

# Montreal students threatened with funding cut for backing BDS

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Nora Barrows-Friedman Activism and BDS Beat 15 April 2022



Canadian students pass measures in support of Palestinian rights while university administrations attempt to sabotage their efforts.

Giles Campbell ZUMAPRESS

In the last two months, students at universities across Canada have voted to endorse the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign for Palestinian rights amid heavy pressure from pro-Israel lobbyists and backlash from college administrations.

In February, the University of Toronto's student union passed a measure mandating divestment from companies profiting from Israel's occupation.

Students at Concordia University in Montreal endorsed an anti-apartheid measure in a mid-March referendum. By a large majority, students voted in favor of pushing the college to pull "vocal and financial support" from states and corporations that are complicit in Israeli

apartheid.

The student body at the University of British Columbia voted to urge the university to divest from Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank on 23 March.

It is interesting that the recent wins come from huge universities, and ones which have been slow to endorse BDS measures - in some cases their efforts to do so have previously been blocked or restricted by their institutions. <https://t.co/vNwgOWmwVI>

— Michael Bueckert (@mbueckert) March 24, 2022

But at McGill University in Montreal, administrators are threatening the undergraduate student union with termination of its funding after students voted in support of a Palestine solidarity policy last month.

The vote was held through a referendum, with more than 70 percent of students favoring the policy.

The policy instructs the university's student body to boycott corporations and institutions that are complicit in Israel's crimes and to pressure the university to follow suit.

It also calls on McGill to publicly condemn notorious blacklisting websites and smear campaigns that target Palestine rights advocates on campus.

The policy also mandates a formation of a Palestine solidarity committee within the student union, the Students' Society of McGill University (SSMU).

"For two decades, Palestinian students at McGill have worked tirelessly to educate their peers about the complicity of this institution in settler-colonial apartheid," stated students with Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights McGill.

"Time and time again, their activism has been met with censorship, blacklisting, and repression from an openly hostile McGill administration," which, the group said, they expected to "do everything in its power to overturn the democratic voice of the students."

The day after the referendum was completed, the administration sent a "notice of default" to the SSMU president. The notice claimed that the Palestine policy was antithetical to the university's constitution and could "lead to discrimination" – ostensibly against Jewish students.

It is a trope promoted by Israel lobby groups to claim that supporting Palestinian rights is tantamount to anti-Jewish bigotry. The claim is solely aimed at silencing and disrupting activism.

The McGill administration also said it was looking into allegations of irregularities in the referendum results.

Several days later, the university's deputy provost, Fabrice Labeau, sent a campus-wide email further condemning the Palestine policy, claiming that it will "bring more division to the community" while he was tasked to "develop an initiative to prevent anti-Semitism and Islamophobia."

SPHR is mobilising a response but this is outrageous though not surprising given that McGill has adopted #IHRA, which positions almost all criticism of Israel as antisemitic.

Please share, please email McGill. We need widespread support to fight this.  
[pic.twitter.com/c87uBI8dok](https://pic.twitter.com/c87uBI8dok)

— Geneviève Joëlle (@genevievejoelle) March 24, 2022

Students organized a rally in front of the administration building in response to the threats. "But we also wanted to emphasize the fact that we had won this battle already and that the administration was reacting to us winning," Reem Said of Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights McGill told The Electronic Intifada.

Said added that the university had quickly come under pressure from Zionist groups that were publishing articles urging the administration to defund the student union, and, likely, from donors.

The administration "clearly felt like they had to show that they were going to crack down," SPHR member Andreas Iakovos told The Electronic Intifada.

## **Mobilizing support**

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Since student-led BDS campaigns began in 2016, Israel-supporting donors have threatened to withhold their financial support if such a measure passed at McGill.

The 2016 BDS motion passed, but was ruled unconstitutional by the student union.

That ruling was eventually nullified by a student judicial board in 2021.

Weeks later, in February 2021, McGill student body representatives passed a "divest for human rights" policy, which demands that the university pull all of its investments from corporations that profit from human rights violations, land theft and environmental destruction in Canada and abroad.

Passing that broad divestment policy "was a really good way for us to gauge the atmosphere on campus, and see how successfully we could mobilize student support for similar campaigns," Iakovos told The Electronic Intifada.

"We decided that now we really need to be much bolder," he said.

Said and Iakovos explained that there was strong support on campus for Palestinian rights during and after Israel's attacks on Gaza last summer.

During that period, Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights McGill circulated a petition calling on the university to implement divestment.

The petition also explicitly demanded the administration to include Zionism, Israel's racist state ideology, in its discrimination and racism policy.

