

## spotlight on UM's investment in apartheid

A grassroots mobilization to defend pro-Palestine voices at the University of Michigan has transformed the atmosphere on campus, explains **Joel Reinstein**.

March 31, 2014

THE CAMPAIGN by University of Michigan (UM) students in Ann Arbor to get their campus to divest from Israeli apartheid is continuing after a six-day sit-in compelled the student government to reverse its March 18 indefinite postponement of a divestment resolution.

After consideration of the resolution went forward on March 25, the Central Student Government (CSG) suspended its own rules and voted by secret ballot--on "security grounds"--to reject divestment 25 to 9, with one abstention. Yet in many ways, the campaign to get UM to divest from its complicity with Israel's human rights violations is just beginning.

With student government elections recently concluded, SAFE plans to bring the divestment before the newly elected body and also to seek out creative ways to ask the UM Board of Regents to disentangle itself from Israeli apartheid.

-----

THE SIT-in has electrified Students Allied for Freedom and Equality (SAFE) and shined a spotlight on UM's investments in four companies involved in profiting from Israel's denial of Palestinian rights. Throughout the last two weeks, the campus practically buzzed with discussion and debate about the issue, and articles and opinion pieces on the subject in the student-run *Michigan Daily* garnered more views than coverage of the Michigan basketball team's tournament run during every day of the sit-in.

The sit-in was sparked after organizers called on supporters to attend the March CSG meeting to speak in favor of the divestment resolution. Organizers expected some 50 people to show up. Instead, more than 300 came out, and only a handful of those opposed to the resolution were present.

It was clear from the start that CSG was hostile to divestment, and during the 30-minute community concerns section of the meeting, CSG took the unprecedented step of giving equal time to speakers for and against the resolution. With virtually everyone present in support of divestment, this "egalitarian" move gave a grossly disproportionate platform to pro-Israel students.

While apologists for Israeli apartheid repeated talking points about "dialogue" and "both sides," Palestinian students spoke from their own experiences. Nicole Khamis described how her cousin was denied cancer treatment by Israel's system of checkpoints:

We had hope that Rima was going to get the treatment she needed, but there was a problem: help was at the other side of the checkpoint. In order to access medical treatment, a permit was needed for the Israeli government. So my aunt applied, and she waited and waited for something NO ONE should have to wait for: access to medical treatment.

She cried to my mom in the darkness, as she could visibly see her daughter weakening day by day, and she prayed to God for a miracle, as Rima was getting worse. On November 11, my cousin passed away from the cancer that she could have had treatment for. November 15, four days later, the permit arrived at her house.

As Khamis was choking back tears to finish her speech, student government representatives were checking their smart phones.

When the resolution finally came up on the agenda, representative John Lin shocked the crowd by making a motion that the resolution be indefinitely postponed. The debate that followed was short, and the assembly voted to indefinitely postpone a vote on divestment by a vote of 21-15 with one abstention.

The **outraged crowd erupted immediately into chants of "Divest, divest!"** [1] for several minutes, forcing the student government to cancel the rest of its meeting. **A spontaneous rally followed on the steps outside the building** [2], with students giving the speeches they weren't able to deliver at the meeting.

-----

AT 7 p.m. the next day, SAFE and its allies took over the CSG chambers in a sit-in to last "indefinitely" until student reps reversed their decision to postpone a vote the resolution. "We called the sit-in to make our voices heard," said SAFE co-chair Suha Najjar. "We were censored at that meeting on the 18th, and student government needed to be held accountable."

More than 100 people joined in on the first night, transforming the student government chambers into the Edward Said Lounge--something that university officials had repeatedly promised but never delivered to Arab students.

On the first night, the students democratically determined **five "calls for accountability"** [3] to student government. In addition for a repeal of the postponement, SAFE called for student government representatives to apologize in person and in writing for silencing students, attend a teach-in on divestment, open all student government meetings, and not limit student speaking time at meetings.

Morale was high throughout the sit-in, with more than 200 students participating at one time or another and roughly 100 present each night. Bonds were built between student activists, and organic ties were patiently strengthened between members of various student groups. Issues of anti-Blackness, misogyny and other oppressive behaviors within the space were swiftly addressed by organizers, and students taught each other about connections between Palestinian liberation and other struggles. Students strived to make the sit-in a place where oppressed people could feel relatively safe as a means to transforming a violent society that makes full safety impossible.

The sit-in also demonstrated the kind of grassroots power that students are capable of wielding. Michael Proppe, the archconservative president of student government, was forced to issue an apology, half-hearted though it was, and university officials were successfully pressured to release a [statement denying rumors that SAFE was "violent."](#) [4]

-----

CSG SCHEDULED its next meeting for March 25 at 7:30 p.m., and the line to get in started forming at 5:30, eventually snaking through four floors of Michigan's Union.

