

San Francisco State Students for Gaza Organize for Mass Action!

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May 21, 2024

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Across the country, a new historic wave of youth mobilization is taking place against Israel's genocide in Gaza. The university movement blossoms amidst the largest sustained popular movement in the U.S. since Occupy and Black Lives Matter. The universities may be entering summer break, but it's clear that the university uprising has just begun, and this is in spite of relentless repression against this powerful movement. At least 2800 students have been arrested on college campuses for

participating in encampments calling for a Free Palestine, an end to the genocide in Gaza, and an end to the occupation of Palestine.

As billions of dollars in arms continue to flow freely into Israel's military, the question on every one of our minds must be: What will it take for us to end this? What will it take for us to Free Palestine?

From 1963-1973, the movement against the U.S. War in Vietnam showed the power of broad, sustained mass politics to challenge the U.S. imperialist war machine. Over these years, there were regular, ongoing demonstrations from dozens to hundreds of thousands of people. Organized labor, students, and everyone in between took public actions to demand that the U.S. withdraw from Vietnam and Cambodia, and on March 29, 1973, the last troops left South Vietnam. What can we learn about the role of the student movement in this time, and apply to our organizing today?

In a 1970 speech about the withdrawal of the troops from Vietnam and Cambodia, revolutionary socialist Peter Camejo said: "Decisive power does not lie within the student movement (itself). The student movement is a direct danger because it can act as a catalyst, spreading ideas and setting other forces into motion. If you were to look at the students in isolation, you would say they don't have any real power. But put the students into the actual network of society—the interrelationship with their parents, the interrelationship with society as a whole, the interrelationship between each university and other universities and schools and the community around it—and the ruling class can see an immediate threat."

Students 4 Gaza organized and scored in Round 1 of the movement!

On Monday, April 29, 2024, several hundred San Francisco State University (SFSU) students with the group Students for Gaza (S4G) held a rally in the Malcolm X Plaza at SFSU and then set up their tents on the campus lawn. This was not a spontaneous or random action; it was an intentional plan organized through open democratic assemblies the week before, with the support and leadership of several campus groups. The groups included the General Union of Palestine Students (GUPS), one of the first Palestinian student groups in the U.S., founded in 1973, and SFSU's recently formed Student Union, which had organized the student support for the two CFA faculty strikes this last semester. A growing number of faculty also got involved. All of these groups coalesced into a new united front coalition named SFSU Students for Gaza, open to student organizations and independent students who issued their own demands aligned with the ones outlined by the National Students for Justice in Palestine (NSJP):

1. **Disclose** all expenditures, stocks and investments of the CSU university as the finances of the SFSU endowment.
2. **Divest** from all companies and partnerships that actively participate in the colonization and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people, both at the SFSU and Cal State University (CSU) level.
3. **Defend** students' rights of free speech and protest, and ask the university to oppose all current legislation aiming to criminalize pro-Palestinian protests, including the SB-1287 bill in California.
4. **Declare** fully and publicly the illegal occupation, colonization and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people and the U.S.-Israeli genocide in Gaza.

From its birth and throughout the development of the encampment and negotiations with the university, student organizers have kept to the following principles, which have proven to be the key to their success: Centering Palestine and the demands from the Palestinian community in and outside campus; building for mass action; and developing democratic structures for their encampment and movement.

The steadfast organizing by the students delivered some preliminary victories in the three weeks left before the end of the semester. On May 13, Lynn Mahoney, the SFSU president, released a public statement acknowledging the legitimacy of the struggle of S4G. She made a concrete commitment to divest from the weapons-manufacturing industry, to create new guidelines for divestment from companies that violate “human rights” and “the ability for all to live a life of dignity and well-being, free from violence and discrimination,” with a precise timeline for action.

In addition, the SFSU president committed to meet the disclosure request through the creation of a public website. Finally, the president publicly committed to protect “academic freedom, freedom of expression, and peaceful student activism,” and to “submit to the CSU Office of the Chancellor a public letter outlining [her] concerns about any and all legislative actions that may inhibit these freedoms, including SB-1287, a bill that would make it easy to criminalize encampments. She argued that “these freedoms form the foundation of higher education and must be protected.” How about that!

The students know this is only a partial victory. Now that they've won Round 1, it's time to bring the fight to the CSU Board of Trustees on May 21. Most importantly, the students are working to strengthen the roots of the movement by building a stronger and wider liberation network on their campus and the CSUs. In their May 15 statement, they declared: “This is the first step. We will continue organizing and continue fighting through the summer and onwards.”

The encampment: Mass action headquarters

Much debate has emerged on the role of encampments since the beginning of the movement. By setting encampments, the students revived a tactic of the Divestment and Boycott movements from South Africa in the mid-1980s, which contributed to the downfall of the apartheid regime.

