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University of Toronto Students Condemn Racist Attacks on Free Speech on Campus and Demand Accountability and Action by Administration

On Monday, October 27th students and faculty gathered for the launch of the UofT Divest campaign, which calls on the university to withdraw investments from three companies complicit in violations of international law in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Unfortunately the event was disrupted, although not derailed, by an off-campus group calling themselves the Jewish Defence League (JDL), classified as a “hate group” by the Southern Poverty Law Centre and responsible for violently disrupting numerous Palestinian solidarity events in the past. Hurling racist and sexist abuse at students and attendees, the disrupters refused to leave the auditorium at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education endangering the security of those present. The University of Toronto Graduate Students’ Union BDS Ad Hoc committee condemns these despicable attacks on freedom of speech and expression on campus in the strongest possible terms. Furthermore we demand the university take immediate action to protect free speech and to ensure students are safe at campus events and not subject to abuse. We are calling on the university to provide a full explanation for their attempted cancellation of the event, which is in direct violation of the university’s 1992 Policy on the Disruption of Meetings.

Eyewitness accounts describe the disruption of the event as follows: In the midst of NYU doctoral student Hazem Jamjoum’s presentation, JDL supporters began to interrupt the speaker, leading the event chair to issue three warnings for each disrupter in line with university policy. Following their third warning the chair asked disrupters to leave the room in order for the event to continue. When the disrupters refused to leave, event marshals came forward to escort them from the room. At this stage JDL supporters attempted to physically bar marshals from approaching the disrupters. Campus security then entered the room to escort disrupters outside. At this point the interruptions escalated with JDL supporters hurling racist and sexist abuse at attendees and organizers. “A JDL supporters told one of our speakers to cover her head with a burqa or she’d get acid thrown on her face in Palestine,” says Chris Webb, student and organizer. “They accused her of being a member of ISIS, after which they asked her whether she enjoyed beheadings.”

While those who were there to hear the speakers and support the UofT Divest campaign left the room peacefully, JDL supporters began to corner students of colour and harass them with racist slurs and physical intimidation. “One student came up to me really upset, she said one of the disruptors came up really close to her and started swearing at her quite violently, telling her to ‘go back there’,” says student and organizer Sam Spady. “Aggressive verbal abuse took place in the presence of campus police and security officers who did little to prevent this from taking place.”



While campus disruption policy stipulates that in the event of a disruption university authorities will provide space for the meeting to take place in a safe and suitable environment, the administration chose to cancel the event. “This plays directly into the hands of disrupters and those who want to undermine freedom of speech on campus,” says organizer and University of Toronto Graduate Students’ Union (UTGSU) Civics and Environment Commissioner Susanne Waldorf. “The university claims to uphold freedom of speech on campus and yet it deliberately undermined this by failing to provide us with a safe space. In not doing so it exposed students and community members to racist verbal attacks.”

Numerous students, community members and faculty attended the event and were outraged by the actions of the JDL and the inadequate response of campus security. Several of their testimonies are provided in the addendum below.

The UTGSU and the UTGSU BDS Ad Hoc Committee demand immediate action from university administration to ensure the safety of students at campus events without undermining the right to free speech. To this end a letter has been sent to the Vice Provost, Students expressing our concerns regarding the decision to cancel the event and the university’s failure to follow campus disruption policy. Event organizers also have serious concerns about the failure of campus security adequately deal with JDL disrupters and ensure the safety of students.

Despite these attacks, organizers were able to move the event to a safe location with the support of faculty members. The overwhelming support for the UofT Divest Campaign from students, faculty, staff and community is evidence of the importance of the campaign and desire amongst the university community to see the university divest from companies involved in abuses of Palestinian human rights. Those who wish to support the campaign can sign the petition online at UofTDivest.com

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For further information please contact: Chris Webb (416-737-5429) or Sam Spady (647-876-1096) or visit our website UofTDivest.com



Addendum:

“I went to the UofT Divest Campaign on Monday, hoping to learn more about the BDS Movement and how UofT invests in companies that help fuel war. I was surprised at the amount of violence the JDL enacted. I feel that their inability to listen to the speakers and their goal to cancel the event showed that the UofT Divest Campaign is a worthwhile pursuit and should continue to provide this information to all UofT students, staff and faculty.” — Shawna Carroll, UofT Student, OISE.

“I’ve never been to an event like this before and found the level of aggression was really shocking. They could have asked questions during the Q&A, but clearly just came to interrupt the event. They were very hateful to a lot of students. Overall, the scene they put on just encouraged me to learn more about the BDS movement.” — Jeff Barlow, George Brown College Student.

“I was sitting behind the harassers, comprised of a group of white men, who started yelling at the speakers then turned to everyone else in the hall with slurs and insults. While I was shocked at their behavior, I was particularly disturbed by the actions taken by the campus police. Their utter inaction to remove the harassers, and their complete disregard to free speech on campus was only made worse when they started yelling that the event was cancelled. The campus police claimed that the organizers should not be allowed to hold the event in an alternate venue because ‘this is university policy,’ which is simply incorrect (see points #4, 5 of UofT’s disruption policy) and only makes them complicit with the actions of the disrupters.” — Mai Taha, UofT Student, Faculty of Law.

“I was just passing by, when I encountered the crowd in the OISE lobby. The resilience and peaceful energy of the Divest protesters really inspired me. It’s terrible that they were forced to endure such turmoil just to gather as a community and share information. This kind of injustice should not be tolerated at the university.” — Brandon Bertram, UofT Student, OISE.

“The organizers and UofT students more broadly should be proud of the fact that they did not allow the JDL to derail their event. This is about more than just this one event but speaks to the issue of academic freedom of expression on our campus more broadly. In this instance the administration legitimized the JDL’s shameful disruption by attempting to cancel the event. In light of this sort of intimidation and harassment of students and scholars it is crucial that we continue to organize around BDS on university campuses and defend the spaces we have built to have critical discussions on Palestine.” — Hazem Jamjoum, Doctoral Candidate, New York University, and event speaker.

“As a Skype participant, I could not see anything and only heard the racist, sexist and vile statements made by the attending JDL as well as those made by what sounded like young female supporters of Israel. I heard chants of ‘Go join ISIS’



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by a number of the men, and one woman shouted ‘if you didn't have a veil on then you wouldn't be hated.’ The anti-Arab hatred and violence of Israel-supporters expressed in just one hour in that university auditorium is exactly the kind of fuel that drives the Israeli war machine. And overall, the racist and sexist interruptions we heard from those supporting Israeli crimes tell us that even Israel's supporters know that no rational and ethical argument can be made to defend Israeli apartheid, so their only option is to disrupt and shut down.” — Shourideh Molavi, Doctoral Candidate, York University, and event speaker.

“The JDL targetted this campus campaign launch with significant violence and numbers. They came to shut down a BDS launch, and their efforts were aided by a complicit campus security regime at the University of Toronto. This tells us one thing for certain – BDS matters, and its detractors are worried about its growing mainstream popularity and success as a movement. The U of T Divest campus BDS campaign is a real threat to organized Zionist groups (like the JDL) and to academic institutions like the University of Toronto which have tried (and failed) for years to quash the powerful and growing BDS movement in Toronto and on campuses across Canada. So, while the JDL caused some disruption to the event, they ultimately failed. The launch launched, the speakers spoke, the event reconvened, the campaign petition signatures grew, faculty met and wrote a complaint letter to the U of T President, connections were made and so on. At the end of the night, the University of Toronto community was one big step closer to divestment. That’s the real story.” — Dr. Mary-Jo Nadeau, activist and event attendee