

PEOPLE'S UNIVERSITY ENCAMPMENT COMMUNITY RESPONSE

13 MAY 2024

Dear Members of the USF Community,

In this morning's closed-door [meeting](#), university administrators refused to let student leaders document the negotiations via recording or livestream. During these negotiations the administration failed to raise any concerns or claims of anti-Semitism on the campus. However, our negotiators raised concerns of attacks on Palestinian faculty and students in which the administration provided little to no answers beyond stating that these matters are handled internally. Despite Father Fitzgerald's commitment to affirming protection of Palestinian students and faculty at today's meeting, he only released a statement in regards to concerns for Jewish and Israeli members of the USF community.

Following this meeting, the student body received an email from administration that gravely misrepresents what we stand for as a People's University. In response to this email we would like to reiterate that to conflate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism is ahistorical, dangerous and disrespectful to the Jewish students who advocate for a free Palestine (*see [statement](#) from Jewish students of the People's University*).

After more than 200 days witnessing the tragic events in Gaza and seven months of tireless organizing, we, the students of the University of San Francisco stand united. USF, known for its commitment to activism and social justice, proudly advertises itself as an "activist incubator" throughout San Francisco.

On April 29th, 2024, we launched the People's University for Palestine encampment, marking our dedication to joining the global movement for liberation. Through this initiative, we stand in solidarity with the 1.9 million internally displaced Palestinians in Gaza, amplifying their voices and advocating for justice.

Embodying the ethos of "change the world from here," the People's University for Palestine exemplifies our university's values in action. It encompasses a diverse community of students, representing various races and faiths, all united in condemning the genocide of Palestinians.

ASUSF Senate passed a divestment resolution on February 28th calling on USF to disclose and divest from companies affiliated with the Israeli occupation. Two months later, USF has not yet fully disclosed. As an institution dedicated to social justice and human rights, USF maintains its

support for Israel. President Father Fitzgerald has ignored our organizing efforts for Palestine since October 2023. We are deeply disheartened by Father Fitzgerald's antagonistic statement in response to our demands, titled *A Peaceful Path Forward*, which misrepresents what we stand for and publicly villainizes us.

Our university has not acknowledged the genocide or even the discrimination toward its own Palestinian students, dehumanizing them and ignoring their needs. We, the students, faculty, alumni, and others at our university, have been disregarded by Fitzgerald's persistent refusal to participate in the vigils held in memory of the Palestinian lives lost in Gaza. Instead of responding to our rallies, he signed a statement aligning himself with "Universities Against Terrorism," which we addressed through a previous community letter. In support of the Jesuit value of *cura personalis*, Father Fitzgerald must acknowledge the over 40,000 Palestinians martyred and the 2.2 million more facing starvation and death.

We are now under threat of university punishment on the condition that our encampment remains intact after 3pm on Tuesday, May 14th. This threatening language has led our peaceful student protestors to fear that their academic and professional futures are at stake.

Here is where we stand in regards to our five demands:

DECLARE

During the May 8th meeting between People's University negotiators and university administration, Father Fitzgerald responded to our demand to condemn the Israeli occupation's genocide of Palestinians by saying, "I'm a theologian by training and a sociologist. I'm not a political scientist. I'm not a historian. So, there are other faculty members here at the university who have deep expertise, and they can make that sort of judgment."

We respond with two points:

First, professors from this University, representing the departments of History, Politics, Middle Eastern Studies, and Peace & Justice Studies, stated in 2023: "We state, unequivocally, that we stand opposed to the genocide in Gaza, and believe it is our moral obligation to ask our USF community to do so as well." Father Fitzgerald should stand with these learned scholars in his own university to make a similar declaration, using language at least as strong as that of Irish Jesuits International.

Second, the University has taken many explicit political positions:

1. November 24, 2016 - “We will use every legal means to protect [undocumented students]” USF President Speaks Out in Support of Undocumented Students - Ignatian Solidarity Network .
2. June 10, 2020- “As campus leaders, we must speak out against the relentless atrocities that we are bearing witness to that are unjust and inhumane. Therefore, the leadership of the University of San Francisco condemns police brutality, institutionalized racism, white supremacy, and systemic social injustices that have led to the deaths of too many Black people in the US and globally” An Open Letter to Black-identified Students, Faculty, Staff, Alumni, and their Allies | myUSF.
3. May 19, 2023- “Our University stands proudly in solidarity with Ukrainian people here and abroad”.

Given these advocacy statements, we only find it fitting that our University leadership take an unequivocal stance in similar nature to those above.

