Northwestern Students Launch Divestment Campaign
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January 29, 2015

Last week students at Northwestern University launched NU Divest, a grassroots student campaign demanding that Northwestern divest its holdings in corporations that profit from human rights abuses against Palestinians.

Since the launch of our campaign on January 22, we have received both an outpouring of support from students, student organizations, alumni, and community members. We also received much-expected reactionary opposition, including unsanctioned acts of vigilante censorship and imposture. Of major importance to our campaign is educating and engaging the student body prior to the student government vote, and our work canvassing to inform students so far has been met positively. We currently have over 300 signatures on our petition and 5 student organizations and counting endorsing our campaign, but opposition to our campaign has also been working to diminish and discredit our impact on campus.

By the morning of January 22, NU Divest fliers that had been put up less than twelve hours prior had already disappeared. This is not an uncommon phenomenon: Northwestern Students for Justice in Palestine and other groups advertising events related to Palestine Solidarity and liberation routinely see their materials disappear on this campus, including a large banner that was hung by SJP just two months ago. This time, NU Divest responded with another round of flyering and chalking on the ground. More hostile than the removal of fliers has been the creation of a fake twitter account impersonating @NUDivest and tweeting anti-Semitic statements and factual inaccuracies clearly intended to both mock activists and confuse potential supporters.

The only organized opposition that NU Divest has been made aware of is the Northwestern Coalition for Peace, which was formed approximately 24 hours after the launch of our campaign and whose reactionary nature is apparent in its tagline: “Standing against divestment & working toward a two-state solution.” They are identifiable thus far solely by their facebook page, and do not identify which groups are involved in the “coalition.” However, a short letter-to-the-editor written in response to the above suggests that it includes both Wildcats for Israel, a campus organization whose mission is to promote the Israeli state, and J Street U, whose mission is to promote American diplomacy toward a two-state solution. Northwestern Hillel is also most likely involved; they have been reaching out to senators through their senate representative and encouraged members to support the Coalition in an email to their general listserv, but it is unclear why the coalition has not published a list of its member organizations or official supporters.

In addition to its ambiguous institutional roots and organizational makeup, the so-called Coalition remains suspicious on two additional grounds: its mobilization of the word “peace,” and its false association between divestment and political solutions to conflict. By essentializing what they stand for as “peace,” they mark NU Divest as violent,
aggressive, and (in their own words) divisive. In reality, what they support is the status quo, which can often be mistaken for “peace” by people in positions of privilege and power due to the lack of obligation to deal with the violent realities of oppression. They assert that dialogue is superior to divestment, continuing to promote the exact same rhetoric that has kept Palestinians occupied for 20 years, and attempting to delegitimize NU Divest’s claims to the necessity of action on financial holdings linked to human rights abuses: this is necessarily an anti-activist response. Having a “conversation” on campus will not end occupation or human rights abuses; divestment has and will. Finally, the false dichotomy that they attempt to create by asserting that they are foremost against divestment and instead for a two-state solution suggests that the two are both comparable and mutually exclusive, despite the fact that NU Divest has explicitly stated that divestment is not a political solution to the conflict nor does it align with a particular state solution. Divestment from corporations that profit from the denial of Palestinians’ rights to life, health, freedom of movement, and equal status under the law is a clear-cut issue, and one that does not necessitate or necessarily conflict with either a one- or two-state solution. Divestment is carried out in direct response to what Palestinian civil society has called for from the international community. On the contrary, Palestinians have not asked us as American university students to determine what type of state would best suit them, nor is it our place to make such decisions on their behalf.

Below is the letter to the editor that was published at the launch of our campaign:

In the coming weeks, you will see fliers, events and actions supporting something called Northwestern Divest. NU Divest is a grassroots student campaign demanding that the University divest its holdings in corporations that profit from human rights abuses against Palestinians. Our first goal is to pass a student government resolution in support of divestment, similar to resolutions that have passed at other US universities. Even in this short time, we have already seen vigilante censorship of our campaign materials, and a reactionary counter organization has been set up to fight our campaign. We anticipate more resistance to our efforts, but in the end we expect Northwestern to stand on the side of human rights and international law.

