

University of Toronto Suppresses Pro-Palestinian Activism

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The last few months have seen a global surge in support for the movement of boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israeli Apartheid. Important solidarity actions have occurred across the globe, including: a wave of student occupations across the UK; union resolutions in Europe, New Zealand and Australia; and, most recently, the historic action of South African dockworkers refusing to unload Israeli ships.

These actions register important steps forward in building solidarity with the Palestinian people and show that popular opinion is beginning to shift toward an understanding of Israel as an apartheid state that must be isolated in the manner of the struggle that was waged against South African Apartheid.

At the same time, pro-Israel organizations have responded to the strength of the BDS movement with the familiar tactics of repression, stifling of dissent and bureaucratic harassment. This article details a remarkable case of repression against student organizing at the University of Toronto (UofT).

What follows is the documentation of a deliberate attempt by the UofT administration to prevent a Palestine solidarity conference from being held, the direct involvement of pro-Israel organizations in determining the use of student space and collusion between a number of Ontario universities to prevent the annual Israeli Apartheid Week – a student led week of events about Israeli Apartheid – from taking place. All of the emails referred to in the article are available online.

The Standing Against Apartheid Conference

Restrictions and harassment are experienced by pro-Palestinian activists on most Canadian campuses; this can take many different forms. At York University, for example, the latest tool of repression is the “Student Code of Conduct,” a draconian document that could potentially be used to ban any form of protest. At McMaster, it was in the form of a blanket ban on the use of the term “Israeli apartheid.” The University of Toronto (UofT) has seen a broad range of tactics being used against student organizers, but it seems that the administration has decided to focus its effort on combating pro-Palestinian activism through an old-new tool: denial of space for meeting and holding events.

Securing space for student activists at UofT has always been a hard task for student organizations. But it seems that the University has shifted its tactics from mounting bureaucratic obstacles and technical hurdles, to outright denial of the right to book space.

UofT seems to have declared a full fledged war against its Palestinian and pro-Palestinian students. Most recently, this came in the form of denying room bookings for a conference planned by Students Against Israeli Apartheid (SAIA), a student group and action group of the Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG), in October 2008.

SAIA, along with student groups at York University and other campuses, had planned a student conference, entitled “Standing Against Apartheid: Building Cross-Campus Solidarity with Palestine,” for the first weekend of October 2008. The conference was meant to strengthen the student movement against Israeli apartheid, and to share strategies for the future, including planning the annual Israeli Apartheid Week.

Initially planned to take place in Hamilton, the conference was moved for logistical reasons to UofT. At the last minute, UofT decided to deny SAIA their room bookings, forcing them to look for an alternative venue for the conference in less than two days. In the end the conference did take place in Toronto but, instead of taking place at the university, the students ended up meeting in the basement of a church.

The following paragraphs will describe in detail the sequence of events leading up to the denial of these room bookings and the motivations behind the denial of space on campus. The information was obtained through a Freedom of Information (FIPPA) request regarding the week preceding the cancellation of the room booking. Over 250 pages of documents containing references to SAIA were generated by the UofT administration within that one week alone.

How does an Administration deny a legitimate student group space on their own campus?

The UofT administration learned about the ‘Standing Against Apartheid’ conference before SAIA had even booked the rooms for it. The information came from Zac Kaye, Executive Director of Hillel of Greater Toronto, the primary pro-Israel group on campuses in Toronto. In most cases, Hillel has acted as Israel’s mouthpiece on campuses. Kaye found out about the conference being moved to Toronto, and knowing that it was going to be a strategy conference to co-ordinate pro-Palestine activism on campus, he was quick to act.

On Sept. 29, before the room booking forms were even submitted, Kaye sent a casual sounding [email](#) to Jim Delaney, the director of the Office of the Vice-Provost, Students. Delaney is the person at UofT who deals with the issues of student clubs, and who also has a say in the approval of space for those groups. In the email, Kaye inquired about the conference, and whether the event had “been booked according to procedures.” Kaye also raised some concerns about openness and accessibility.

After receiving Kaye’s email, Delaney alerted some key people at UofT about the conference. Sheree Drummond, Assistant Provost, who is part of the senior advisory group within the Office of the Vice President and Provost, got word of the conference. Apparently Drummond decided that the right to book space on campus by a student group for a student activity is an important issue, so important in fact, that the Interim-Vice President & Provost, Cheryl Misak, should be [alerted](#). It was then that President David Naylor himself got involved.

