

Inspiration from the Nationwide Student Uprisings in Support of Justice in Gaza and What We Must Learn and Remember

WILPF US President's Statement

I am so inspired by the students of 2024! At college campuses across the country they're standing up for humane and moral values, about *how anyone should treat anyone*, as well as ethical institutional and governmental policy on militarism and Israel-Gaza. I know I speak for WILPF US to say we support political speech and activism that is nonviolent and against war. WILPF supports peace and *justice*, which WILPF includes within *freedom*. We believe societies and cultures thrive with the justice and *true* security possible when people and communities find and take ways to reduce or eliminate the causes of war.

WILPF principles are rooted in a women's perspective; that perspective wants clean drinking water for the community and food for families. A women's perspective does not accept the killing and maiming of over one hundred thousand Palestinians – most of them women and girls – as the price of “security”. There is no justice to be found in the Israeli devastation of Gaza.

Peace, based on justice and other fundamentals of *freedom*, is the best road to a sounder and saner world, but who among the highly militarized states and factions in the Middle East is paving the way?

It's the students who are reminding us of what should be the shared basis in human relations: *ethical and moral behavior*. Let us remember other U.S. student movements based on human rights standards and international law: anti-Viet Nam War, anti-apartheid, anti-Iraq War. The institutions of higher learning give lip service to the same principles, yet most of the over 3,000 student arrests for nonviolent actions on campuses have been at the instigation of the students' own universities.

I remember other student movements when occupiers of campus building were arrested, but those arrests were mostly only after *weeks or months*, for trespassing. Now, it's days! And at [City College in New York](#), some of those said to be occupying a building have been charged with third-degree burglary, a felony.

What are the factors driving such an escalation by the universities? Almost all the student actions are nonviolent. They call on their universities to *divest* from the corporations that profit from the war in Gaza and militarism. Beyond that, many student actions are also calling for divestment from Israel – given the *overwhelming evidence* of massive violations of international law and human rights standards by the Israeli government. (Our U.S. government consistently sweeps aside that evidence.) What does it tell us about the universities, that the calls for divestment threaten them so much? If the purpose of universities is to explore and advance truth and knowledge, how is that purpose served by their responses?

Daily, we see many and continuing cases of extreme violence by the police. Whom are the police “serving and protecting”? What do the behaviors these two institutions tell us about how *they* see their purposes?

The unaddressed violence of so many of the police arrests – in the context of U.S. policy taking scant action in response to Israel’s violence – reminds me of other wars, other student activism, other killings. The 1970 [killings at Kent State](#) and, then, the [Jackson State killings](#) ten days later were 54 years ago just this month. Today, connecting with what’s happening in Gaza, I remember the tag line in the song from 1970: As it said about the dead in [Ohio](#), *how many more?*

Now we in the U.S. can see, vividly on display in another country – yet one much like ours – just how fear can drive one to *deep* denial: denial of full news reporting, denial of human costs, denial of the lasting consequences of policies, denial of the centuries-long harm to the earth. *How many?* In the grip of denial, what limit is there?

Remembering the U.S. after September 11, 2001, do we recognize, that same fear and denial? Do you recall the miasma of *fear*? And the concealing of information, the distortion of the facts during the 9/11 era? That concealment and distortion continues today, as the U.S. continues to pursue Julian Assange. And now a new “mainstream” story is out, about the [Saudi government involvement in 9/11](#). Wasn’t that indicated, *even documented*, long since? But in the grip of denial, when the U.S. invaded Iraq, what limit was there?

Facts can be slippery. That’s why, to build peace, we often call for *truth* and *reconciliation*. But – to get back to the students expressing themselves – truth and reconciliation requires people being able to speak their truths, in a nonviolent context. Today on campuses and in mainstream U.S. media, little or no truth is allowed through. What does that tell us about the campuses, about our news media?

We can learn a lot if we pay attention, if we do not retreat into denial. In the U.S., as in Israel, most people do not challenge the concealing of information, the distortion of the facts. The students are challenging it.

Words can be very slippery. In the stress of our historical moment, we must remember: To be *pro-* the lives, communities, and human rights of Palestinians is *not* to be *anti-Semitic*. (And, of course, being *pro-Israeli* does not make a person *pro-Netanyahu*. Over-simplifications and broad judgments do not serve truth and cannot support justice.)

To call for a ceasefire, as the students do, as WILPF does, is not to be anti-Semitic. Even President Biden has stated, he’s for a ceasefire!

In WILPF, we make the strong distinction between being *anti-Zionist* and anti-Semitic. I am saddened and disturbed by the way that many in the U.S. – and, perhaps, some in WILPF – do not see that Zionism is a form of oppression. It was and is about forming a Jewish state by settling in – *colonizing* – a part of the world. The place Jews colonized is Palestine. It is no surprise that, given the current behavior of the Israeli government, many of the student actions are anti- the Zionist government of Israel.

In North America, to form the United States, European settlers did the same thing: colonized. In both Palestine and North America, *the land the settlers laid claim to was already inhabited*. And in both cases, what results from such colonizing are violations of the human and civil rights of the indigenous inhabitants – leading, in both cases, to *genocide*. Additionally, in the U.S. and Palestine, claims of “land

ownership” and “land purchases” can not justify forcibly removing the inhabitants from the land where they lived.

While it should be clear that anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism, we *do* experience anti-Semitism in the US. WILPF members are part of U.S. culture, with anti-Semitic biases embedded in us, along with other racial and class biases. So all of us – including the students rising up at campuses – do well to be self-aware and open to critiques of what we do and say.

Among the loudest now claiming that the student actions are anti-Semitic are the Right Wing voices in Congress. Where were their voices against the blatant anti-Semitism among those who sought to overturn the U.S. Presidential elections on January 6, 2021? Why do they speak up now, but did not against the racist demonstrators at the 2017 Unite the [Right rally in Charlottesville](#), North Carolina?

I assume there are anti-Semites on the Left, too. But rather than being anti-anything, the student protests are mostly *for*: *for* human rights, civil rights, and justice for Palestinians. The students are not engaged in the delicate negotiations of statecraft; theirs is a moral stance. Meanwhile, the U.S., as a government, is not taking a consistent moral stance – nor addressing the statecraft of *peace* negotiations.

WILPF joins the students in opposing the U.S. arming of Israeli militarism and applauds their largely disciplined and nonviolent free speech actions. From our women’s peace perspective, WILPF condemns the war of the Israeli government and settlers against the Palestinians. Yes, Hamas, too, has acted brutally. The only meaningful answer is peace negotiations based on truth, with reconciliation and justice. And at least half of the negotiators on all sides must be women.

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