

‘Divest to reinvest’: how one encampment is thinking global and acting local

17 May 2024 Ben Hillier [SHARE](#)

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The People's Univer-City, an encampment at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey PHOTO: Ben Hillier

It is appropriate that a solidarity encampment was established between the Center for Urban and Public Service and the Centre

for Law and Justice, on the main promenade at Rutgers University's Newark campus. Well, apt regarding "public service" and "justice" at least, because this last remaining encampment in New Jersey has a decidedly community orientation.

They call it The People's Univer-City. The Newark encampment, which was established on May Day, affirmed all the demands of students at the main campus in New Brunswick. But they added another eight. Basically, the activists in this working-class municipality, which is a twenty-minute train ride from the World Trade Centre in lower Manhattan, are linking divestment from Israel with investment in local services. (The full list of demands is printed below.)

"Rutgers has property all over town. We want three to five of those buildings to be turned over for free housing", Kyng, a member of Black Students for Liberation, explains. "And we want the university to provide aid to people in the community—to the community organisations. People are being pushed out of this city and communities are being broken apart because rents have gone up so much. Rutgers is part of that; it's parasitic. So we want divestment from Israel and reinvestment in the community."

As the encampment stretches west from Washington Street, trees, lamp posts, bench seats and tents are covered in Palestine solidarity slogans. Memorial displays highlight the dates of Israeli air strikes on various refugee camps: Al-Shati on the Mediterranean coast, Al-Bureij and Nuseirat in central Gaza, and Al-Maghazi, just south of Bureij. Like other encampments, they've organised a kitchen and other amenities. A vigil and reading of the names of people killed in

Gaza is held daily, and community lunches are a feature. About 30 people stay overnight, but the total number involved is higher as many come and go.

The broad backlash from establishment politics continues against the movement. Last week on MSNBC's *Morning Joe* program—one of many widely watched but stupid American TV shows—host Joe Scarborough vented in astonishment that many students do not venerate and idolise current and former US officials:

“It’s distressing. First of all what do we do about it? So public servants aren’t taught that American leaders are war criminals, and that Joe Biden isn’t “Genocide Joe”—quite the opposite. And secondly, [what do we do about] the stupidity of all the slogans that ignore all the history since 1948 ... Maybe this will get on YouTube if the communist Chinese will allow it to get on YouTube ...”

Responding to this risible rant, on what purportedly passes for a serious news network, Scarborough’s guest, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, nodded in agreement and shared in the disbelief that some students have concluded that the leaders of US imperialism have blood on their hands. “You’re right”, she said. “They don’t know very much at all about the history of the Middle East, or frankly about history in many areas of the world, including in our own country.”

At Newark, however, the students and others are giving themselves the sort of education that the likes of Clinton and Morning Joe would probably cancel. Encampment teach-ins have been held on various subjects: **Hafsa Kanjwal** was a recent guest, speaking about

Indian-occupied Kashmir; so was **Marc Lamont Hill**, who led a discussion about Black—Palestinian solidarity.

There's also a People's Library, housing literature on subjects as varied as the Palestinian resistance, the US civil rights movement, religion, real estate law, and corporate attacks on higher education. Also spotted are the selected works of pioneering US socialist Eugene Debs and a collection of essays by the late Marxist Neil Davidson. And there are piles of flyers about workers' rights and civil rights—topics about which many campus administrators seem to be unfamiliar.

Several printouts of “A practical appraisal of Palestinian violence”, **written in October by Steve Salaita** are prominently displayed. Salaita long ago became persona non grata in the US academy because of his outspoken opposition to Israeli atrocities, among other things. It is notable that the activists here demonstrate a commitment to interrogating established foreign policy dogmas, and welcome a greater variety of perspectives, than US officials and their sycophantic TV personality promoters.

At the encampment's western edge is a hall dedicated to Charles W. Engelhard Jr.—a mining and metals magnate once **picketed by Black students** because of his extensive business interests in South Africa. Seven years after the billionaire's death, **a 1978 piece in the Harvard Crimson** described Engelhard as “the man who for two decades served as the United States' largest corporate backer of the apartheid regime”.

It feels appropriate, then, that this new anti-apartheid encampment sprawls in the shadow of that building.

Beyond its stated demands, another aspect to the community flavour of the encampment is that it isn't run solely by students, but organised by the Newark Solidarity Coalition, an alliance of students, faculty and locals involved in advocacy and aid programs in the city.

According to Simeon Marsalis, a Rutgers professor who helped establish the camp, some of the groundwork for the broader array of forces here was an historic academic staff strike last April, **the first in the university's 257-year history**, which brought students and staff together in a campaign against the college administration. It comes as no surprise, then, that the staff union organiser at Rutgers, Sherry Wolf, can be found in discussions with participants, and introduces us to the key activists.