Somewhere between appointing professors, setting up policies, fundraising and running the affairs of the 61,000 students at UofT, President Naylor made time to deal with the urgent

and serious issue of room bookings. In an [email](#) he sent to Misak and Jill Matus, Vice-Provost for Students, Naylor characterized the issue as “urgent,” and wanted to discuss it and check the room bookings. In his haste he also included some factually incorrect information, specifically that McMaster had refused the initial booking. He then [emailed](#) Matus and Misak again, bringing to their attention the fact that the conference was only open to Palestine solidarity activists. This, in his view, was a problem.

Delaney did not waste any time and he quickly started collecting information or, as he called it, “[digging](#).” One of the first things that he did was to contact the administration at McMaster to see if they had any information pertaining to the conference. Dr. Phil Wood, Associate Vice President of McMaster University [replied](#) and provided some information. He said that Delaney was lucky because “Our local Jewish community made us aware of the planned event for Oct. 4-5 about 3 weeks ago,” and McMaster was looking for room bookings for the event (presumably to cancel them). He also informed Delaney that McMaster’s ‘Crisis Management Group’ is also planning for the upcoming Israeli Apartheid Week in March. McMaster’s Director of Security was copied on this email, since according to Wood’s assessment, Delaney might have “intel” (i.e. intelligence) about Israeli Apartheid Week.

Booking pre-emptively denied

At this point, with the threat of room bookings looming, the highest level of administration at UofT entered into crisis mode. At some point on Monday, Sept. 29, the upper echelon of UofT decided to deny the booking. It is very important to note that this decision took place before a request for room bookings had even been made. It would seem that this decision was taken because of both the pressure from Hillel, and because of their own animosity to pro-Palestine activism.

Although it is not clear exactly who made this decision, it would appear, according to this email correspondence, that Delaney and Misak were [involved](#) and had the support of President [Naylor](#). Delaney began immediately working on an email that would go out to the organizers of the conference informing them that the room bookings were being denied. It also seems that both Delaney and Misak took this so seriously that they put some overtime work on this; a number of emails were sent past midnight.

Delaney drafted an email to the organizers of the conference saying that the room booking was to be denied. He sent it for approval and editing to Misak and Matus who then “tinkered a bit with it” and approved it. Naylor also [approved](#) the email. Then this group of high-ranking UofT administrators discussed who should send this completed letter, whether it should be sent from a generic account without a name signing on to it, or whether it should be sent by Delaney himself. In the correspondence it is evident that they were worried about who the legitimate body should be, and how SAIA would react.

After the email was sent out, Delaney was informed by the Manager of Office of Space Management (Andy Allen) that the Ontario Public Interest Research Group (OPIRG), had put in a request for room bookings for the conference on behalf of SAIA. Of course, the decision to deny the bookings had already been made, and already had the approval of the Provost and the President. The question now became, what should be the excuse for denying the room booking? In his email to Cheryl Misak and Jill Matus, Delaney suggested two reasons: that the five business days advance notice requirement was not met, or the second reason

being that they had 'seen' advertising indicating that it is not an OPIRG event. At 10:34 p.m., [Jill Matus replied](#) that the room booking request should be declined because of the advance notice requirement (although the rooms were empty, and this would be contrary to past practice of the Office of Space Management). The question of who should send the email emerged again.

In the meantime, Delaney [asked](#) the Office of Space Management if they "have standard language for denying a request," and who would normally send it. Surprisingly, the manager of the Office of Space Management [answered](#) that "[We] don't deny many so we don't have a standard language or procedure. I would to start [sic] with Rose sending it, but I know they will push back so I am inclined to start higher up the food chain, at least myself."

Delaney decided to consult with his superiors. He [sent](#) another email to Misak and Matus, but this time he informed them that the advertisement for the event did mention Students Against Israeli Apartheid, which is an OPIRG working group. This means that he made the claim that the University had seen advertising that indicated that this was not an OPIRG event with the full knowledge that such a claim would be false. Presumably, that is why Matus suggested that they focus on the '5 business days notice' as an excuse instead. In the same email he also suggests that the email should come from the Director of the Office of Space Management. The reasoning behind this suggestion is that in case this decision is appealed, it would be appealed to the trio Delaney, Matus and Misak, and they can consider the appeal (on their own decision), and dismiss it. So much for transparency and due process at UofT.

Finally, they decided to go with a combination of the two reasons; the short notice, and the claim that the event is not an OPIRG event, even though Delaney, Matus and Misak knew that the second excuse was false. Canada's top academics, Interim Vice President and Provost, and the Vice Provost of the University of Toronto – people who are expected to be ardent defenders of freedom of expression – [conspired](#), and knowingly used a false excuse, to shut down a simple conference for students about Palestine solidarity organizing.

Canadian Universities restricting freedom of speech: What's next?

