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UTFA Statement in Defence of Academic Freedom

October 18, 2023

Dear colleagues,

We mourn the loss of life in Israel/Palestine over the past two weeks and over many decades, and we strongly condemn all attacks on civilians in contravention of international law. We also extend our heartfelt compassion and solidarity to all members of our community who are grieving. No statement can adequately convey our collective horror, nor can it capture the depth of our members' feelings. We commend our colleagues who are supporting each other and demonstrating leadership amid all of the rage, sorrow, and heartbreak.

We are an academic community. As its **Statement of Institutional Purpose** powerfully affirms, our University is

dedicated to fostering an academic community in which the learning and scholarship of every member may flourish, with vigilant protection for individual human rights, and a resolute commitment to the principles of equal opportunity, equity and justice.

Within the unique university context, the most crucial of all human rights are the rights of freedom of speech, academic freedom, and freedom of research. And we affirm that these rights are meaningless unless they entail the right to raise deeply disturbing questions and provocative challenges to the cherished beliefs of society at large and of the university itself.

It is this human right to radical, critical teaching and research with which the University has a duty above all to be concerned; for there is no one else, no other institution and no other office, in our modern liberal democracy, which is the custodian of this most precious and vulnerable right of the liberated human spirit.

Protecting the 'most crucial' rights of freedom of speech, academic freedom, and freedom of research, and the right to raise disturbing questions and provocative challenges to cherished beliefs that they entail, is all the more important in times of crisis.

In this heated context, UTFA members holding diverse perspectives are reporting harassment. Indigenous faculty and faculty of colour have been singled out in the national press for their public comments in support of Palestinians, and as a result have endured death threats, demands to senior Administration that they be fired, and other forms of harassment. Some UTFA members have had to engage with Campus Safety for their protection. Jewish and other faculty are reporting increased antisemitic hate speech on social media. In every case, we recognize that the goal of this harassment is to intimidate and to silence, and thereby to restrict academic freedom.

The University of Toronto Faculty Association is unwavering in its support for all faculty, librarians, students, other members of our scholarly communities who speak up about the current war in Palestine/Israel, and all who offer their scholarly expertise. It is not only a right, but also a duty for scholars to bring their expertise and varied perspectives to the most contested conversations, including about human rights, terrorism, colonialism, genocide, and international law.

We encourage any UTFA member experiencing harassment or attempts to limit their academic freedom to contact **advice@utfa.org**. UTFA will vigorously defend and represent all members who face improper treatment regarding their employment, including violations of their academic freedom rights, by ensuring the Administration honour the commitments and procedures as outlined in the **Statement on Prohibited Discrimination and Discriminatory Harassment** and the grievance procedures in the **Memorandum of Agreement**. If you are experiencing an immediate concern about your safety, you may contact Campus Safety at 416-978-2222.

We call on academic units, deans and principals, and other senior Administration (1) to immediately denounce all forms of public harassment and intimidation to which some UTFA members have been subject; (2) to ensure procedural fairness in dealing with all complaints against students, staff, UTFA members, and other individuals and groups in our community; and (3) to reaffirm the University's commitment to academic freedom, as expressed in the Statement of Institutional Purpose cited above.

We are a community of educators and scholars. We have a special duty to help deepen understanding, to approach differences as an opportunity for learning, and to create spaces for this vital dialogue. Anti-Palestinian racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and any other form of racism or discrimination have no place on our campus. It is the duty of every member of our community to ensure that our campus is an affirming and inclusive place to learn and work, for there is "no other institution and no other office…which is the custodian of this most precious and vulnerable right of the liberated human spirit."

Sincerely,

The UTFA Executive

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