

## Foreword

Before we begin there are a few things that need remarking on.

Firstly, these notes were written in a kind of breathless haze in Autumn of 2024, as such this piece overlooks certain things that didn't seem so impactful to the analysis at the time. Secondly, this is certainly a historic artefact just as much as analysis. I stand by much of what I say, though not how I say most of it or the manner in which I wrote it. It works better to be viewed as a snapshot in time of the encampment's perception perhaps. These notes could be viewed as a primer or introduction to the encampment before more analyses become available. It is my hope to have a series of interviews available for reading soon after the publication of these notes. If you would like to be part of these interviews, please feel free to reach me at [stevenjjones@proton.me](mailto:stevenjjones@proton.me), and we can sort something out.

The title should probably have a few remarks. It is not meant literally. I am a rather heterodox Marxist-Leninist, even though I hate the use of orthodoxy as a term through which to understand Marxism, and as such I do not believe in factions within the party form. The encampment was obviously not the party form - though the application of a little democratic centralism wouldn't have hurt. The title then is just a reference to the poet Percy Shelley's first pamphlet (*The Necessity of Atheism*) and shouldn't be read as a comment on the nature of factions or fractional splits. Unity is always to be preferred, though never unity with reformist elements, hence the perceived necessity of factionalism in this case.

I also look a lot kindlier on many of the people I critique herein. If you find yourself being critiqued, you likely know how to reach me and I would be glad to talk about it with you – in fact I would welcome it. A struggle session sounds aggressive and argumentative but that is not so, rather it is a rigorous application criticism self-criticism which is the perfect tool for ideological struggle.

Events at the encampment surrounding an abusive man named Alex Hadwin will not be touched on here. This is because I am not qualified nor knowledgeable enough to make comment. He was a disgusting, violent man and the allegations against him were mishandled in the extreme, if my understanding is correct.

There will be appendices that contain pictures and descriptions uploaded alongside these notes to refer to. If I can get my act together as well, there will be a timeline of events surrounding the movement on campus and a series of links to various social media posts showcasing the encampment.

Lastly, please try and enjoy the read. I have tried to write conversationally as political writing is dialogic and while form can easily support that, the content cannot so easily. Please enjoy, please write to me with any critique you have. If it all makes no sense, I am not sorry.

Solidarity Forever,  
- Comrade Steve

## *The Necessity of Factionalism*

‘Let the axe strike at the root, and the poison tree will fall’

- Shelley’s *Queen Mab*

If you were to enter Newcastle University campus, coming up from Haymarket, past King’s Gate and The Grand, as of these notes being written, you will find a lawn enclosed by fences. There will be patches of moss on the grass and tall weeds too. Over the summer these were rectangles of mud, baked dry by the sun. These little patches are where the Gaza Solidarity Encampment stood for almost three months beginning in May of 2024. Once, as I sat smoking on a bench outside of Northern Stage, a man with his grandson, exiting the building, passed this lawn. The child asked his grandfather why the area was fenced off. His grandfather said he didn’t know why. Whilst the camp has been dismantled, for myself, and I hope many others, it will be remembered for a while yet. It is my hope these notes will serve to keep the lessons of the encampment in mind.

For roughly fifty of the Gaza Solidarity Encampment’s eighty something days, I slept, ate, drank, chain-smoked, organised and lived under the shelter of a few gazebos and tarps that were at once inundated with rain then baked by the sun. This period saw me engaged in the most instructive experiences of my time in the movement so far: no amount of organising anti-racist rallies as a teenager can compare. No doubt, a lot went wrong, and, unfortunately, far less went right. Nonetheless, it was a trial by fire for many, myself included, without which I would not have the perspective I have today. The encampment will remain a formative experience for that generation who organised it and lived it. To some a first massive failure and to others their first taste of success, more likely both. Personally, I regret some of the developments of the encampment, but there is no use in wishing it would have gone otherwise. What follows here is a series of brief notes about the encampment: what happened; the actors (and forces) involved and why, how and what went wrong. Beyond personal reminiscence, I hope these notes will indicate some lessons applicable to future endeavours in political organising.

