

Anti-genocide encampments spread across Canada

Our reporters
3 May 2024

As Canada's longest-running anti-genocide protest encampment at Montreal's McGill University approaches the end of its first week, protest camps against Israel's onslaught on Gaza are springing up on campuses across the country. Students, supported by many faculty and other working people, are demanding that universities divest from companies, especially arms manufacturers, with ties to Israel and calling for an immediate end to the Israeli regime's slaughter and starving of the Palestinians.

The McGill encampment has grown from around 20 tents last Saturday to cover thousands of square meters on the university's front lawn. A steady stream of passers-by and participants in other downtown protest marches have joined the camp or provided donations.

From the beginning, the McGill administration and Quebec's Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ) government have been baying for police action to shut down the protest, as has been done with great violence at Columbia, UCLA and other US universities.

An attempt to criminalize the encampment through a lawsuit filed by two Jewish students, who claimed the protest made them feel "unsafe," failed Wednesday, when a Quebec Superior Court judge refused to issue an injunction against the protest. Judge Chantal Masse ruled there was no evidence the anti-genocide protesters threatened to cause harm or block access to the university. She added that "freedom of expression and to gather peacefully would be affected significantly" by an injunction.

In countering the slanderous claims that protesters have voiced antisemitic chants, their legal counsel noted that Jewish students make up a sizeable part of those participating in the protest camp.

University management, fresh from bullying faculty members into scabbing on their colleagues during a recent strike by teaching assistants, have repeatedly smeared the protesters as antisemitic, and claim to have evidence of this, although they have conspicuously failed to make any of this "evidence" public.

Even the Montreal police have felt compelled to note that "no crime is being committed" at the protest camp. A police spokesman cited by CBC described the protest as a "civil matter."

The university has also attempted to turn the broad support the protesters enjoy from Montreal residents against them, by denouncing the protest for including people, such as students from other Montreal universities, who do not attend McGill.

As Rahul, an informatics student, told a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team who visited the encampment Friday, "The arguments about the 'outsiders' don't hold up. First of all, the

cops are the outsiders. And even if there are people from outside, they are justly protesting genocide. What do you expect from normal human beings? It's a very absurd argument to make against the camps."

The legal setback for the authorities and the police's admission that no crimes have been committed did not stop right-wing chauvinist Quebec Premier François Legault from denouncing the protest Thursday as "illegal" and demanding that the camp be "dismantled" forthwith. Granting the police a free hand to do as they please, he added, "We trust the police, let them do their job." If anything, Legault's CAQ government has been even more unstinting in extending unconditional support to Israel's genocide in Gaza than the Justin Trudeau-led federal Liberal government.

Rahul criticized the threat of police intervention, pointing out, "That was one of the demands of the Zionist counter-protest yesterday, for the police to take action." Thursday's counter-protest was a deliberate provocation, with Zionists waving Israeli flags at the university gates and using a giant screen to broadcast unsubstantiated allegations that Hamas members carried out mass rapes during their Oct. 7, 2023 incursion into Israel.

Nelly, a local resident who attended the protest Friday to show her solidarity, condemned the threat of a police crackdown in comments to the WSWs. "I think it's illogical and I hope people will oppose it," she said.

Anti-genocide protest camps have also been established at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and at the University of Victoria in the provincial capital. In Ontario, a camp consisting of two dozen tents was established at the University of Ottawa Tuesday. On Thursday morning, University of Toronto students and supporters broke through recently erected fencing to set up a protest camp outside King's College. After the authorities demanded the site be cleared by a 10 p.m. deadline, a crowd of over 1,000 people gathered to support the protesting students and ward off a potential police attack. The university subsequently announced that it would not order the removal of the camp if it remains "peaceful."

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, whose trade union-backed minority government has sent tens of millions of dollars of military equipment to Israel since October 7, has already given his stamp of approval for a violent crackdown against pro-Palestinian protests on Canadian campuses akin to that seen across the United States. In a Tuesday statement, he cynically declared, "Universities are places of learning, they're places for freedom of

expression ... but that only works if people feel safe on campus. Right now ... Jewish students do not feel safe. That's not right."

