Statement on Freedom of Assembly and Peaceful Protests

Thursday, May 2, 2024

As the Executive Committee of the University of Toronto Graduate Students’ Union, we assert our unwavering support for the fundamental rights to freedom of assembly and expression. These rights are essential for a vibrant exchange of ideas and the development of a robust democratic society.

Our university has historically been a place of learning where the pursuit of truth and the advancement of knowledge are paramount. Yet, the University of Toronto’s response to the ongoing crisis in Gaza has been disappointingly passive and non-committal. For years, student activism at our university has been informed, persistent, and deeply rooted in research [1], advocating against the long-standing injustices faced by Palestinians. Despite this, the university has consistently avoided taking any substantive action on divesting from companies associated with arms and violations of human rights or severing ties with complicit Israeli academic institutions, often citing a policy of neutrality on political issues - despite a history of divestment from South African apartheid (1990) [2] and fossil fuels (2021) [3] which was driven via student action.

This reluctance stands in stark contrast to the active involvement of our students in peaceful lobbying, protests and encampments, most recently observed at King’s College Circle. These actions reflect a growing dissatisfaction among students with the university’s stance on the ongoing genocide in Palestine, echoing sentiments seen across North America. The portrayal of these protests in the media has often been skewed, framing them as violent or unreasonable, which is not only misleading but also diminishes the validity of the students’ concerns.

The University of Toronto's Statement on Freedom of Speech [4] underscores the commitment to ensuring that all community members can freely engage in dialogue without fear of censorship or retaliation. This includes the right to organize, debate, and express dissent—activities that are crucial for fostering academic freedom and societal advancement. Direct democracy, including pickets, encampments and sit-ins, have been a vital component to express such dissent.

In these tense times, it is crucial to affirm unequivocally that our support and solidarity extends to all members of our community. Our advocacy for peaceful protest is rooted in a commitment to inclusivity and mutual respect, guiding us through disagreements and political discourse. We urge the University of Toronto Administration to engage peacefully and constructively with the
encamped students, especially in the context of the many anti-war student movements of the past.

We oppose any restrictions that unjustly limit peaceful protests. The encampments at our university are a manifestation of the social engagement and progressive action the University encourages in its education, and should not be viewed as disruptions but as integral to the scholarly values of our institution.

Supporting peaceful student activism is crucial to preserving the integrity and vitality of our academic environment. As members of a diverse and global academic community, we are dedicated to defending these principles and fostering a campus that embraces open dialogue and upholds human rights.

We invite all members of the University of Toronto community to join us in affirming these rights, ensuring our campus remains a beacon of free thought, respectful dialogue, and progressive change.

Sincerely,

Executive Committee, University of Toronto Graduate Students’ Union

For reference:

University of Toronto Faculty Association Statement, April 30, 2024