christian peacemaker teams

November 25, 2019

Report regarding violence at York University

On November 20th, 2019, members of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) were on campus to witness and observe the demonstration opposing Herut Canada's event which gave the Israeli Defense Forces a platform to speak on campus. CPT is a peace and human rights organization with teams working in Iraqi Kurdistan, Colombia, Palestine, Lesvos, and North America. We are trained in conflict de-escalation and documentation of human rights abuses.

Media coverage has characterized the demonstration at York as violent, without specifying the nature of the violence or who was involved. CPTers on campus witnessed multiple incidents in which pro-Israel demonstrators harassed and attacked mostly racialized pro-Palestine demonstrators. The following is an overview of what we saw and what was reported to us.

What we witnessed:
- Physical violence:
  - On several occasions we witnessed pro-Israel protestors pushing and shoving pro-Palestine protestors in addition to kicking them, spitting on them, and throwing garbage at them.
  - Pro-Israel demonstrators physically blocked a group of pro-Palestine demonstrators at the top of a staircase, then tried to push them down the stairs.
- Threats of Violence:
  - A pro-Israel demonstrator threatened to rape a pro-Palestine demonstrator.
  - A pro-Israel demonstrator threatened to stab a pro-Palestine demonstrator.
- Intimidation Tactics:
  - Pro-Israel demonstrators, including many who were not students, roamed on campus in groups often trying to corner a pro-Palestine student to start a fight, creating an atmosphere of intimidation.

What was reported to us:
- Physical violence:
  - Pro-Israel demonstrators attempted to remove two women's hijabs.
  - A teaching assistant demonstrating in solidarity with Palestinians was punched in the head and taken to hospital.

- - A student demonstrating in solidarity with Palestinians was punched and their glasses were broken.
  - Harassment
    - Pro-Israel demonstrators told racialized students to "go back to where you came from."
    - A Palestinian flag was taken from a protester and returned with urine dumped on it.

Additional Concerns:

From our observations, York University security did not do enough to stop the attacks against pro-Palestine protestors. In the later part of the evening, pro-Israel demonstrators roamed in Vari Hall and outside, trying to target and attack pro-Palestine demonstrators. Pro-Israel demonstrators specifically targeted racialized pro-Palestine demonstrators, while generally ignoring white pro-Palestine demonstrators. Security did nothing to stop this. Instead it was left to the student body marshals and to CPTers to try and de-escalate the situation, while receiving threats of attacks on ourselves. It is also deeply concerning that the Jewish Defense League was allowed on campus, despite their history of targeting students at York and a previous ban on campus.

We also have questions as to why plain-clothed civilians, many with links to the Jewish Defense League, were allowed to act as 'security', searching students' bags as they entered the event, and granting/denying entry to the event. This created further insecurity for students on campus.

Concluding Statement

As Christian Peacemaker Teams, we condemn this violence. We also express strong concern that representatives of a foreign military were allowed to speak on campus – a military responsible for human rights abuses that have harmed York students and their families in Palestine. From our observations, we hold York University responsible for the violence that took place on November 20th, 2019. We encourage the York Administration to take the appropriate steps to ensure safety of all of their students.