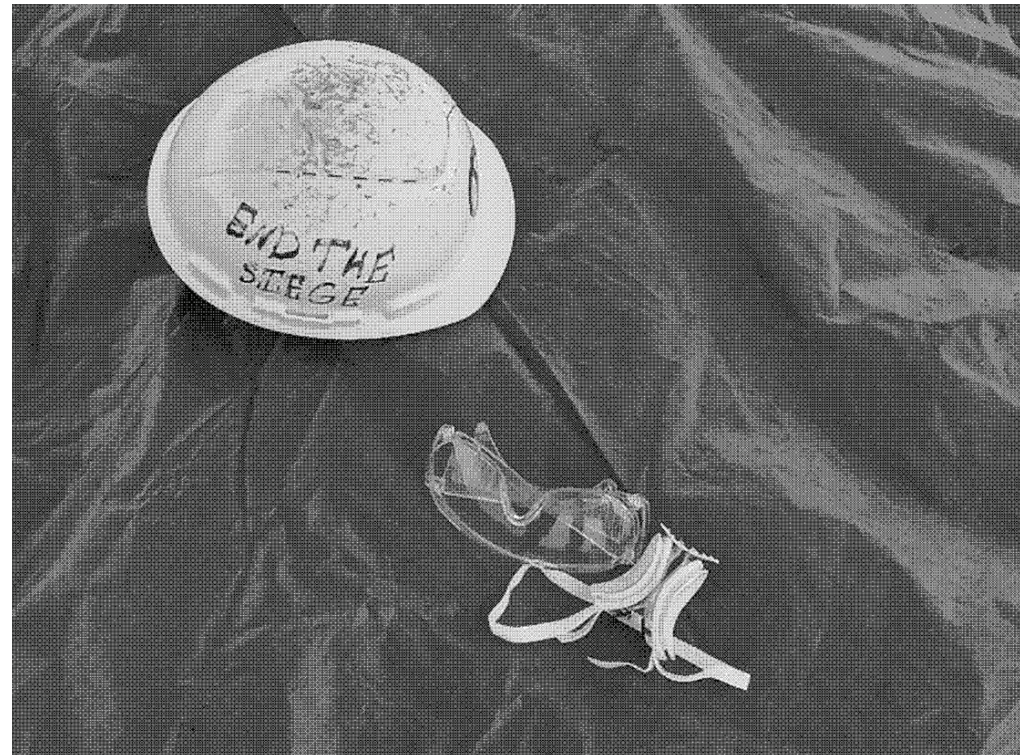


DEFENDING THE CAMP

All around the United States and now in Canada, Australia, and several European cities, students have established encampments protesting the bloodshed taking place in Gaza. Over the past few days, more than a thousand people have been arrested in police raids targeting these encampments. Yet despite the high-profile assaults on Columbia University and other occupations, many encampments have managed to stand their ground, even in the face of repeated police attacks. In this report, participants in the Gaza solidarity protest encampment at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) recount their experiences learning to hold their ground.



A Report from the University of Illinois
Urbana-Champaign Gaza Solidarity
Encampment

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Day 1: Friday, April 26

At 5 am on April 26, approximately thirty students at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign occupied Alma Mater, the well-known statue at the center of campus. In less than half an hour, the protesters set up a welcome table, a medical tent, a food tent, half a dozen camping tents, and a makeshift yurt constructed from less than \$400 worth of materials. Within 20 minutes, half a dozen cops and about ten Facilities and Services (F&S) workers rolled up with a box truck. They said that the protestors were breaking university policy by putting up structures and would be subject to arrest for trespassing if they did not comply with an order to tear down the structures by 8:25 am.

The idea spread that we would buy time for reinforcements to arrive by feigning compliance and slowly taking down the tents. This was a bad idea. It resulted from a lack of consensus on whether to hold our ground, and also from fear. Students began disassembling the yurt first, reasoning that only thirty people would not be enough to defend it. Students formed a ring around the yurt as a few people began slowly deconstructing it. Afterwards, the circle reassembled around the main encampment. Due to fears of a raid and a breakdown in communication, another crew of campers began taking down tents.