For S4G, the encampment is only one tactic in the battle, and not the strategy for victory in itself. This tactic was well placed, allowing them to physically connect with the rest of the student population in building solidarity with Gaza. It brought the land of Palestine and Palestinian people directly into visibility of the campus community. Most importantly, this tactic has served a larger strategy to create the needed conditions for social and political revolution—bottom-up democracy and mass action: “From the beginning of this encampment, we have consistently maintained transparency and democracy as the structure from which we organize. This has been true since the initial vote to start the encampment. This will continue to be true for future decisions regarding this movement” (May 15 Statement, SFSU Students for Gaza).

Over the course of mere days, the SFSU encampment quickly became the student recruitment and training headquarters for a broader movement. After the basic logistics of the camp were established in the middle of the campus quad, the organizers turned their focus toward outreach to more students. On day one, they set-up working committees open to everyone in the encampment. All students camping and supporting had to take an active role in the camp.

On the second day, the encampment assembly solidified demands after collective review and discussion. On the third day, they elected a leadership of seven members, with permanent seats for representatives of GUPS, making it clear to all that the struggle for Palestinian liberation must be done with the leadership of Palestinian students. Every day, a “community circle” was held, where the main political decisions were debated and decided.

Throughout these weeks, their practice in the struggle was guided by the lessons of previous generations and today’s socialist militants. On one day, a contingent of strikers from the 1968 Third World Liberation movement visited the encampment to share their experience and lessons. Twice, a team of our La Voz de los Trabajadores / Workers’ Voice comrades organized popular school-style teach-ins on key moments in the history of the Vietnam antiwar movement.

For all the energy that S4G invested in their internal development, they demonstrated the same vigor for making the encampment an outward-facing body that involved their fellow students, who otherwise would have remained indifferent to or even scared of the movement, given the constant media discourse that criminalizes the Palestinian cause. They began each day with small activities like picketing, flyering, art making, mural painting with washable paint, and educational events like teach-ins or classroom presentations.



When the president of SFSU, Lynn Mahoney, reached out to the students privately, the students immediately called for “open negotiations,” and invited her to personally come to the encampment on May 6, to listen and respond to their demands. These open negotiations served as one of their most successful recruitment events to attract new students and educate them about how they could oppose the ongoing genocide in Palestine. The livestream and publication of the exchanges between S4G and the SFSU administration inspired other encampments to start turning towards more democratic and transparent principles of organizing. For some of the S4G organizers, open bargaining and workers’ democracy were things they learned from their California Faculty Association (CFA) comrades during the December 2023 and January 2024 strikes, demonstrating the way that one movement will always nurture and sustain the next.

On Wednesday, May 8, S4G held a walkout and rally with hundreds of students, followed by a march through the campus, where a hundred more students joined them despite the approach of final exams. The march culminated in a silent die-in in front of the administration building. The students lay down for 35 minutes, to honor the 35,000 victims of the ongoing genocide in Palestine, demanding that university President Mahoney name and condemn the genocide, as other California university presidents have done. As of this week, they are still waiting for that to happen.

How faculty supported and joined the movement

Because of the pre-existing relationships between student and faculty organizers, SFSU faculty members were able to quickly establish a Faculty for Justice in Palestine (FJP) group at SFSU. Faculty organizing was initially led by Ethnic Studies faculty, together with CFA strike organizers and members of the Palestine Arab and Muslim (PAM) caucus of the union. They quickly aligned with the S4G demands and sought to support the encampment by respecting student leadership. They helped when the students asked them to with food, resources, security, de-escalation and conflict resolution, political education, and poetry workshops. Additionally, faculty worked with the elected student leadership to sort out their questions on tactics and strategy.

In 15 days of horizontal exchanges, relationships of trust and solidarity were built. Just as the experience of the students’ participation in the CFA strikes nurtured democracy

in the encampment, the relationships that the students and faculty built will sustain future struggles.

SFSU faculty also organized through the PAM caucus to mobilize their statewide union to support this growing movement. Before the SFSU encampment began on April 26, the PAM caucus issued a statement of solidarity with the mobilizations: “The movement that is currently materializing at universities all over the country—the Popular University for Gaza—is the newest wave of the already seven-months-long organizing effort driven by a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-generational coalition of organizations.”

Next, the PAM caucus issued a “CFA Solidarity with Encampments and Against Police Repression” petition to mobilize the California Faculty Association for a defense campaign of the students and faculty repressed at Cal Poly Humboldt. The Cal Poly administration had sent the police and ordered 100 demonstrators to leave under threat of violence. In the early morning of April 30, the police detained and arrested protesters, alleging so-called crimes of unlawful assembly, vandalism, conspiracy, and assault of police officers. Students are now facing criminal charges and university disciplinary actions. Faculty who supported their students were also arrested and now face legal actions.

