on strike, but displayed learned helplessness and even cowardice while workers were being slaughtered and demonized by fascist forces. We face that same junction here today. We also know that not only do genocidal, imperialist forces want to turn Gaza into a mass cemetery, they also use it as a **laboratory**. The forces of repression and fascism are perfecting their tools of terror and violence against an innocent, captive population who have nowhere else to run, and are making

hundreds of **billions** of dollars in profit while doing so. **What happens in Palestine won't stay there.** It will spill over to affect all working, racialized, and marginalized people of the world. This is a fight for all of our lives, and for a beautiful new world.

So, which side is PSC on?! “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”

 **CUNY** | **Israel** | **Labor Movement** | **Palestine** | **Professional Staff Congress (PSC)** |



## Members of CUNY on Strike

### GUEST POSTS

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