DETACH

In response to our demand to end all academic partnerships with the Israeli occupation, Father Fitzgerald claimed in the May 8th email that “USF does not have partnerships with Israeli institutions.” However, the People’s University for Palestine can confirm that USF offers two academic ties to Israel: one academic opportunity for a study abroad program and one scholarship fund with ties to a Zionist organization.

The academic opportunities offered by USF include a trip into the modern confines of the "Israeli state," the occupied West Bank, and Jerusalem titled “Beyond Bridges: Israel-Palestine.” The program raises severe concerns about the ethical positioning of this trip, given the occupied status of the land. **Further, participating in programs for the academic enrichment of our community's *most privileged students* at the danger of our *most marginalized students* is a morbid confirmation that USF is not giving all its students the same level of protection.** We have a moral obligation to detach from programs that support genocide or endanger our students. Father Fitzgerald’s response conflating studying at a U.S. university with studying in an apartheid colonial project built on illegal settlement is a dismissal of the genocide in Gaza. The genocide of indigenous peoples everywhere is inherent to colonialism which relies on the violent exploitation of people and land in order to expand and profit. We study the U.S. history of genocide and cannot stand to allow it to continue with the ongoing genocide of Palestinians.

Upon further research, we have confirmed the presence of the Daniel Levine Cook scholarship at the USF School of Law which provides a \$23,000 scholarship to Jewish students in an essay

prompt responding to Daniel Levine Cook's passions for many things including being "a passionate supporter of Israel." The scholarship is connected to the Jewish Community Federation & Endowment Fund (JCFEF). **Therefore, the original denial of any academic partnerships with any organization funding the occupation and/or Israel has been debunked.** The People's University demands immediate removal of this scholarship and severance from the Jewish Community Federation & Endowment Fund. The People's University is currently investigating specific ties, as it is essential to uphold our commitment to justice and solidarity with oppressed communities.

DISCLOSE

We have considered the University's proposal to establish a Socially Responsible Advisory Investment Task Force. After looking closely at the history of USF's South Africa Divestment in 1986, we recognize the success of the Investment Advisory Committee that was established by Fr. John Lo Schiavo. Additionally, we are aware of a more recent USF Divestment Campaign, Fossil Free USF. Considering the lack of accountability and transparency on USF's recent Fossil Fuel divestment campaign and the ASUSF Senate resolution that passed in March 2023 to address this, we cannot trust that our current administration *alone* will disclose and divest with adequate transparency. That being said, we agree that a task force is necessary but would only be willing to move forward with establishing one if the overall composition of the task force is mutually agreed upon by both USF and the USF People's University Negotiations Team.

The students of the People's University understand that approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of USF's investment portfolio is public, while Non-Disclosure Agreements protect $\frac{2}{3}$. A Foghorn article from April 13th, 2013 states, "The students of Fossil Free USF requested information on the whereabouts of the university's endowment and received a document detailing investments." From this document, a campaign leader was able to determine that USF was in fact invested in fossil fuels. **We demand a similar document.** Furthermore, we demand that all information regarding the university's liabilities be made public. The University's publicly available tax documents offer a partial picture of financial relationships that must end. The University has accepted money through a tax-exempt state program called the California Educational Facilities Authority (CEFA). Investment firms Blackrock and Vanguard, which offer direct investment in Israel and weapons manufacturing, invest in CEFA bonds. We demand that all university assets and liabilities be made public, to ensure that our university is not investing in or profiting from warmongering corporations carrying out genocide.

DIVEST

We, the students of the People's University, see no other logical, ethical, theological, spiritual, or just response to an ongoing genocide than to divest from any and all ties to the Apartheid State of Israel. Additionally, our coalition for liberation expects to respectfully co-create solutions that ensure transparency, efficacy, and prudence until we as an institution can announce a full divestment.

USF has historically taken stances and divested as an institution from Apartheid State South Africa and Fossil Fuels. The ongoing genocide in Palestine should receive an equal response from the USF administration. By failing to apply the same logical standard to take a stance against genocide, USF fails to both keep its students safe, as well as answer the global call for justice.

We hope that the administration can join us by living up to the values that brought many of us to the USF Community. The world is watching as a genocide unfolds, and it is our duty to divest wholly from *any* genocidal entity. The university claims to follow the principles of the Jesuit faith, yet by accepting donations, investments, and other financial contributions from Zionist entities, the administration is prioritizing finance over social justice and endowment over student well-being. **The time to stand up for Palestinians was during the first Nakba. The time for USF to divest is now.** Profits from genocide should have no place in the university's investment strategy.