Newark's population is 45 percent Black or African American and 36 percent Hispanic, **according to census data**. Median household income is about half the New Jersey state average. The poverty rate, at nearly 25 percent (33 percent for children), is double the state average. Like the United States more generally, social class and race are closely aligned in the city.

“Part of the struggle is getting people to say that liberation is for everyone”, Marsalis says. “No-one is free unless everyone is free. The fights at the moment are on the campuses, but the campuses themselves are part of a larger problem. Where there's a campus, there is militarisation, because the police come with the university.

Where there's a campus, there is the buying up of property all around it. So where's there's a campus, there are rising rents. And where there's a campus, there is the displacement of marginalised people.”

That slogan, “no-one is free until everyone is free”, which is usually a gesture to and cry for universal justice, has more practical bones at Newark. Also at the encampment is Anthony Diaz, co-founder and executive director of the **Newark Water Coalition**.

“I've been organising since high school”, he says. “It was a top performing school, but the conditions of the building were really bad. The top floors were condemned; the locker rooms flooded. We had terrible lunches. So activism started there. Later in life, I fought things like police brutality, and for public housing rights. Then it eventually led to environmental justice when the city had a lead crisis.”

In 2016, elevated levels of the toxic chemical were found in the drinking water in several Newark school districts. The following year, tests showed that **more than 10 percent** of residential homes were being supplied with water containing twice the level of lead considered safe. For several years, the city continued to fail contamination tests.

“That was at my school—we were all drinking the water and then we're suddenly told, ‘Oh, don't drink it, it's poisoned”, Kyng says. So Newark is like Flint, Michigan? “It's like *everywhere*. Black communities all over this country have been poisoned”, she says.

The Water Coalition formed in 2018, and has since been providing free water to residents. While the city claims to have largely addressed the issue, not everyone is convinced that the authorities can be trusted. At any rate, the coalition is campaigning on a range of issues, such as housing, poverty alleviation and mental health support. That's because, Diaz, says, trying to address one issue invariably raises other issues that are obstacles to social justice.

“At first, we were organising town hall meetings and committees to distribute free water. The city failed us”, Diaz says. “Then we started distributing food and resources back into the community—there are so many problems and so much neglect.”

Diaz and the Water Coalition got involved here because of the strike—they had provided water to the workers and so began working with the Rutgers activists. By the time the encampment began, they were already part of the Newark Solidarity Coalition. “This is a place where everyone in the community can come to get water, to get food, to talk about the issues, to talk about liberation politics”, he says.

How has politics evolved—both in the encampment and over the last seven months?

“It's similar to Black Lives Matter in that it's an awakening”, Diaz says.

In August, it will be ten years since Mike Brown was shot and killed by a cop in Ferguson, Missouri. When Ferguson rose up in response, crying “Black lives matter!”, one of the largest movements

in US history began—opening into a new national uprising in the summer of 2020 with the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, again by a cop.

When footage and photos of police repression against Ferguson protesters spread around the world, Palestinians began sending messages of support to the participants—and advice about how to deal with tear gas, among other things. The following year, more than 1,000 Black activists and organisations signed an **open letter of solidarity** with the Palestinians. This year, more than 6,000 activists and more than 200 organisations have **signed a new “Black Solidarity with Gaza” statement.**

While there may be a greater appreciation of the plight of Palestine among layers of Black activists compared with other groups, the connections aren't necessarily automatic.

“The narrative has shifted from October to now”, Diaz says. “For some people we work with, the [initial] response was: ‘Why should I care about what’s going on on the other side of the world? We’ve got our own problems here’. But we say to them, ‘Because look at all the money from here going over there to kill people. Look at all the things we could do with that’.

“When you look at the university itself, it’s only one part of it. But it has a long history of gentrification and displacement. The medical and dental schools they built used to be Black homes. Some of the parking lots of the university used to be black suburbs—Black and brown homes. So, when we talk about reparations, especially looking at the properties that the university owns, there’s a direct

correlation between the displacement that they have caused and the housing situation in the city of Newark.”

In that sense, the university, reportedly with ties to Israel through its endowment, and the encampment, with its message of “divest to reinvest”, makes for a logical pairing of international solidarity and community-based activism. The activists are fusing the global with the local.

“‘Palestine will free us all’. You know this slogan, right?”. Michael Letwin, a co-founder of Labor for Palestine, asked this question over a coffee early last week. To be honest, I’d never heard it. But it’s been stuck in my head for nearly two weeks.

One dimension of the phrase is of course obvious, particularly in New York City: to stand with Palestine is to be confronted by a range of other questions that go to the heart of the sort of society in which we live and the nature of political power. Why do they need 200 armed cops to clear **a couple of dozen unarmed undergraduate protesters**? Why are the police so over resourced when all the city’s libraries are closed on Sundays, ostensibly because the city says it can’t afford to keep them open? Why is the media so ferocious towards and dishonest about young activists? Why do the authorities all support Israel and deny the obvious genocide taking place?

