

From Cape to Rafah, Jenin to Madagascar: Boycotting Israel at UWC

The Palestine Solidarity Coalition at UWC (PSCUWC)

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Abstract

The Palestine Solidarity Coalition at UWC (PSCUWC) emerged in late 2023 as an intergenerational mix of staff, students, workers, and alumni. The coalition operates alongside the Palestine Solidarity Association (PSA UWC), an SRC-affiliated student formation established at UWC in 2014. This short text and selection of images offers a brief, partial narrative on the movement(s) of the PSCUWC so far. Demands presented to the university management are reiterated and achievements of having resolutions ratified by UWC Council acknowledged. We outline a key motion presented to the UWC Senate on 28 May 2024, in which UWC passed a resolution on The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (or PACBI). There is also a message from the student executive of the PSA UWC. With the struggle for Palestinian liberation ongoing, the PSCUWC encourage *WritingThreeSixty* readers to get involved. Forward to a free decolonised Palestine!

Introduction: Background to the PSCUWC

For years, UWC has been an ally to the Palestinian struggle and has had a de facto boycott of Israeli institutions. However, this was in an informal capacity and without it being made university policy, UWC risked unchecked complicity with Apartheid Israel. Prompted by the events of October 2023, visible support for Palestinian liberation grew among UWC constituents and a coalition has taken shape.

On 24 October 2023, the Ditsela Workers' Education Institute, the EMS Faculty, the Institute for Social Development (ISD), and the School of Government (SOG) co-convened a session on campus titled *Solidarity with the People of Palestine: Understanding Contemporary Palestinian Struggles and the Right to Self Determination*. This rousing meeting saw over 150 attendees listen and engage with interventions from Palestinian journalist Aziz Younis alongside seasoned comrades Na'eem Jeenah and Zelda Holtzman. An action point from this meeting was to assemble an interim working committee to clarify UWC's stance and accelerate solidarity with Palestinians.

In the months that followed a unstructured group of staff, students, and alumni formed to draft an Open Letter to the university management with six demands:

1. Call publicly for an immediate and permanent ceasefire and the smooth passage of increased humanitarian aid into Gaza and all Occupied Palestinian Territories;
2. Issue an unambiguous statement of solidarity with universities in Palestine that should mourn the deaths of academics, journalists, and students who have been killed and the plight of Palestinian political prisoners who are academic staff and students;
3. Communicate this statement to the South African Minister of Higher Education and Training;
4. Agree to a university assembly to discuss the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), understanding that Palestinian colleagues call on institutions to sever links with Israel;
5. Promote active exchanges and partnerships with Palestinian universities and cultural formations;
6. Fly the Palestinian flag from the UWC flag poles as a visible signal of solidarity.

By the start of 2024 over 700 people affiliated to UWC had signed, indicating broad support for the coalition to proceed. We stepped up our campaigning with teach/learn-ins on campus adding to seminars or webinars that had been happening intermittently across departments since November. In the first half of 2024 we directed much effort towards the university Senate. Two senior academic comrades in the coalition presented at Senate meetings which were soon followed by public statements from the UWC Council.^[1] The demands from our Open Letter shifted slightly but they have almost all been met and we can proudly declare that UWC is an institution committed to implementing Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) to Israeli institutions so as to be active in the struggle for Palestinian liberation.

Focus towards PACBI at UWC

For purposes of presenting a motion on behalf of the PSCUWC to Senate, on the 28 May 2024, Dr Kelly Gillespie quoted from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the UN, from a statement the UN had published a month before which laid bare the scholasticide happening in Gaza. In closing their statement, the UN experts advised that “Attacks on education cannot be tolerated. The international community must send a clear message that those who target schools and universities will be held responsible”. The answer to amplifying this message had already been suggested by Palestinians. At an event on 28 March this year, we co-hosted with colleagues at UCT, Muhannad Ayyash, a Palestinian scholar and Professor of Sociology, was asked what we can do. His response was simple: educate and boycott.

The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (or PACBI) gives us tools to practically demonstrate our objection to Israeli violence and occupation. PACBI has generated a set of guidelines to orient a boycott, but really the adjudication still rests

with us as to how best to articulate – ethically – an academic boycott at UWC. In articulating their

guidelines PACBI drew explicitly on the international boycott of Apartheid South Africa. Indeed, many of PACBI's founders were involved in the anti-apartheid solidarity movement in the 1980s.

