

Free Speech and Israeli Apartheid Week

By [Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East](#)

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Montreal – On April 22, 2010, the council of the University of Manitoba Student Union (UMSU) voted near-unanimously to oppose both a recent motion as well as any future motions and actions aimed at muzzling Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW). The first IAW at the University of Manitoba campus was held in March this year. Events included discussions of various topics, including: the evidence that Israel is an apartheid state; the connections between gender discrimination and apartheid; Canadian apartheid and indigenous solidarity; and the freedom to speak and organize against apartheid on campus. These events were sponsored by the Canada-Palestine Support Network and Independent Jewish Voices, among others. Comments made in the Manitoba Assembly during a debate on MLA’s Heather Stefanson’s April 15 motion denouncing IAW implied that IAW promotes discord, is “unhelpful” and might “promote anti-Semitic opinions leading to the harassment and intimidation of Jewish students and staff.”

However, according to IAW, “minutes of the March 16th meeting of the University of Manitoba (U of M) Board of Governors cited the University President stating that the IAW events had ‘proceeded as anticipated and were orderly’ and that the University’s position to not shut down IAW was the correct choice.” In addition, seven prominent members of the U of M faculty subsequently initiated an open letter supporting the “right to freedom of speech about Palestine for all members of the university community, including freedom to use the term ‘apartheid’ to identify and debate certain policies associated with the state of Israel as well as the freedom to support, facilitate and participate freely in activities under the rubric of ‘Israeli Apartheid Week.’”

Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME) welcomes the resolve demonstrated by the University’s President and Board of Governors, the UMSU and the faculty members initiating the open letter. “It is heartening that the various bodies and individuals responsible for defending freedom of expression have refused to bow to the considerable political pressure to muzzle IAW at the U of M campus,” says CJPME President Thomas Woodley. In the weeks prior to Stefanson’s motion, B’nai Brith organized a letter-writing campaign and held a press conference pressuring the University to ban IAW on campus. The B’nai Brith call was supported by NDP cabinet minister Christine Melnick, Opposition Leader Hugh MacFadyen, and Stefanson.

CJPME and other organizations anticipate that those resentful of sharp criticism of Israeli policies will take another stab at silencing critics next year. “CJPME urges university administrators, faculty members and students across Canada to be vigilant in protecting the right to speak one’s mind,” Woodley added. “No country is above criticism, and all must be held accountable for their human rights records,” he noted.

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Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME) is a non-profit and secular organization bringing together men and women of all backgrounds who labour to see justice and peace take root again in the Middle East. Its mission is to empower decision-makers to view all sides with fairness and to promote the equitable and sustainable development of the region.

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