But another dimension has been more elusive to grasp—what is the practical meaning of “Palestine will free us all”? Part of the answer is now clearer: to the extent that there is organising anywhere, it is centred on Gaza. As Letwin said at the time: “Palestine was always

the issue excluded from discussions in progressive politics. Now it's the issue pulling everything together. It's gone from the margins to the middle."

One focus of labour organising, for example, has been rank-and-file attempts to make union leaders take a firm public stand against the genocide. Yet the very act of organising against genocide means both confronting political questions such as those above, and, well, just organising—making new connections and drawing in new activists who want to do *something*, and who, through doing something, are learning how to organise in a multitude of ways, thereby laying the groundwork for whatever comes next.

In terms of the encampments, Palestine being a catalyst for a broader alignment of forces fighting for human dignity has been nowhere more obvious than at Rutgers Newark campus. Small as the mobilisation is, the staff, students and local activists, mobilised by a genocide on the other side of the world, are making concrete that slogan raised by Marsalis: "No-one is free unless everyone is free".

This encampment eventually will be cleared like the others. But it nevertheless promises, and has likely already delivered, something more enduring than the collection of tents outside the Centre for Law and Justice.

The full list of the Rutgers Newark People's Univer-City

Rutgers University must:

1. Divest from any firm or corporation materially participating in, benefitting from, or otherwise supporting the state of Israel's settler colonialism, apartheid, and genocide of Palestine and the Palestinian people, in accordance with the principles for divestment listed in University policy 40.2.14.
2. Terminate its partnership with Tel Aviv University including in the New Jersey Technology and Innovation Hub.
3. Accept at least 10 displaced Gazan students to study at Rutgers University on scholarship.
4. Provide resources for Palestinian and Arab students in the form of an Arab Cultural Center on each Rutgers campus.
5. Establish a Memorandum of Understanding to establish a long-term educational and collaboration partnership with Birzeit University, in accordance with precedent set by William Paterson University
6. Name "Palestine" and "Palestinians" in all future communications related to Israeli aggressions in Palestine (as opposed to "Middle East" "Gaza region" etc.), and release a statement from the Office of the President acknowledging the ongoing genocide against Palestinians, its impact on the Palestinian community at our university, and advocating for a ceasefire.

7. Hire senior administrators with cultural competency and knowledge about Arabs, Palestinians, Muslims, anti-Palestinian racism, and Islamophobia.
8. Hire additional professors specializing in Palestine studies and Middle East studies, institute a center for Palestine studies, and establish a path to departmentalization for Middle East studies.
9. Display the flags of occupied peoples — including but not limited to Palestinians, Kurds, and Kashmiris — in all areas displaying international flags across the Rutgers campuses.
10. Provide full amnesty for all students, student groups, faculty, and staff penalized for exercising their First Amendment right to protest Rutgers University's support for Israeli human rights violations, and voice support for faculty and staff who have been publicly targeted for exercising their academic freedom.

Rutgers University must accept the above-stated demands and must agree to the coalition's "Divest to Reinvest" model, emphasizing not only the withdrawal of support from genocidal entities but also the redirection of resources to foster community growth and resilience. Below are Newark specific demands:

1. Rutgers University must leverage its significant influence and power over the city of Newark to ensure the passage of a ceasefire resolution. This resolution must demand an immediate, permanent ceasefire in Gaza, call for an end to the genocide, and advocate for the right to self-determination for the Palestinian people.

2. As a land-grant institution, Rutgers University has a responsibility to serve its community. Therefore, we demand that Rutgers divest from the apartheid state of Israel and reinvest in the Newark community by allocating 3 to 5 of its properties to establish a Community Land Trust dedicated to providing free public housing.

3. Rutgers University must offer free tuition and forgive all outstanding student loan debt for all Newark residents.

4. Similarly, NJIT, ECC, and Seton Hall are expected to adopt the measures outlined in demands 2 and 3. This includes divesting from the apartheid state of Israel, reallocating resources to establish Community Land Trusts for free public housing, offering free tuition, and forgiving all outstanding student loan debt for all Newark Residents.

5. Rutgers University must commit to monetary support for grassroots organizations as part of its reinvestment efforts in Newark. Furthermore, the Newark Solidarity Coalition should have the authority to oversee and approve the funding allocations to these groups.

6. Rutgers Law School - Newark must provide pro bono legal services to all Newark residents earning less than \$50,000 as a single-family household. With additional members, further considerations must be applied.

7. Rutgers Medical and Dental Schools must offer free health care services to all Newark residents and forgive any existing medical and dental debts owed by Newark residents.

8. Rutgers must immediately cease all military recruitment activities on its campuses and use its significant influence and power within the city of Newark to ensure the cessation of military recruitment at all educational institutions in Newark. This includes but is not limited to: all public and private schools, colleges and universities within the greater Newark area.

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