More than 1,500 students signed on, as well as a coalition of anti-racist and social justice campus groups.

Top McGill officials rejected the students' demands.

But campus activists pressed on, eventually drafting the Palestine policy document.

## Pushing back

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Since the referendum victory last month, students, faculty, campus groups and Palestine solidarity organizations have defended both the policy and the democratic agency of the student body against the administration's threats.

At least 100 faculty members at McGill have signed an endorsement of the Palestine Solidarity Policy, which they see as "a continuation of a long-standing history of student leadership aimed at bringing meaningful changes to their educational arenas."

Proud of my colleagues down the road for calling on their admin publicly to stop hypocritically bullying students who dare to see Palestinians as human beings deserving of respect, rights, and international solidarity. <https://t.co/RXT3rTbJ4r>

— Wilson Jacob (@astralaime) April 6, 2022

Amazing solidarity: 100+ @mcgillu faculty and staff sign an open letter endorsing @theSSMU's Palestine Solidarity Policy, and counter the university's threats against student democracy. Read the letter here: <https://t.co/xOmWPqWMVq> #McGill [pic.twitter.com/d30RPjsBKD](https://t.co/d30RPjsBKD)

— Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (@CJPME) April 6, 2022

In an opinion piece, Jewish students at McGill said they see "defense of human rights – and effectively the defense of this motion – as an enactment of our Jewish values."

"Conflating criticism of the settler-colonial state of Israel with anti-Semitism is both incorrect and a dangerous distraction from real instances of anti-Semitism," they wrote.

The Jewish students also rebuked the Israel lobby groups' claims that they speak for all Jews on campus.

"For many years, there has been a strong Jewish presence at McGill in solidarity with Palestinian human rights," they added.

Yesterday, we sent a letter to the [@mcgillu](#) administration - stop attacking Palestine solidarity and student democracy! Click here to read it: <https://t.co/QjCcOnuTWA> [@SPHRMcGill](#) [@theSSMU](#) [@qpirgmcgill](#) [@mcgilldaily](#) [pic.twitter.com/ublr0Eji3A](https://pic.twitter.com/ublr0Eji3A)

— Independent Jewish Voices ([@IndJewishVoices](#)) [April 8, 2022](#)

After students voted 71% in support of a Palestine Solidarity Policy, [@McGillu](#) is threatening to punish [@thessmu](#).

Now, more than 900 emails have been sent to demand [#McGill](#) rescind its threats and respect student democracy!

Add your voice: <https://t.co/4E7mJuuaka>

— Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East ([@CJPME](#)) [April 7, 2022](#)

The editorial board of the campus newspaper, *The McGill Tribune*, excoriated the administration's attempts to sabotage the policy under the guise of fighting discrimination. "Palestinian students face constant targeted, structural racism at McGill, but never receive any institutional support. The administration's latest interference upholds the institutionalized oppression of Palestinians at the expense of student safety," the editors wrote.

"[Vice Provost] Labeau's statement uses inflammatory buzzwords and harmful misrepresentations of anti-Zionism in an attempt to intimidate those in support of the Palestine solidarity policy – and in doing so, it imposes the beliefs of administrators, the board of governors, and donors onto students," the editors added.

The statement by [@F\\_Labeau](#) to McGill's community together with threats to cut SSMU funding weaponises "inclusion and diversity" to silence student action on Palestine. It is an institutional attack on free speech and the right of students to organise on social justice issues. <https://t.co/huZo0wCHKQ>

— Samer Abdelnour ([@SamerAbdelnour](#)) [March 26, 2022](#)

*The McGill Tribune* noted that "by branding the policy as contradictory to values of diversity and inclusion, while touting accusations of anti-Semitism without any real explanation, Labeau's statement appears to be nothing more than a fear-mongering technique to silence those in opposition to Palestinian liberation and the profit McGill makes from investing in apartheid."

The student union has until next week to respond to the administration's notice of default. If the union decides to formally dispute the notice, it could go to legal arbitration.

"Right now, we're really pushing our student union to take the right stand and protect student democracy," Reem Said of Solidarity for Palestinian Human Rights McGill said.

"We're also trying to apply pressure on the administration by making as much public noise as we can, and making it clear to them that we're not just going to stand by while they bully us and our student union into reversing something that was a democratic referendum."

## **Nora Barrows-Friedman**

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Nora Barrows-Friedman is a staff writer and associate editor at The Electronic Intifada, and is the author of *In Our Power: US Students Organize for Justice in Palestine* (Just World Books, 2014).