Some 500 people, mostly supporters of divestment, packed the large room student government had booked specifically for the meeting. Hundreds more watched the [livestream](#) [5] in other parts of the building. A majority of these were opponents of divestment mobilized by Hillel, who arrived later than SAFE and its allies.

Journalist Max Blumenthal, who flew in at the last minute to speak in support of the resolution, started things off with a [speech that drew attention to the brutal realities of Israel's ethno-nationalism](#) [6]:

Now when you hear [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu say that [Palestinians] present a threat to the Jewish character of the state of Israel, consider if an American president said that Jews, or Muslims, or another minority group in the United States threatened the white Christian character of the United States. All of you would immediately be up in arms...what I am elucidating here is the essential logic of Israel as an ethnocracy, and to call Israel a democracy is to besmirch the very concept of democracy.

Blumenthal countered the anti-Palestinian politics of Prof. Victor Lieberman who was invited by student government to speak as an "impartial expert" on the history of the "Arab-Israeli conflict." Lieberman, whose expertise is in Southeast Asian studies, teaches a popular class at UM that normalizes Israel's occupation under the guise of "objectivity." Palestinian students have had to take his class knowing that his whitewashed version of history justifies the killing and imprisonment of their families in Palestine, even though he is widely considered to be "impartial."

With time for student input expanded as a result of SAFE's sit-in, numerous students spoke to the resolution ([watch a full playlist of pro-divestment speeches](#) [7]).

Pro-Israel speakers attempted to portray a false symmetry between Israelis and Palestinians by employing liberal rhetoric about "identity" and claiming that they'd been silenced (exactly how, they didn't say). One white speaker even appropriated the words of socialist and civil rights leader Bayard Rustin in an attempt to police Palestinian resistance and delegitimize the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement as "taking away freedoms from its opposition."

Other Zionist speakers rehashed arguments that will be familiar to anyone involved in the BDS movement. They insisted that the resolution was "divisive," that it made pro-Israel students feel "unsafe," and that UM had no business taking sides in the "conflict."

Unable to deny Israel's apartheid and ethnic cleansing, they instead said that the resolution was "singling out Israel." A professor from Michigan State, speaking for Hillel (a non-student organization that [bars membership of Jewish students who criticize Israel](#)

[8]), tried to downplay Israel's violent displacement of Palestinians by **invoking the U.S. genocide against Native Americans** [9].

-----

SUCH TRANSPARENT efforts to cloak Israel's denial of human rights and its expropriation of Palestinian land with liberal rhetoric fooled only those who can ignore the gross injustice of maintaining neutral in the face of a conflict between an oppressor and the oppressed. Student Lamees Mekkaoui read **a speech by her sister Nohal that made plain the absurdity of these talking points** [10]:

Today the renowned university that I'm so fortunate to attend, the block "M" that my parents so proudly display in public on their cars and to their friends, and my undergraduate education are all complacent in the oppression of the Palestinian people. Yet the concerns that members of the opposition feel "unsafe," believe this issue's "divisive," and name the resolution "anti-Israel" continue to be acknowledged.

You feel unsafe? How about the Palestinian students working so diligently to graduate with a Michigan degree while their families are living in one of the many refugee camps spread across the Middle East? How do you think it feels knowing that your university doesn't care about you, and invests in companies that violate human rights on a daily basis?

Other anti-Palestinian speakers repeated **arguments used to defend apartheid South Africa** [11], claiming that the BDS movement would harm Palestinians. Given that BDS was called for by 170 Palestinian civil society groups and is supported by the vast majority of Palestinians, this amounted to stating that Zionists know better than the Palestinians themselves what's best for them. What's more, those using such racist and paternalistic statements had the audacity to claim that they believe in the "self-determination of all people."

By contrast, student Angela Abiodun, standing in solidarity with SAFE, read **a speech from a friend detailing Israel's systematic anti-Black racism** [12]. She spoke to **Israel's arbitrary incarceration and deportation of Eritrean and South Sudanese asylum-seekers** [13], deemed "infiltrators" by Israel, and the widespread violence against them. She denounced the appropriation of Rustin: "You do not get to use Black suffering when it is convenient for you."

Remarkably, this was deemed "out of order" by the speaker of the CSG Assembly, and Abiodun was forced to stop speaking, begging the question of why CSG's rules against hate speech didn't result in ruling that pro-apartheid arguments were out of order.

But perhaps the most reprehensible statements of the night came from the student government itself. Vice President Bobby Dishell, for example, **implied that SAFE had made threats, subtly employing Islamophobic stereotypes** [14] that engender real violence. Rep. Chris Mays likewise **described SAFE and the BDS movement as violent without a shred of evidence** [15]. And John Lin openly prioritized profits over human life, arguing that if UM were to divest from all companies involved in human-rights abuses, its portfolio would be unprofitable. He was arguably the most honest bigot of the night.

