

University occupations over Gaza

At the end of December 2008 a wave of protest occupations swept across UK university campuses in response to the Israeli attacks on Gaza. The 'occupation movement' started on 13 January 2009, when students at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London occupied the Brunei Gallery and issued a list of demands in connection with the atrocities committed in Gaza and the University's links to the arms industry. The national media largely failed to report on the SOAS occupation and others that followed. But the occupying students spread the word themselves, and managed their own publicity via Facebook, Wiki, blogs and YouTube.

During the occupation of King's College London the following week, the students emailed academics asking for help in two ways: by writing to the principal of their university to express support for the occupation, and by going to talk to them during their occupation. This pattern of engaging academic staff directly in the protests repeated itself across the various occupations that soon followed. The lecture rooms they occupied were turned into spaces for dialogue and reflection, for engaging with issues they felt deeply about but knew they would be challenged on and hence needed to educate themselves in. The space was kept open to all: any student or member of staff could walk in and out, could listen to talks and discussions and contribute to them. In Manchester, the students even engaged the security officers who were stationed outside the occupied space to keep an eye on them – so successfully in fact that some of the officers took to wearing Palestinian keffiyehs, like the students.

Between 13 January and 6 March 2009 there were at least twenty-seven occupations at UK university campuses: School of Oriental and African Studies, London School of Economics, Essex, King's College London, Birmingham, Sussex, Warwick, Manchester Metropolitan, Oxford, Leeds, Cambridge, Bradford, Queen Mary, Sheffield Hallam, Nottingham, Strathclyde, Manchester, Glasgow, Goldsmiths, Edinburgh, University of East Anglia, University of the West of England, St Andrews, University of East London, University of Arts London, Plymouth and Cardiff. Newcastle and Kingston reportedly also engaged in occupation, but little reliable information is available on these two. The shortest occupation, at Oxford, lasted a mere seven hours and ended with significant and immediate concessions from the University administration, including agreeing to the provision of scholarships to Palestinian students and a commitment to examine and reconsider university investment in companies that have links with the military. The longest, at Manchester University, lasted thirty-one days, beginning on 4 February and ending on 6 March.

Students' demands varied slightly from one occupation to another, but a number of demands featured consistently. These include a demand for scholarships to be granted to Palestinian students and, in some cases, to Israeli students who refuse to serve in the army; a statement to be issued by the university administration expressing support for the right of Palestinian students to education and/or expressing solidarity with the Islamic University of Gaza, which was specifically targeted in the latest attack; various forms of aid to be sent to educational institutions in Gaza that have suffered destruction in the attacks, including the Islamic University; some form of fundraising effort on campus to provide support for the people of Gaza, with many occupations specifically calling for a DEC day of fundraising to be visibly promoted by university administration (the BBC had incensed the British public at large by refusing to televise an appeal for Gaza by the Disasters Emergency Committee in early January, and many of the student occupations in London and Scotland were accompanied by occupations of BBC offices to protest this decision); commitment to examining

university investment portfolios with a view to divesting from companies implicated in the arms trade and in the occupation of Palestinian land; and ensuring immunity from reprisals for students involved in the occupation. Some occupations also demanded one or other form of boycotting Israeli goods and services, especially on campus. In Scotland, all occupations demanded that the (national) contract with Eden Springs to provide bottled water on campus be revoked. (Eden Springs is a UK company with unethical links to Israeli firms that source their water from the occupied Golan Heights.) In Birmingham, the boycott agenda included a demand not only to withdraw all goods illegally produced on Israeli settlements from university retail and catering outlets, but also to close the university account with Lloyds TSB and withhold renewal of its lease on campus because it had instructed the Islamic Bank of Britain, in its capacity as a clearing bank, to terminate the account of the Palestinian charity Interpal.

On many campuses, the occupying students managed to pass motions in support of several or all of their demands, strengthening their hand in negotiating with the university administration. For example, the SOAS occupation demand for an end to military activity on campus was backed up by a student union motion to the same effect. One of the concessions the occupation consequently won was the right for students to hold activities in the Brunei Gallery for free, instead of having to pay the £1,000 per day fee previously demanded by the administration and routinely waived for the Ministry of Defence.

Not all occupations succeeded in securing all of their demands. Nottingham, Sheffield



Hallam and Birmingham were particularly heavy-handed in dealing with student occupations, using the police either to threaten to remove them (in Birmingham and Sheffield Hallam) or actually to remove them by force (in Nottingham, where outrage at the treatment and threatened deportation of Hicham Yezza remains high), without yielding to any demands. In Sheffield Hallam, students were also threatened with suspension. However, most occupations have ended in partial success, so far as demands are concerned. In Cardiff, for instance, the University agreed to divest

all shares from BAe Systems and the aerospace arm of General Electric. Several universities agreed to provide scholarships to Palestinian students, though most tended to wrap this up within a package of scholarships to students in war zones in general.

But the achievements of the occupation movement extend well beyond concessions secured in relation to student demands. One has been managing to expose the hypocrisy of university administrations. When the director of the LSE refused to issue a condemnation of the attacks on Gaza, claiming that the university does not take positions on political issues, the occupying students were quick to remind him that he personally made an overtly political statement in May 2007 condemning a UCU resolution on Israel, and that previous LSE administrations had condemned South African apartheid and the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. Another achievement is the successful alliances students forged with academic staff that are likely to endure in future and strengthen the activist base on campus. But perhaps the most significant achievement has been the shock waves the action sent through the system – from one end of the country to the other, and beyond, even inspiring two occupations on US campuses (at Rochester and NYU). Educational institutions in this country can no longer take their students for granted – especially on the issue of Palestine.

Mona Baker