

Scenes from the student pro-Palestine encampment at OttawaU

Brynn Emond

The other day my friend and I decided we wanted to visit the student-led pro-Palestine encampment that has recently sprung up on the lawn of OttawaU. On one of the organizing group's social media pages, they had recently sent out a message informing people they were accepting donations, specifically of certain types of things (like hot water, garbage bags, blue tarps, yoga mats, etc.). I felt driven by the urge to donate whatever I could – so, during my shift, I furtively searched the back storeroom, digging through years' worth of defunct paper cups, lids, and out-of-season teas. There was enough back there to supply a small army with to-go cups and flavored rooibos. Perfect; I packed it all into a bag to take with us.

We biked the few short minutes to the university campus, me with my bag of paper products and tea, my friend balancing a roll of bristol boards precariously on his handlebars. It was a damp, warm afternoon: when we arrived, activity at the encampment was visibly subdued. We saw the Palestinian flags twist-tied to the looming black metal bars surrounding the lawn; there were others hanging from the handful of towering oaks that stood above the quiet rows of tents. There were people milling around the front, sitting on the grass, chatting and sipping cold drinks. A big hand-painted sign read CHECK-IN, so we went there first.

Approaching the encampment I felt a sense of anxiety and uncertainty: would we be turned away? (But why would they turn us away)? I tried to seem as relaxed and unthreatening as I possibly could. With some difficulty I strolled up, half-expecting a challenge, and received none. People in high-visibility vests and keffiyehs chatted under the canvas roof of the CHECK-IN booth. I asked where I could donate, and they pointed me to another tent (the kitchen).

I ducked in between the tent roofs, into a close and almost intimate-feeling space. The people at the kitchen told me where I could leave my paper cups and tea. I added them to the (already fairly significant) pile and hurried to find my friend, who had by this time already established himself in the "Arts Corner", which was at the back of the encampment, neatly tucked in behind one of the stately, beautiful old oaks. Several people were working on a huge banner, carefully painting the Palestinian colors onto a length of canvas. I sat down on a blue tarp beside my friend, still feeling like an imposter and still half-ready to be challenged – but I never was. We sat together for an hour or two, making signs. We exchanged a few quick words with other people

– “I like that sign,” someone said, looking at our *Stop the Genocide Now!* poster. “I’m looking for my airpod,” said someone else, their face obscured by a keffiyeh.

“Your airpod?” I said.

“Yes, in the singular,” they replied.

“Oh, that sounds difficult,” I said, looking out at the vast lawn with its tens of tents, immense green space, and millions of small objects piled on tables.

“I’m sure I’ll find it,” they said, drifting away.

We worked away on our signs, chatting about whatever. Once in a while, a car passing by on the other side of the fence would honk its horn, eliciting a small cheer from those at the front of the encampment. I looked around, trying to get a sense of how the place worked. It occurred to me several times to wonder who was in charge, before I remembered that almost certainly no one was. When I asked the people painting the banner where to put my garbage, they shrugged and said, “Probably in there, I guess.” On my sign I wrote, *Institutions Are Not Your Friends*, meaning the university, but also all the other ones, too.

Later the person with their head wrapped in the keffiyeh returned, and said, “I found my airpod.”

“I’m glad!” I responded.

“I knew I would,” they said, drifting away again.

Any movement of people will inevitably bring out detractors. Right now, we see our institutions continually turning their backs on Palestine, despite the immense popular outcry in support of it and its people. Much of the media refuses to accurately portray the one-sided nature of this conflict, instead resorting to “both-sides”-isms, claiming the complexity of the issue, or the supposed right of Israel to defend itself. (To defend itself by murdering children? is the natural, though rarely voiced, response). Part of the method by which the government and the media aims to discredit the pro-Palestine movement involves misrepresenting – and misreporting – what the student encampments are actually like, and what they’re for.

The encampments, and their organizers and volunteers, are meant to do several things. They’re meant to shine a harsh and revealing light on the complicity of Western institutions in the Palestinian genocide. They’re also meant to raise general awareness about the conflict, the plight of the Palestinians, and the fact that enough is enough; the Western world’s response has so far been explicitly in support of Israel, the aggressor, with some occasional gestures of sympathy toward Palestinians. To the average person, this is unacceptable – it makes no sense. Protests, encampments, and demonstrations will continue to rollick through our cities until something changes. Many politicians do not seem to understand this. They, as always, are trying to wait the agitation out. But with every new atrocity that occurs in Palestine, the agitation only grows; it is in no danger of dissipating, not until Palestine is free.

Some media outlets, reporting on the student encampments, seem *surprised* that they are so obviously non-violent, or that they are so communal, functional and anarchic, friendly. But of course they are. They exist to execute the dream of a just world, and certainly they are messy – any community of human beings always is. But they know their purpose, they are united in their goals, and the spirit of justice and mutual aid thrives in them. This terrifies the university administrations, the government, the media, the police – of course it does. They are suddenly faced with a movement of people that are invigorated by the lived reality of community, and a thousand times stronger than them because of it.

*”From the river to the sea,
Palestine will be free!”*

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<https://mutualrage.wordpress.com/2024/05/03/what-the-student-pro-palestine-encampments-are-actually-like/>

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