**Steadfast activism**

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When I got back from my stint with the United Farm Workers, the main political activity on the Columbia campus was a campaign to get the university to divest from companies involved in apartheid South Africa. We didn’t win then, but we did help put that issue on the map. Ten years later, a student divestment movement finally succeeded, and Columbia became the first major university to commit to fully divesting from South Africa. That modest victory, part of sustained anti-apartheid efforts on college campuses and beyond, would be followed nationwide by Congress’s passage of comprehensive sanctions on the apartheid regime, despite a veto attempt by then-President Ronald Reagan.

Many of us kept working on the anti-apartheid issue after graduation. I remained a member of the New York Committee to Oppose Bank Loans to South Africa and, for a while, was also a member of the collective that put out Southern Africa Magazine in support of the anti-apartheid struggle and liberation movements in southern Africa. In New York, our mentors and inspirations in the anti-apartheid movement were people like Prexy Nesbitt, a charismatic organizer from Chicago, and Jennifer Davis, a South African exile who edited our magazine and went on to run the American Committee on Africa. For that magazine, I helped track companies breaking the arms embargo on South Africa as well as multinational corporations propping up the regime, an experience that served me well when I went on to become a researcher in the world of think tanks.

By that time, I was fully engaged politically. As I approached the end of my four years at Columbia, however, it slowly dawned on me that I was going to have to get a real job. The good news was that, in my brief career as a student activist, I had learned some basic skills, including how to craft an article, give a speech, and run a meeting.

The bad news was that I had absolutely no idea how to find gainful employment. So, I went home to Lake View for a while and my mom, who was a member of the International Typographical Union, gave me a crash course in proofreading and how to use official proofreading symbols. On the strength of those lessons, I got a job at a New York print shop, where I spent a miserable year proofreading magazines like Psychology Today, Modern Bride, Skiing, Boating, and pretty much any other publication ending in -ing.

Then I got lucky. A friend had just turned down a job, mostly because the pay was so lousy, at the Council on Economic Priorities (CEP), a think tank founded to promote corporate social responsibility. But my expenses at the time were, to say the least, minimal, so I took the job.

The focus of my first CEP project was economic conversion, a process designed to help communities reduce their dependency on Pentagon spending. It had been launched by Gordon Adams (now Abby Ross), then finishing The Iron Triangle, their immensely useful analysis of the military-industrial complex. While at CEP, I wrote about the top 100 Pentagon contractors, the top 25 arms exporting firms, and the economic benefits of a nuclear weapons freeze. My goal: produce research that would help activists and advocates make their case.

And so it went. Other than a stint in New York State government from the mid-1980s through the early 1990s, I’ve been a think-tank analyst ever since. At the moment, most of the issues I’ve advocated for, from reducing the Pentagon budget to cutting nuclear arsenals, are heading in exactly the wrong direction. By contrast, though, the issues I worked on as a student did indeed make progress, though only after years of organizing. South Africa’s apartheid regime actually fell in 1992. In 1975, California Governor Jerry Brown pushed through a state law guaranteeing the right of farmworkers to organize. In Chile, Pinochet was ousted thanks to a 1988 national referendum and lived his last years as an international pariah, even spending 503 days under house arrest in the United Kingdom on charges of “genocide and terrorism that include murder.”

The main difference between the successful solidarity movements I participated in and the other political movements in which I’ve played some small part was that both the South Africa divestment campaign and the United Farm Workers (UFW) boycott took their leads from people and organizations on the front lines of the struggle. Solidarity movements contributed in a significant fashion to those victories, but the central players were those front-line organizations, from the African National Congress and the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa to UFW organizers working in the fields of California.

Which brings me back to the state of current student activism. I live 10 blocks from the main gates of Columbia University, the site of one of the more active student organizations pressing for a ceasefire in Gaza and an end to government and institutional support for Israel’s brutal military campaign there, which has already killed nearly 35,000 people and left many others without medical care, adequate food, or clean water. The International Court of Justice has already suggested that a plausible case can be made for the Netanyahu government being guilty of genocide. Whether you use that term or simply call Israeli actions “war crimes,” the killing has to stop, which makes me proud of those Columbia student activists and deeply ashamed of the way the leadership of my former university has responded to them.

This April, when the president of Columbia called in the riot police to arrest students engaged in a peaceful protest, she inadvertently brought a whole new level of attention to activism about Gaza. Students at scores of campuses across the country started similar tent cities in solidarity with the Columbia students and protests that had largely been ignored in the mainstream media are now drawing TV cameras from outlets large and small.

Opponents of the student demonstrators, whose real goal is to get them to stop criticizing Israel’s mass slaughter of civilians in Gaza, have hurled claims of antisemitism at them that largely haven’t distinguished between actual acts of discrimination and cases of students feeling “uncomfortable” due to harsh – and wholly justified – criticisms of the Israeli government. As Judd Legum underscored at his substack Popular Information, there was no evidence of antisemitic acts by the students running the pro-ceasefire encampment at Columbia. Individuals and organizations outside the student movement seem to have been responsible for whatever hate rhetoric and related incidents have occurred.

Genuine antisemitism should be roundly condemned but confusing it with criticism of Israeli policies in Gaza will only make that job harder. And keep in mind that the Republican politicians hurling charges of antisemitism at students protesting repression in Gaza are, ironically enough, closely linked to actual antisemites.

To cite just one example, House Speaker Mike Johnson, who visited the Columbia campus last month in a purported effort to express his concern about antisemitism, has long promoted the racist “great replacement theory,” which holds that welcoming non-white immigrants is part of a plot to undermine the culture and power of white Americans.

Excerpted: ‘What I Learned at Columbia Outside the Classroom Is What Students Now Are Teaching Us’.

Courtesy: Commondreams.org