



February 10, 2020

Open Letter to UofT President Gertler: Graduate Students Call on University to Ban the Jewish Defence League

Dear President Meric Gertler,

In a landslide vote, graduate students passed a motion at the January 27 General Meeting of the University of Toronto's Graduate Student's Union (UTGSU) calling on you to ban the Jewish Defence League (JDL). That motion affirms the UTGSU's solidarity with York University students and protestors who were physically and verbally assaulted on their campus on November 20, 2019 by the JDL at a Herut Canada event. It also asks that the University take concrete measures against the JDL to ensure the safety of its students and their right to freedom of speech from alt-right harassment and violence.

We are asking that you respect the will of the graduate students at your University, and their calls for safety and solidarity against the JDL. [For years](#), we as organizers in the UofT Palestine solidarity movement have asked the University to defend our right as students and workers to freedom of speech, academic freedom, and safe working conditions by stopping the persistent JDL harassment against us and the University has not done so. When [UofT faculty called on your predecessor to do so](#), the University still did not take adequate measures. Now the graduate students have joined our appeal by supporting our motion to ban the JDL.

Will the University finally take action and put an end to racist, sexist violence and political intimidation against your students, faculty and staff? Will you help us ensure that horrific attacks like those at York on Nov. 20 never happen again at any university? Will you make sure that our University is a place where academic freedom and freedom of expression are protected for all?

The use of intimidation and violence to shut down campus debate on Palestine is a serious threat to democracy, and an assault on the most basic principles of equity and [freedom of speech](#) that University espouses. It is a violation of [UofT's official Statement on Freedom of Speech](#), which points out that the rights of freedom of speech and academic freedom are "meaningless unless they entail the right to raise deeply disturbing questions and provocative challenges to the cherished beliefs of society at large and of the university itself." It also belies the statement you made [as reported in](#)



[UofT News](#) that: “We have a responsibility as a university community to ensure that debates and discussions take place in an environment of mutual respect, and free of hate speech, physical violence or other actions that may violate the laws of the land”. Why, President Gertler, does this responsibility not extend to us? Why has the University failed to heed our many appeals in private and public [since 2014](#) and before to take action to stop the hate speech, aggression and other actions that have created an environment on our campus where students, workers and their supporters can be harassed and disrupted with no recourse, simply because they are talking about Palestine?

In condemning the JDL violence at York U, the UTGSU joins the [York University Graduate Students' Association \(Local 84\)](#), [the York Federation of Students \(Local 68\)](#), [CUPE Local 3902](#), [Independent Jewish Voices \(IJV\)](#), and organizations around the world. On Nov. 20 at York, JDL members were recorded spitting at, punching, verbally assaulting, shoving and choking peaceful protestors who assembled to oppose [an event by Herut Canada featuring Israeli soldiers](#). JDL members [urinated on a flagpole, threw garbage at protestors, threatened sexual assault and stabbing](#), and tried to [rip off Muslim women's headscarves](#). Witnesses of this racist and gendered violence shared what they saw and experienced with members of the UTGSU at the January 27 General Meeting; the membership overwhelmingly resolved to act in solidarity with our fellow students and workers at York by condemning this violence, particularly against Palestinians and people of colour, and by refusing to allow these racist assaults on students to persist. [The JDL is a dangerous, violent, alt-right, racist group](#). As the [Southern Poverty Law Center documents](#), the JDL “has orchestrated countless terrorist attacks in the U.S. and abroad, and has engaged in intense harassment of foreign diplomats, Muslims, Jewish scholars and community leaders, and officials.” Banning its members from our campus and prohibiting them from disrupting campus events is a necessary step for you to demonstrate your commitment to the most basic tenets of democracy, equity, and freedom of speech and inquiry.

Like all Palestine solidarity organizations, the UTGSU Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions (BDS) Committee along with its sibling organizations—UofT's Independent Jewish Voices, the CUPE 3902 BDS Committee, and UofT's Students Against Israeli Apartheid—have faced ongoing attacks. At this University, the JDL and its allies like Herut Canada [disrupt our events, threaten our organizers and supporters](#), and publicly slander us with the usual [baseless accusations of antisemitism and terrorism](#). Such accusations authorize and encourage violence and harassment against us by white supremacists. They endanger our lives, our livelihoods, and our studies. They violate our right to



freedom of conscience and speech on the question of Palestine/Israel. Most egregiously, they seek to silence criticism of the Israeli state from any attempt to hold it accountable so that it can continue committing war crimes and human rights violations against the Palestinian people. For we are all too aware that the aggression and harassment we face is but a small microcosm of the daily violence and oppression experienced by the Palestinian people living under the illegal Israeli military occupation and apartheid system. We are also aware that the erosion of Palestinian rights and freedoms contributes to the erosion of the rights and freedoms of all people everywhere. Public debate on Palestine has become the litmus test for any institution, government or society that claims to espouse liberal democratic principles and to believe in basic freedoms.

The BDS movement is a peaceful, grassroots response to the severe, long-running, and ongoing human rights violations by the Israeli apartheid regime against the native Palestinian people in their own lands. Our committee was established following a decision by the UTGSU in 2012 to endorse the 2005 Call from Palestinian civil society for peaceful resistance through international boycott, divestment, and sanctions against Israel until it complies with international law. Unions on all three UofT campuses — [St George](#), [Scarborough](#), and [Mississauga](#) — consistently and unequivocally endorse the BDS movement and divestment from companies that provide resources like arms that enable Israeli human rights violations. The UTGSU has repeatedly urged UofT to divest from companies that profit from the illegal occupation of Palestinian land, the collective punishment of Palestinians, economic activities in Israel's illegal settlements, and from the trade of brutal and indiscriminate weaponry with Israel. These include Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, Hewlett-Packard, and BAE Systems.

We ask for your support in ensuring the safety and freedom of speech for the thousands of students on our campuses who are committed to human rights and who stand in solidarity with Palestine. The UTGSU Membership demands that your administration ban the JDL from our University. We await your response and action on these crucial issues.

Sincerely,

The Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions Standing Committee

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