"No one can serve two masters; for either they will hate the one and love the other, or they will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."
Matthew 6:24

DEFEND

Since October, student organizers have made many attempts to work with the university, abiding by their protest protocol on campus. We met with members of the administration, such as the Assistant Vice President of Student Engagement, Lester Deanes, and had conversations about how we can comply with the school's conduct of peaceful protest. We held peaceful demonstrations and vigils following these meetings and even extended an invitation to administration members, which they did not accept. After months of harassment from Zionists on campus, silence from administration, and seven months of intense siege on Gaza as a result of

Israeli occupation, funded in part by American universities, we have found no other choice but to amplify our cause and launch an encampment. We have attempted to follow protocol and have been silenced by the administration.

In his May 8th email, Father Fitzgerald claimed that “USF protects the right of all students, faculty, and staff to express their views peacefully and respectfully while adhering to campus safety and conduct regulations and protocols. We do not tolerate harassment, discrimination, or intimidation of individuals or groups.” This encampment has only served to protect, uplift, and bring attention to the genocide of the Palestinian people. We create art, share our lived experiences, and educate one another. **The People’s University is sacred, and at its core, peaceful. To insinuate that it is anything but peaceful is an intentionally deceptive tactic used by the administration to spread false narratives about this movement.**

When Palestinian voices speak about their trauma, their grief, and their suffering, this is not disrespect. When Palestinian voices speak about their trauma, their grief, and their suffering, Father Fitzgerald turning his back on them to go to another meeting is disrespectful. The language of “respect” is being weaponized to silence us and stifle the speech of a student whose people are being annihilated by American bombs. We demand that USF defend our Palestinian students and faculty and protecting pro-Palestinian causes by:

- Affirming student, faculty, and staff’s First Amendment rights to free speech and free assembly;
- Listening to, negotiating in good faith, and not calling upon external law enforcement agencies to silence the People’s University for Palestine;
- Ensuring that no member of the USF community that has been involved in the encampment or related activities will face retaliation from the University, including suspension, expulsion, termination, or other disciplinary actions;
- Investigating anti-Palestine/anti-Palestinian or Islamophobic incidents on campus and heightening the consequences faced by individuals who commit these actions, including USF students who are previously or currently serving in, or plan to serve in the Israeli Defense Force, not merely to acknowledge their transgressions but to ensure that their actions reflect genuine accountability;
- Implementing a comprehensive strategy for addressing pro-Palestinian discourse, including establishing workshops and strengthening support networks like CASA to empower and advocate for students expressing these views; and
- Actively safeguarding educators, ensuring their job security when discussing sensitive matters without subjecting them to academic or professional repercussions.

CONCLUSION

We, the People's University, demand that USF uphold its mission statement, which includes that USF “promote the common good by critically, thoughtfully, and innovatively addressing inequities to create a more humane and just world.” We join the international student movement to pressure our academic institution to divest from genocide so that our tuition dollars do not aid unconscionable war crimes. **Our university owes the student body transparency and accountability.** We urge USF to continue coming to the table to meet student demands for justice in Palestine. Our demand exceeds our university and includes our workplaces, consumer enterprises, and government. We stand in solidarity with the Palestinians as they fight for their liberation from Israeli, American, and Western oppression. No time in the history of America has a social movement been non-disruptive. From slave revolts to the uprisings against police brutality in 2020, the liberation of oppressed people has always been met with severe repression because it disrupts the status quo.

In his email “Updates Regarding The Encampment” sent May 13th at 4:39pm, Father Fitzgerald lays out the next steps that the University of San Francisco's administration plans to take in response to the demands of the People's University. Here he threatens disciplinary action against students who refuse to vacate Welch Field by May 14th, 2024, at 3:00 pm.

Our encampment has arisen solely due to the University administration's failure to engage in dialogue with us since October of 2023, spanning seven whole months. The establishment of our encampment was the sole catalyst that prompted the University administration to come to the negotiating table to discuss topics such as divestment, disclosure, and condemning the genocide, displacement, and mass murder of Palestinian people. Once the encampment was erected, it took only 10 days for Father Fitzgerald to engage in discussions with us. Given the University's previous disregard for our attempts at dialogue, we believe our encampment must remain in place until solutions agreed upon by both our People's University and the University administration are implemented. However, this seems unlikely as Father Fitzgerald is personally threatening to cease discussions unless we dismantle our camp, the only catalyst for initiating dialogue in the first place. How can we be sure the University will live up to its promise?

In Peace,

The People's University for Palestine