Several protesters advocated for holding our ground, chanting “We keep us safe!” and counting to 12. At the 8:25 am deadline, police moved in to make arrests, violently assaulting the students at the front of the circle. A few brave campers broke formation to mobilize behind their comrades, de-arresting several of their peers. For a brief moment, the campers pushed back and encircled the cops, who visibly panicked, yelling “Do not surround us!” However, the cops managed to surge forward, stealing the materials for the yurt and the few tents left on the ground. In the end, they made one arrest from the side of the circle that was not supported by reinforcements, then left the site.

Between thirty and forty folks remained at Alma over the next few hours through heavy rain—eating, playing music, passing around a soccer ball, and resting. Organizers put out a call for a mass mobilization at 3 pm in time for the Jummah prayer and the end of Friday classes. Between two hundred and three hundred students and community members responded. During the prayer, some people put the tents back up.

A dozen campus cops and a handful of F&S quickly returned, forming a line about 50 feet away to try to enter the camp and take down the tents. The protesters assembled in a circle once again, with a larger group of about forty to fifty people focused at the front where the cops aimed to make their incursion. This group had reinforced banners and umbrellas, and most of them were prepared to push and de-arrest as needed.

At first, the police were able to shove their way through the first line, but they quickly found themselves kettled within the crowd. Some pulled out batons, but many seemed hesitant about employing them. Other officers attacked protesters' necks, collarbones, and chests, inflicting one concussion and many minor injuries. In the end, the police were only able to tear down one tent before another surge from the demonstrators drove them out of the camp for the rest of the night.

After the scuffle, people recovered a body cam and a clip of lethal ammunition from the ground.

For the rest of the afternoon, cops and F&S gathered in the parking lot in front of the camp, never totaling more than twenty. They shut down Green Street, the main road along the encampment, as well as the Union and Transit Plaza bus stops, and brought in four city busses and a horse trailer for mass arrests. Fire trucks were parked two blocks away, prepared to turn their hoses on students. Officers from four different police agencies including the University of Illinois, Champaign County, Urbana, and Mahomet amassed in riot gear, with pepper spray and tear gas at the ready. Eventually, however, the union representing F&S filed a cease-and-desist order, affirming that F&S workers did not need to comply with orders to take down the camp.

Despite the threat, the crowd of campers grew in size, spirit, and knowledge over the course of the afternoon. Participants expressed approval of the reinforced banners that some people brought to the front; others distributed goggles, gloves, and additional protective equipment. Several comrades offered a brief presentation describing how to perform de-arrests and keep each other safe during confrontations. The group agreed to block the buses if the police arrested anyone. Nonetheless, police snatched one camper who left camp alone wearing a neon vest; they were arrested out of the camp's line of sight.

Police emptied and closed the Union building early, at 6:15 pm. Then the police line moved towards the encampment, interrupting the evening prayer. Moments before the attempted incursion, protesters sprang back into their

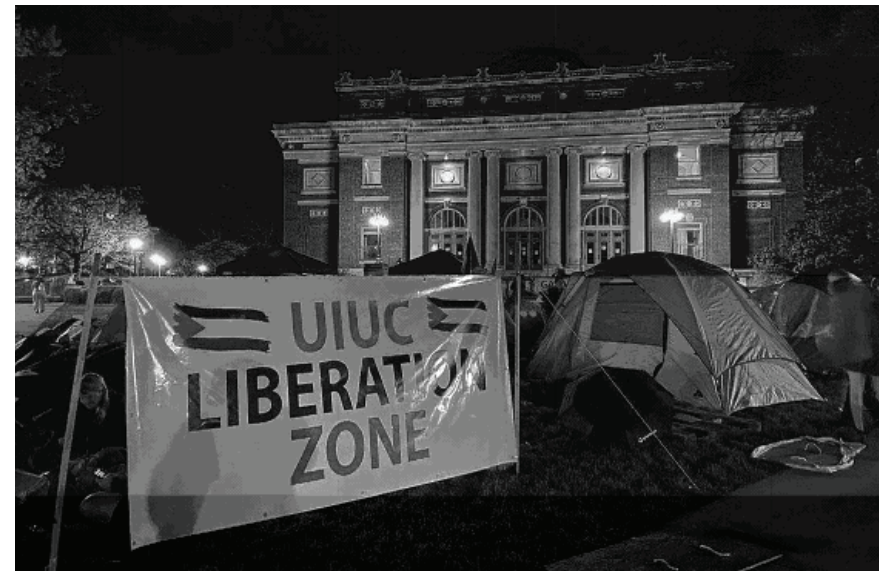
9. Do not reproduce the regime inside the encampment.

