

Chaim Katz's six-year battle culminates in the University of Toronto withholding \$10,918 earmarked for the BDS caucus in a graduate student union

 thecjn.ca/news/bds-u-of-t-chaim-katz/

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The University of Toronto will begin withholding a portion of student fees from the Graduate Students Union that were earmarked for promoting sanctions against Israel.

The move to withhold \$10,918 from the UofT Graduate Student Union (UTGSU), the amount the university calculates was used to support its boycott, divestment and sanctions caucus, was announced last week. The decision is the culmination of a six-year battle waged by then-graduate student Chaim Katz and others.

"I'm somewhat relieved, to a degree, we've been waiting on this for a long time. I think the UofT could have been more efficient and they could have responded more harshly," Katz said in an interview with The CJN. "I don't think this is the end, but it was nice to see a small victory, we take them as they come."

In February 2021, the Complaint and Resolution Council for Student Societies (CRCSS), a body composed of students, recommended that students be allowed to opt out of the portion of fees paid to the BDS caucus and gave the student union a year to implement it. The panel did not recommend that the caucus be eliminated. The BDS caucus was formed in 2012.

The Graduate Student Union's budget for 2020 was \$13 million, according to documents presented to the CRCSS, with about \$5,000 being allocated annually to the BDS caucus.

Katz had argued that his entire student union fee should have been refunded, because the student union was not operating according to "open, accessible and democratic principles," as required by the university's regulations.

Both the university and student union have delayed resolving the issue, points out Katz.

"The fact that it took so long and they (the university) were kind of weak in terms of how much they're holding, it doesn't really deter this activity," Katz said.

Chaim Katz and Rachel Dadouch describe life as a Jewish student at the U of T: on The CJN Daily

Despite that, the move to withhold a portion of the fees is an important one, he said.

“There was acknowledgement, it took a while to get there, but there is a clear decision that what was happening was wrong,” he said. “My hope is that it will encourage other Jewish students to advocate for their needs.”

In a press release, university vice-president and provost Cheryl Regehr pointed out that UTGSU had had a year to implement the recommendations and urged the union “to reconsider their inaction.”

The university’s policies are intended to protect the free speech of everyone involved, Regehr said.

“Debate must not be limited by preordaining conclusions. Individuals can also not be forced to hold specific views on controversial issues in order to participate in any aspect of university life.”

Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/wQ9T4TR-3UA>

The university’s decision was welcomed by B’nai Brith Canada, which had supported Katz in his lengthy appeal.

“Today marks a pivotal step forward in the struggle against antisemitism at UofT, and at Canadian universities more broadly,” CEO Michael Mostyn said in a statement. “While UofT should have gone further and withheld the entire fee, this is a positive precedent and a step in the right direction.”

Hillel Ontario agreed that the move was overdue. “This decision illustrates what we have long argued—that the UTGSU’s obsessive and discriminatory focus on Israel and Jewish students has overstepped the bounds of what is acceptable,” Jay Solomon, chief communications officer for the student organization said in a statement.

The university’s decision has also been criticized for undermining student unions’ autonomy and independence.

“Evidently, the UofT is attempting to punish and intimidate the UTGSU into dropping their commitment to Palestinian rights and abandoning the democratic will of its membership,” Michael Bueckert, vice-president of Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, said in a statement.

The UTGSU did not respond to requests for comment.