In addition to the glaring restriction on freedom of speech, the documents that were obtained through the Freedom of Information (FIPPA) Request reveal how the UofT's top leadership treat their own students as suspected criminals who apparently should be under close surveillance. This seems to be a common theme throughout Ontario universities, especially when it comes to the issue of Palestine.

At McMaster, the Associate Vice-President was asking for "intelligence," and at York the administration has already compiled hundreds of pages of legal advice about the activities of SAIA@York. Events on all campuses are consistently monitored and Campus Security often send personnel to attend Palestine related events.

Universities not neutral

In 2007, UofT has even had the audacity to try to charge OPIRG for security personnel that OPIRG did not ask for. OPIRG refused to pay, and the administration backed down. The fact that Hillel and other pro-Israel organizations were involved in denying the room booking at UofT exposes the myth that universities are neutral and somehow give equal treatment to both pro-Palestinian and pro-Israel groups.

In fact, the impression from the course of action that the UofT chose in this case, the language they used and the close coordination with Hillel shows that when it comes to the matter of the 'Middle East conflict,' the administration unequivocally sides with Israel, even at the expense of freedom of speech – the very principle without which universities could not exist. The personal involvement of the President and the Interim Vice President and Provost is especially alarming. This is evidence of the unfettered access that the pro-Israel lobby has to the administrations at Canadian universities, and to the fact that the top administrators of the Canadian universities are amenable to pressure from these groups.

The implications are even more severe than the denial of room booking. The fact that for the sake of pro-Israel groups, top academics who are in charge of Canada's largest university are willing to make false excuses and use repressive tactics in order to silence a group of students should cast doubt on the overall commitment to principles such as the autonomy of the university and academic freedom.

Ontario-Wide Campaign Against Pro-Palestine Activism

The denial of space for the October conference seems to be just one part of a concerted campaign by universities all across Ontario against pro-Palestine activism. A body that is called "Ontario Committee on Student Affairs," which includes in its membership the Associate Vice President of McMaster University, Philip Woods, Delaney from the University of Toronto and Frank Cappadoccia from York University, [met](#) last October in order to discuss the threat of Israeli Apartheid Week on campuses. It was in this Ontario Committee on Student Affairs meeting that they were planning to use the "intimate knowledge," or "intel," as Philip Wood put it, that Delaney would provide. It is clear that the people in charge of security in various universities are [putting](#) together "plans and strategies" for [Israeli Apartheid Week](#).

Double standards at UofT

One has to wonder if the pro-Israel groups would get the same treatment from UofT. It seems that not only does UofT help pro-Israel groups in suppressing Palestinian activism, but it also directly sponsors pro-Israel activities. UofT is one of the sponsors of a conference titled "Emerging Trends in Anti-Semitism and Campus Discourse," which is scheduled to take place in March 2009. The conference is the launching [conference](#) for an organization called "The Canadian Academic Friends of Israel," or CAFI.

According to CAFI's website, CAFI is "an organization of individuals from Canadian post-secondary institutions who support Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, and who wish to protect civil and scholarly discourse as it pertains to the state of Israel on university and college campuses across Canada."

CAFI also shares offices with the Canada Israel Committee and the Canadian Council for Israel and Jewish Advocacy (CIJA). It even shares the same phone number and staff person with the latter. Essentially, it is an organization whose sole purpose is to further support the Israeli state and its apartheid policies, and UofT is one of the sponsors of its launching conference. Although this conference is supposedly an academic conference and its organizers claim that it is an inclusive, interdisciplinary event, it is doubtful whether it will include the voices of academics who challenge the policies of the state of Israel. In fact, the organizers of the academic conference were so "inclusive," that they did not issue a call for papers. UofT's sponsorship of this conference, as well as their continued repression of Pro-

Palestinian activism on campus, shows the mode of thinking prevailing at Canadian universities: if it is pro-Israel, embrace it, if it is pro-Palestinian, silence it.

We know that university Presidents across Canada have jumped on the opportunity to unilaterally [condemn](#) the debate of the merits of an Academic Boycott against Israeli Institutions that support apartheid policies (as called for by over 171 Palestinian Civil Society organizations in the 2005 Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions appeal to the International community). This past summer, UofT's President David Naylor, along with many other Canadian University Presidents, visited Israel, [touring Israeli Universities](#), to further show their direct support for Israel. Yet these same Presidents have been strikingly silent about the denial of the basic right to education for Palestinian students who are living under Israeli occupation.

Moving forward, the following questions still remain: will Canadian universities conspire with pro-Israel groups to shut down Israeli Apartheid Week in 2009? Are they going to continue silence any voice of support for the Palestinian people on campus?

Or, are university administrations finally going to listen to the voices of Palestinian and Pro-Palestine students who are demanding an end to the unequivocal support of Israeli apartheid on Canadian campuses? •

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