Encampments are liberated zones; they should not reproduce authoritarianism, capitalism, or any other form of oppression. Camp security teams should not replace the police with whoever can buy a vest and megaphone at Home Depot. Campers should not feel pressure to ask for permission from "leadership" to act. Decisions should be made autonomously wherever possible, or else by consensus. We must trust and love each other enough to coexist without hierarchy. In our camp, we share food, shelter, defenses, and entertainment. We use space freely, reappropriating sidewalks, lawns, and gardens, leaving things out without worry that they will be stolen, relaxing and napping knowing that we will be kept safe.

10. Against liberal counterinsurgency.

As the movement grows, so will the counterinsurgency. They will wear vests, they will spread fear about the police, they will advocate for de-escalation. At Northwestern University, they caved into symbolic successes with no material win. Here, too, some organizing groups may already be preparing for de-escalation. Be wary of those who attempt to stifle the movement in the name of "safety."

Try to approach conversations with both compassion and conviction. Gaza does not need concessions—Gaza needs liberation.



4. Reinforced banners can win the day and the crowd's trust.

As we saw at Emory and UIUC, reinforced banners will be best at defending and pushing. Some participants regarded the militants with unease and mistrust until they used the banner to prove that they really could “keep us safe,” like the chant says. Plywood, insulation board, lumber, scrap wood, metal sheeting, garbage cans, and water barrels can all be used as raw materials, and some can even be sourced from campus dumpsters. Be creative and be brave.

5. Resist “divide and conquer.”

Participants in the UIUC encampment have not wasted any time hunting for “outside agitators” or drawing lines differentiating students and non-students. All are welcome here. So far, the university itself has not used this tactic. Hopefully, the encampment will be ready to handle it whenever they deploy it against us.

6. Negotiations are a double-edged sword.

Negotiations delayed the police raid—and diminished our ability to fend off the raid. The administration is negotiating in bad faith; they aim to waste our time, so we should only engage with them when reinforcements are on the way and buying time is advantageous to us.

7. Build more yurts and other structures. Seize campus infrastructure and use it as barricades.

We have not done this at UIUC yet, but it would improve our defenses. We need to find activities that make the most of our time and improve our defenses.

8. Escalate for Gaza. Impose a cost on complicity in genocide.

The administration, as seen during Day 2 of the encampment, may choose to ignore the protest. Be prepared to escalate your actions in order to continue making it more expensive—whether materially, financially, or socially—to remain complicit than to divest.

positions to defend the encampment. The police retreated to their original position as if nothing had happened at all. The protesters held their positions, chanting and singing louder.

At some point in the midst of this chaos, student leadership entered into negotiation with a university employee who went back and forth between the students and chancellor Robert J. Jones; the chancellor communicated by phone, considering it unsafe or unimportant to be present in person. While the negotiations dragged on for hours, rain began to pour down on the encampment. Despite this, the energy of the encampment swelled. People were righteously angry. Some suggested rushing the police line and either surrounding or occupying the Union during the negotiations.

By this point, much of the front line had been there since 5 am that morning, running on as little as two hours of sleep. They were recovering from two clashes with the police that day, not to mention standing for hours, and were now soaked through their clothes to the bone. Most of the protestors had no previous experience with facing police in this way.