PACBI, however, is more generous than the South Africa boycott was. PACBI requests an institutional boycott but not the boycott of individuals working at those institutions. They are very clear on this. The target is the institution which sustains and upholds Zionist occupation. This provision is rooted in PACBI's principled commitment to anti-racism, which specifically includes antisemitism. PACBI's boycott guidelines allow for collegial intellectual work with anti-Zionist Israelis who are willing to collaborate in their individual capacity rather than as representatives of their institution.

What does this mean for UWC?

The PSCUWC have engaged in research over the past months to be able to answer this question. Firstly, UWC's International Office has confirmed that our university has no official ties to Israeli institutions through MOUs, collaborations or research contracts. We have official links to two Palestinian universities: Al Quds University and Birzeit University. Secondly, we undertook preliminary research using SCOPUS (the global multi-disciplinary, abstract and citation database) to assess existing academic collaborations between scholars at UWC and with Israeli institutions. The academic publishing record since 2013 shared between a UWC affiliated author and an author with an Israeli institutional affiliation were retrieved. The results were manually inspected to verify the inclusion of authors from UWC, Israel and Palestine. Of the 10,591 UWC publications assessed, we found 54 publications that had a UWC author listed alongside an author at an Israeli institution. Of these 54 publications, 42 were massive research consortiums with 10 or more authors from institutions around the world. If we exclude those because there would presumably be little direct contact between UWC and the Israeli institution, we are left with only 12 publications with less than 10 authors in the past 10 years. This is a very small footprint. Much smaller, for example, than South Africa's historically white universities. The collaboration with Palestinian academics is, however, even smaller. Of the 21 publications in which a UWC author and an author listed as affiliated to a Palestinian university appear as co-authors, and where there are less than 10 authors listed, only 2 publications were found. [One in Education and one in Dentistry]

What these findings show is that UWC has very little to do with Israeli institutions. Thirdly, from what we have managed to source in the University's archives, UWC has never taken an official position on an Israeli boycott before. What is suggested by this research is that UWC would not have to sacrifice much in adopting an academic boycott against Israeli institutions. A groundswell of support for Israeli boycott and divestment at universities around the world is gaining momentum in South African higher education. Our Minister of Higher Education in an interview on NewzroomAfrika called for: "...our universities to stand

up in support of Palestinian academics, in support of Palestinian higher education, especially in Gaza.^[2] In our motion presented, we called on Senate to:

1. Ratify a full academic boycott of Israeli academic institutions by UWC, in accordance with the PACBI guidelines;
2. Facilitate strategies for strengthening academic ties with Palestinian scholars and students, and for supporting the rebuilding of higher education in Gaza;
3. Task the university management to fully disclose any and all UWC investments in Israeli products and companies;
4. Request a commitment to a process of divestment from any and all such investments;
5. Appeal to the Rector and senior management to advocate at national level (in particular at USAf) on UWC's behalf for South African universities to commit to a full academic boycott of Israel.

Conclusion

The motion for boycott was passed by the UWC Senate with results from the vote being: 77% Yes, 6% No, 16% Abstained. As we move into 2025, the atrocious violence that Palestinians face continues. We refuse to be complicit or silent witnesses to this and other injustice. Our aims continue to be:

- To unite colleagues across constituencies of the University;
- To educate and further mobilise around the Palestinian liberation struggle, most pressing with calls to end the genocide in Gaza and settlements in the West Bank;
- To struggle for UWC to take a lead among universities active in solidarity with Palestinians.

For the PSCUWC to keep going requires much collective effort. We welcome all with a commitment to the struggle and/or a willingness to learn and hold UWC accountable to its motion passed by the Senate. You can contact us on uwcpalestine@gmail.com and visit linktr.ee/uwcpalestinesolidarity for more. Phambili!

[1] <https://www.uwc.ac.za/news-and-announcements/announcements/uwc-council-calls-for-immediateceasefire-and-aid-to-gaza>

<https://www.uwc.ac.za/news-and-announcements/news/university-of-the-western-cape-announceimmediate-academic-disengagement-from-israeli-institutions>

[2] ('Nzimande slams Stellenbosch University's Senate' NewzroomAfrika, May 6, 2024; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_XYtMCGhPU)