Trudeau's line on the protests is virtually indistinguishable from his and Canadian imperialism's closest ally, "Genocide Joe" Biden and American imperialism. Biden spoke at the White House Thursday in defence of the sweeping nationwide police crackdown on the protests, which have seen more than 1,700 students and faculty arrested over the course of the past two weeks.

An appropriate answer to Trudeau and the ruling elite's slanderous assertion that the protesters are antisemitic was provided by Nahman, a member of Independent Jewish Voices and a participant at the McGill encampment. He told CBC, "We will consistently see the claims of antisemitism being used against our movement. The whole point is we have been anti-Zionist Jews since before October. ... Zionism and Judaism need to be de-conflated."

Trudeau's Liberals rely on the support of the trade union-sponsored New Democratic Party (NDP) for their majority in parliament. In March, the two parties combined to transform what was ostensibly a motion in support of Palestinian "self-determination" into a declaration endorsing Israel's imperialist-backed genocide. Underscoring the union/NDP/Liberal alliance's pro-war, pro-genocide character, NDP politicians collaborated in making over a dozen revisions to the motion they had originally presented so as to bring it into conformity with the war propaganda spewed out by the White House and the far-right Netanyahu government.

In October, the NDP helped initiate the witch-hunting of opponents of genocide when the Ontario party leadership kicked Sarah Jama out of its legislative caucus at Queen's Park. Jama's "crime" was that she described Israel as an "apartheid state," a designation supported by the United Nations and countless aid organizations, and declared her solidarity with the Palestinians. The NDP's action cleared the way for hard-right Premier Doug Ford's Progressive Conservatives to censure Jama, preventing her from speaking on any issue in the legislature until she "apologizes."

This record underlines the absurdity of NDP leader Jagmeet Singh's attempt to posture as an ally of the student protesters. "I stand in solidarity with students and anti-war advocates," he wrote Thursday on X. "What is happening in the US right now is very dangerous and alarming. In Canada, I want students to know this: It is your right to peacefully protest—and I will defend that. New Democrats will continue to stand for peace and justice, for protection of your Charter-rights and for ensuring every student feels safe and welcome on campus."

The truth is that the NDP will "continue to stand" for the ongoing genocide, Canadian imperialism's participation in the US-NATO war on Russia, and massive military spending to prepare for imperialist war around the world. Canada's social democrats, who have backed every war of aggression involving Canadian imperialism since NATO's 1999 bombardment of Yugoslavia, will also continue to prop up the Liberal government. They will continue to prevent pro-Palestine candidates from running on their ticket in elections and block the discussion of motions at their conventions that condemn Israel.

The reluctance of the Quebec Superior Court and the University of Toronto to authorize a violent crackdown on the protest camps—for now—should in no way be interpreted as a principled defence of democratic rights. Those, beginning with the Trudeau government, ready to countenance genocide abroad will show no reluctance in trampling on the rights of students and working people at home. Such an attack has already been politically prepared through the incessant smearing of the protests as antisemitic and through the growing clamour from the likes of Legault, Pierre Poilievre and his Conservative official opposition and the *National Post* and the various Canwest tabloids, for a police crackdown on "pro-terrorist" demonstrators.

The restraint, at least for the time being, arises from fears within the ruling class that an attempt to crush the protests could backfire, further fueling the already widespread opposition to the Israeli genocide and Canada's complicity in it. Hundreds of thousands of people have participated in weekly protests across the country under conditions in which major strikes and contract struggles, including those involving Quebec public sector workers, railway workers, Alberta healthcare workers and Canada Post letter carriers, are underway.

The demands advanced by students for universities to divest their investments in companies with ties to Israel and businesses profiting from the genocide are legitimate. But they cannot be achieved with appeals to university administrations that enjoy intimate ties with the corporate elite and political establishment. Stopping the Gaza genocide requires the independent political mobilization of the working class in opposition to the entire political establishment—federalist and pro-Quebec independence, avowedly right-wing and ostensibly "left"—which has universally supported the far-right Netanyahu regime in its onslaught on the Palestinians.

Students must turn to the working class, appealing for their solidarity in beating back state repression from the same institutions and parties that have enforced dangerous working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic and used strikebreaking legislation to all but abolish workers' right to strike. Workers must recognize the importance of coming to the defence of the students by taking up the struggle to build an international movement led by the working class in opposition to war and genocide, and the capitalist system that gives rise to them.



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