For the last twenty years the world has pinned its hopes for a resolution to the conflict on a so-called peace process through which Israelis and Palestinians are expected to negotiate a solution. In recent years, it has become painfully clear that this peace process is not working. Not only does it fail to provide Palestinians in the occupied territories with adequate representation, but it ignores refugees, the diaspora, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and Syrians living within the occupied Golan Heights.

Furthermore, throughout the duration of this peace process, the state of Israel has expanded its illegal settlements in the West Bank, and engaged in three assaults on the Gaza Strip, killing thousands, wounding tens of thousands, and displacing hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians.
While the US-brokered peace process has been ineffective, divestment provides an alternative path for Palestinians to achieve human, civil, and political rights equal to their Israeli counterparts. Divestment is one part of the international Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. In 2005, Palestinian civil society called for BDS as a way to pressure Israel to end its oppression. Palestinians are asking the international community to boycott and divest from companies that profit from human rights abuses and place sanctions on Israel until it ends the occupation, Palestinian citizens of Israel are granted full and equal rights, and the right of return is respected for all Palestinian refugees in accordance with UN Resolution 194.

Universities like Northwestern are ideal places for a divestment movement because of their large investments in companies directly involved in stripping Palestinians of their human rights and violating international law. Divestment is a strategically legitimate tactic that has been employed many times, including when it played a major role in dismantling South African apartheid and when Northwestern and other universities divested from companies supporting the Sudanese government over human rights abuses in Darfur. Sanctions are frequently leveraged by the international community against nations committing human rights abuses. Thus far, Israel has not been the subject of US sanctions, despite its violation of numerous UN resolutions. The US continues to give Israel more than $3.1 billion annually in military aid. This makes us, as American students, doubly responsible for contesting financial support of human rights violations.

The Northwestern University Investment Office manages $7.9 billion of assets, partially composed of the hundreds of millions of dollars Northwestern collects in tuition and fees every year. This money is invested in a wide range of corporations, but the Investment Office does not release specific information on which. However, based on the investments of other comparable institutions and Northwestern’s lack of a socially responsible investment policy, it is likely that the University is invested in these major corporations targeted by NU Divest: Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Caterpillar, Elbit Systems, Hewlett-Packard, and G4S. Each one of these corporations is complicit in military occupation.

Boeing and Lockheed Martin provide Israel with F-15A fighter jets, F-16 fighter jets, F-35 fighter jets, Apache AH 64 helicopters, and Longbow Hellfire Missiles, the main weapons that were used in the assault on Gaza last summer and that kill countless civilians.

Caterpillar provides engineering tools and bulldozers routinely used in the demolition of Palestinian homes in the West Bank and Gaza, facilitating the expansion of illegal settlements.

Elbit Systems provides surveillance tools for an electronic detection fence which has been ruled illegal by the International Court of Justice.
G4S provides security systems for interrogation and detention centers, where Palestinian political prisoners are held without charges or trials and regularly subjected to abuse. Hewlett-Packard provides biometric identification systems used at Israeli military checkpoints that can distinguish Palestinian faces from Israeli faces, reinforcing an unjust discrepancy in the rights afforded to Israelis and Palestinians.

Divestment from corporations like these six is a necessary step in moving towards equal human rights for Palestinians, but does not constitute a complete political solution to the current Israeli-Palestinian problem. The history and complexities of war and occupation in Israel-Palestine can be overwhelming, but the human rights abuses that these corporations profit from are crystal clear. Supporters of NU Divest do not need to have a historical background on the conflict, nor do they need to be in support of any particular nation or political solution. Rather, those who support human rights for all, including Palestinians, should support NU Divest.

Our school should invest in our futures, not in oppression. NU Divest aims to hold Northwestern to a strict standard of transparent and socially responsible investment that reflects the values it seeks to instill in its students. As members of the Northwestern community, we have a moral obligation to make sure our institution is not complicit in human rights violations. By holding Northwestern to this higher standard, students can help to correct injustice, wherever it occurs. If you support equal rights for all, if you believe Northwestern needs to prioritize social responsibility in its investments, and if you stand in solidarity with Palestine, we invite you to join us in NU Divest. We will be holding informational events leading up to our eventual introduction of our resolution to the Associated Student Government.