The PAM caucus’s move to mobilize their faculty union follows the lead of UAW 4811 (the largest union of academic workers of the University of California system, representing 48,000 TAs, postdocs, and researchers). Earlier this month, the brutality on the UCLA campus by pro-Israeli counter protesters and police prompted the UAW 4811 Executive Board to file an emergency ULP (Unfair Labor Practice) charge against the UC. The completely unhinged police raid of the UCLA camp—involving beatings, shootings with rubber bullets, tear gassing, and nearly 45 minutes of constant explosive flash bangs in the air above the encampment—was a violation of the health, safety, and academic freedom protections and other rights guaranteed in their labor contract. In conjunction with the ULPs, the union also issued a strike authorization vote to protest UC’s abdication of its responsibility to protect students and workers.

The PAM caucus petition read: “We, the undersigned California Faculty Association (CFA) members, stand in solidarity with Gaza and with students who are demonstrating in line with Justice for Palestine at various campuses around the USA, including in the California State University system. Our Spring CFA Assembly recently adopted a Resolution in Support of Palestinians and their allies in the CSUs defending the right to protest, free speech, and academic freedom among other things. We are appalled at the brutality unleashed by campus administrations, police, and pro-Israeli counter-protesters upon students, faculty and community who are exercising their right to protest on campuses across the nation against the injustices they see in Palestine by participating in the Popular University for Gaza with the establishment of campus encampments.

“We would like our union to take prompt action to defend our safety, academic freedom, free speech, and the right to peacefully assemble on campus...

“The criminalization of these protesters and the closure of Humboldt campus was unnecessary, excessive, and quite brutal. Not only is it an attack on our campus community, but it is an attack on academic freedom and free speech for those campus protesters who desire to speak out against the genocide in Gaza, the Zionist occupation of Palestine, and the inhumanity of the Israeli war machine in maintaining apartheid that is funded by this nation’s tax dollars that has killed close to 35,000 people so far.”

The petition was also endorsed by SFSU Faculty for Justice in Palestine and the Caucus of Rank and File Education Workers (CREW) This considerable pressure from below pushed the CFA leadership to file a ULP charge with PERB against the CSU on May 9, arguing that “management took the extraordinary step of closing down the campus last month in response to students protesting the war in Gaza when other campuses around the country have remained open despite fairly large actions and police responses” and that it “should have bargained over the decision to close the campus, especially in light of the fact that the Cal Poly Humboldt community questions the need at this point.”

In addition, the CFA union declared that “the harm from depriving faculty access to campus will be long-lasting, impacting faculty in their current and future work performance, evaluations, and overall sense of safety and academic freedom.”

Building a CSU statewide movement for mass action

When S4G began, they were already coordinating with other university encampments for their May 8 statewide walkout, and they continue to coordinate for a common action at the upcoming Cal State Board of Trustees meeting. There, they will present their demand for CSU divestment, and most importantly, use the gathering to hold a rally and workshop.

Their objective is to start creating structures to coordinate student activism for Palestine across the CSUs during the summer, and to build a statewide organizing conference. The goal of the conference will be twofold: to educate and to organize. For the education portion, student activists will conduct workshops that draw together common lessons from past movements, such as the 1960s antiwar movement, the 1968-69 Third World Liberation Strike at SFSU, the First Intifada, and the 1980s South Africa divestment movement.

A statewide CSU conference will also be the place to critically assess and reflect on the intense spring season of organizing, and to assess the need to defend students and faculty who have been repressed. For the organizing portion of the conference, there will be an opportunity for students to develop common demands across campuses, and a shared strategy and timeline for building campus power mass actions in the fall.

Beyond campus divestment: End all U.S. aid to Israel!

With the question on their minds, “What will it take to Free Palestine?” the student struggle continues. In every encampment, especially those who were able to secure small victories, the students are already beginning to envision the next step to build a broader movement that goes beyond university campuses. They know that even if all U.S. academic institutions were to fully divest from Israel and enforce a full economic boycott, Israel will still be able to continue to carry out its barbaric genocide. After all, the key economic and military backer of Israel since 1946, and still today, is the U.S. government. Between 1946 and 2023, the U.S. government has sent \$297 billion to Israel. Joe Biden has promised to send an additional \$26 billion before the end of 2024, and to send at least \$4 billion a year until 2028.

The racist settler-colonial State of Israel could not exist without the financial and military backing from the U.S. government. This money comes directly out of the pockets of the U.S. working class, whose labor generates these profits, and whose taxes pay for the bullets and bombs making hell on earth in Gaza today. The dependence of the genocide on U.S. labor is why the BDS (Boycott, Divest, and Sanction) movement in the universities absolutely must connect with the emerging workers’ boycott initiatives, especially networks such as Bay Area Labor for Palestine and Labor for Palestine National Network, who have been working these last months to build a base to respond to the call from the Palestinian unions to end all U.S. aid to Israel.

The growth of the campus BDS movement is one key aspect of the struggle for the full liberation of Palestine. It could serve as the catalyst for broader mass action of working people, youth and community organizations, under the active leadership of Palestinian organizations. Together, these different parts of our society must unite around key demands such as “End all U.S. aid to Israel!”

This summer will be a crucial test for this movement, and its capacity to build and coordinate broad mass action. May a Free Palestine stay in our hearts and minds as we bring the movement forward together!
