Professor’s Letter in Support of Students in Geneva

written by Jean Batou | May 13, 2024

Student encampment at the University of Geneva

Across the United States and around the world professors other faculty and university workers have come out in support of students encampments in solidarity with Palestine. We publish here a letter by Swiss Professor Jean Batou, a New Politics *auhor, to the rector of the University of Geneva expressing his support for the student protestors. – DL*

Mrs. Audrey Leuba
Rector of the University of Geneva
Uni Dufour
24, rue du Général-Dufour
CH-1211 Geneva 4

Madam Rector,

Dear colleague,

I am writing to you about the student mobilizations against the war that the State of Israel is waging in Gaza, in flagrant violation of international law and in defiance of numerous UN resolutions.

Having myself been Dean of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Lausanne, I am fully aware of the political pressures to which you must be subjected today. But precisely for this, I believe that you must make the will for dialogue triumph over the sirens of repression.

This war threatens a significant part of the Palestinian population with genocide, in the sense given to this term by the 1948 International Convention, signed to date by 149 states, including Switzerland.

It is therefore legitimate for the students of the University of Geneva to mobilize, like others in many countries around the world, against a war with terrifying humanitarian consequences.

These movements are part of the long anti-colonialist and anti-racist tradition that has so often stirred up young people on an international scale, particularly against the Algerian War, the apartheid regime in South Africa, racial discrimination in the United States, the Vietnam War and

the Western military intervention in Iraq.

The slogan “Palestine will be free from the river to the sea” is an old Palestinian slogan, long before the birth of Hamas, which is part of the perspective of a democratic and secular state where all national and religious communities can enjoy the same rights on Palestinian soil. To identify this slogan with the desire to expel Israeli Jews from Palestine is at best a misunderstanding of history.

Need I remind you that this was the position of Albert Einstein, who wrote in 1938: “Rather than the creation of a Jewish state, I would much prefer to see a reasonable agreement with the Arabs on the basis of peaceful coexistence. Regardless of practical considerations, my awareness of the essential nature of Judaism resists the idea of a Jewish state with borders, an army and temporal power.” In 1948, in reaction to Menachem Begin’s visit to the United States, who had just formed the far-right Herut party, the forerunner of the Likud, he had even co-signed a letter of protest with the philosopher Hannah Arendt, who denounced “the emergence in the new State of Israel of a political party close in organization, methods, political philosophy and propaganda, of the Nazi and Fascist parties”. What would they say today about the parties represented in the Israeli government?

The universal mobilizations against the colonial war led by the far-right government in Tel Aviv are part of the fight for human rights and social justice, against racism in all its forms and against apartheid regimes, which should rightly be at the heart of the concerns of the academic world.

I condemn the abuses committed on 7 October against Israeli civilians and regret that the Tel Aviv government has refused to set up an international commission of inquiry to establish the facts irrefutably. Yet this in no way justifies the mass terror exercised by the Middle East’s leading military power against nearly 2.5 million Palestinian civilians.

In view of the above, I ask you to consider carefully the demands of the student movement and, at the very least, to enter into measures that clearly indicate that the University of Geneva condemns the indiscriminate war waged by the Israeli army against the Palestinian people and expresses its solidarity with Palestinian academic and cultural institutions threatened with destruction.

I fully associate myself with the terms of the letter from the teachers and researchers of your university, in particular with their defense of academic freedom and respect for the formation of critical knowledge.

In any case, in view of the above, I urge you to renounce any measure of forcible evacuation of the premises.

In the hope that you will take this letter into consideration, please accept, Madam Rector and dear colleague, the expression of my best regards.

Jean Batou
Honorary Professor
Former Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Lausanne

Copy: at the UNIGE Palestine Student Coordination