By 10 pm, even the front line began discussing how to best safely disperse. The crowd got smaller through the evening, dropping down to just below two hundred. The bystanders, counter-protesters, and reporters who had been standing between the encampment and the riot cops had cleared out. The authorities had erected giant spotlights around the area, directed at the few tents left standing. Student leadership left the negotiations with a compromise: the crowd could disperse with no arrests on the condition that the camp would be moved to a sanctioned protest zone far from the center of campus. According to the agreement, it would be allowed to remain until the following Monday—after which the police would carry out mass arrests.

The camp was disassembled and we dispersed. The following morning, a few tents were set up at the sanctioned site as a diversion; but some organizers planned to come back.

Day 2: Sunday, April 28

Under the cover of two diversions—the encampment at the sanctioned site and a leaked message that protesters would disrupt a sporting event in a different part of campus—protesters moved into the main quad at 1 pm on April 28. Now knowing the necessity of maintaining mass, organizers waited until

students and community members had responded to a public call for mass mobilization before they set up tents. Over the course of the day, the community engaged in making banners and posters, de-arrest trainings, and meals provided by faculty and community members.

The campers stayed informed of police and counter-protester activity through a robust scouting and communications system. Comrades with more on-the-ground experience organized into a security team, sharing knowledge gained from the Emory encampment and the Stop Cop City/Defend the Forest movements. More personal protective equipment was made available to protesters and frontliners, including heat-resistant gloves, gas masks, helmets, and goggles; this fueled a sense of collective power and raised morale. Several times, when the camp received information on police activity, the crowd was able to mobilize within seconds into a protective formation that was both strong and dynamic. These were the same people who had no experience mobilizing against police only two days prior.

We made it through the night with no police raid and minimal interaction with counter-protesters.

Day 3: Monday, April 29

We woke to pouring rain at 5 am, but the crowd of thirty campers arose in good spirits. Throughout the day, the camp grew again in size—first to fifty and then to one hundred by the evening. More tents were erected and various forms of programming took place including banner making and additional de-arrest trainings. While F&S was seen out on the quad working, there was ultimately no visible presence of cops all day. The night ended with a screening of *The Battle of Algiers*. It seems more are camping out tonight. In conversations, campers expressed motivation, pride, and surprise at our success. Many expressed they had never thought it possible to stand their ground like they did on Friday.

As we begin the last academic week before finals, time will show whether the encampment shrinks, clings to its claimed territory, or expands—whether we wither and divide until we are destroyed, or flourish until we win.

Strategic Reflections

As of now—dawn on May Day—our encampment persists. Here are some of our thoughts on the basis of our experience so far.

1. Defend each other, not the tents!

The long thin arm-linked line is insufficient. We must be like water: dynamic and willing to meet the cops where they are at; moving around obstacles with ease; mobilizing to protect our comrades wherever needed. During the first clash with cops and F&S, if all thirty campers had mobbed up and begun pushing back, the situation would have played out differently. The people, tents, and yurt would have been safe and de-arrests easier. The circle line is effective only as a way of obscuring activity inside the camp from police line of sight. The encampment is us, the people, and we must defend each other. Our presence is the core of the occupation—not the tents, the food, or the supplies. We keep us safe.

2. Encampment is escalation.

Putting tents up on campus is against almost every campus policy. Refusing to take them down means refusing to listen to a “lawful command.” The basic premise of the encampment is already an escalation that the cops will meet with force; they have done so or tried to do so on almost every campus with an encampment. So organizers should not concern themselves with de-escalation or “remaining peaceful.” Neither remaining on the defensive nor being compliant will protect us, but being dynamic and meeting the cops head-on might.

3. We do not wait for the right conditions to act—we create those conditions.

Several organizers who had participated in previous symbolic actions refused to support the encampment because they felt that the conditions were not right to do so. This vague and counterproductive stance fails to take into account the people’s power to share knowledge, build solidarity, and create a culture of disruption. The Cal Poly occupation taught us: if you build it, they will come. Day 1 of the UIUC encampment taught us: if you build it, they will defend it, they will learn from it, they will grow from it.