These words stood in stark contrast to those of Suha Najjar, one of the resolution's authors, who spoke to the student representatives who had silenced Palestinians the previous week:

Some people are angry at you, and some people think you are cowards. Some have even lost respect for you. But me, I pity you. I pity you because you had the opportunity to stand on the right side of history, and alongside hundreds of Palestinian classmates. I pity you because you had the opportunity to learn from classmates who could have taught you something about love, humanity, dignity and integrity. I pity you because you have robbed yourself of that opportunity.

-----

SINCE MARCH 25, leaders of SAFE have been subjected to personal attacks that threaten to destroy their reputation, following **common practices of the virulently anti-BDS David Project** [16]. They have had **personal photos dug up to portray them as terrorists** [17] and been **slandered as anti-Semitic** [18].

These are only the most extreme examples of attempts to intimidate Palestinian solidarity activists on campus. Such attempts will not succeed and can only further reveal the moral bankruptcy of apartheid apologists. SAFE has made it plain: they will not be silenced.

Indeed, their voice has been heard across the country. #UMDivest has trended nationally on Twitter, and to date, the recording of the March 25 student government meeting has been viewed more than 24,000 times.

SAFE's voice has been heard on campus, with a **letter of support from UM faculty** [19] and a **letter of support from Jewish Voice for Peace** [20].

And on a campus with a strong and active pro-Israel Hillel, #UMDivest was nevertheless supported by 36 student groups. Some of these groups had initially declined to offer their support, but changed their positions after patient engagement and education by SAFE organizers, including Human Rights Through Education and United Students Against Sweatshops. Through SAFE's efforts, the Palestinian cause dominated campus discussion for two weeks, a discussion that Zionists--in contrast to their calls for "dialogue"--have done everything in their power to stifle.

Perhaps more significantly, SAFE itself has changed. Not only have many new students joined its ranks, but its membership has been transformed by a week of intense struggle.

During the sit-in, students gained experience organizing, dealing with news media, negotiating with administrators and holding internal strategic debates. They shut down a student government meeting and took over the chambers, creating a space that for a week was explicitly for Palestinians. They controlled the narrative on campus and exposed the bigotry of anti-Palestinians, who were forced to burn bridges with social-justice groups. That experience of student power will not soon be forgotten, and SAFE is more confident than it's ever been.

The events of the past two weeks are just the beginning for #UMDivest and a sign of things to come for the entire BDS movement. "Obviously this doesn't end here. We want to push with our next student government," says Suha Najjar. "But now, we're focusing on the regents."

The University of Michigan was one of the last schools to divest from apartheid South Africa. If SAFE's success continues, it may be one of the first to divest from the occupation of Palestine.

-----  
Published by the International Socialist Organization.

Material on this Web site is licensed by SocialistWorker.org, under a Creative Commons (by-nc-nd 3.0) [21] license, except for articles that are republished with permission. Readers are welcome to share and use material belonging to this site for non-commercial purposes, as long as they are attributed to the author and SocialistWorker.org.

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYQz57yek3Q>

[2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKH7eM00Eog>

[3] <http://www.scribd.com/doc/213560553/CALL-FOR-ACCOUNTABILITY-FROM-THE-CENTRAL-STUDENT-GOVERNMENT-FOR-ITS-RECENT-DECISIONS>

[4] <http://www.vpcomm.umich.edu/pa/key/respectfordiverseviews.html>

[5] <http://new.livestream.com/csg/events/2868309>

[6] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ry7IxcCwoBQ&list=PLRaLUtdo-STqDU1Btci88BN87MSYKgzVf&index=2>

[7] <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLRaLUtdo-STqDU1Btci88BN87MSYKgzVf>

[8] <http://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2014/02/24/second-hillel-affiliate-rejects-ban-anti-israel-speakers>

[9] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UHm-OcB08Go>

[10] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0ljNMb1Czw>

[11] <http://electronicintifada.net/content/how-todays-liberal-zionists-echo-apartheid-south-africas-defenders/13168>

[12] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTN4nSpjGA0>

[13] <http://electronicintifada.net/content/racist-ringleaders-2013-israels-war-africans-intensifies/13023>

[14] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ir3eLQych2s>

[15] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhvE6tGScyg>

[16] <http://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/israel-lobby-group-outlines-dirty-tricks-against-campus-palestine-activists>

[17] <http://michigandaily.com/opinion/03viewpoint-pineapple-express28>

[18] <http://www.scribd.com/doc/214886136/On-Slander-Accountability-and-CSG-Elections>

[19] <http://www.scribd.com/doc/214531858/Faculty-Letter-in-Support-of-UMDivest-Movement-at-the-University-of-Michigan>

[20] <http://www.michigandaily.com/opinion/03viewpoint-jvp25>

[21] <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0>