Before we begin, a few pieces of background of events prior to the encampment. The campus struggle seems to have been dominated by the Leonardo Off Campus campaign. This campaign focused on highlighting the place of the arms company Leonardo<sup>1</sup> on Newcastle University’s Helix site (situated on the Spark Building’s fifth floor). In the lead up to the encampment, this seems to have been a significant point of pressure. This aim broadened to more wide scale divestment with the news of the Columbia Encampment and the brutal crackdown by New York state and city authorities. In co-ordination with other groups across the UK, May Day was selected to establish the encampment and demands were formulated. I recently came into possession of an original copy of the demands. An abridged version of the demands on that leaflet are as follows:

- Disclosure of investments, collaborations and partnerships
- Divestment of the above in line with the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement

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<sup>1</sup>Leonardo is an Italian arms’ company that makes weapons for the Israeli state, many of which will be used or have already been used on middle eastern civilians of various nationalities, but on Palestinians most egregiously. They are also a target of Palestine Action.

- Protection of staff and students who stand in solidarity with Palestine
- Address Anti-Palestinian racism
- Pledge to an academic boycott of Israeli universities
- Call to end the genocide in Gaza through immediate, unconditional and permanent ceasefire
- Commitment to create links with Palestinian universities, including assistance with rebuilding Gaza's universities

These demands remained unchanged for the duration of the encampment and will be remarked on further near the end.

Something I think that it is interesting to note is the initial description of Newcastle Apartheid Off Campus (NAOC): 'A cross-campus coalition'. This is a little funny to look back on as you can probably tell given the title of this piece and how the encampment would congeal around a core of actionists and speechmakers, rather than a politicised mass of students.

### *A communard's song*

My first response to the encampment was pride. I was happy that something like this could happen just down the road from me. I was proud to call the people in keffiyehs on campus my peers, in age and situation in life. It was a great place to be at the start, countless people drifted through on those first warm, sun-lit days. They would stop to prepare their final assignments out in the sun or under one of the gazebos and stay for communal dinner and the rally in the evening.

The rallies too made me proud: at five o'clock every day the space outside the student union came more alive than I have ever seen it. Flags from the arches to the stairs and chants so loud you could hear them on Northumberland Street. In a word, they were inspiring. There wasn't a place on campus you could go at five in the evening where you couldn't hear the crowd chanting in Arabic or shouting for the downfall of imperialism.

In those warm, sunny days everyone on the encampment was excited to be there. I remember overhearing a conversation between two girls speculating on whether anyone would meet their future partner at the camp. They were right to consider this, I believe; the encampment brought together a lot of people who would never have met otherwise. One night during the first week, crowded beneath a gazebo, there were convulsive renditions of *The Internationale*, *Solidarity Forever* and other songs from the labour movement. The politics seemed radical, the people were friendly and the food was free. There were cigarettes going wherever you looked; over the months the encampment stood, a dip in the floor of the smoking area slowly filled with butts and water. This became known as 'tab soup'.

Looking back however, there always seemed to be those cliques that would start dragging the place down, a tendency that became apparent after the incident of 'King's Gate-gate'.

On May 8th, there was supposed to be a meeting with the Vice-Chancellor. When he failed to show, we escalated and blocked the doors to King's Gate, the administration building of the university and home to the offices of the University Executive Board (UEB). Some comrades went over to the Helix site as well, home to some of Leonardo's offices, and entered one of the buildings for a time. The reaction was mild, but subsequent events proved that the University was by no means averse to employing repressive measures. From

mid-afternoon until the rally at five we stood watch as a form of soft picket in front of the doors to King's Gate, chanting and chatting amongst ourselves. Local RCP<sup>2</sup> members came down to do their drivel (i.e. attempting to converse with the building's security, getting in the way during a dangerous situation, etc) and left before everyone else. The event appeared to arouse a lot of local interest: the students had put King's Gate to siege and won an emergency meeting of the UEB. As a subsequent Freedom of Information (FOI) request has proved, this meeting was not about how to engage with the students, but rather concerned how to prevent further escalation.

With the wind in our sails, many called for further escalation if the UEB did not at least meet with us. However, there was push-back from a group of allied anarchists and liberals who argued that the picket/blockade had been a failure. As a result, certain participants in the encampment met separately to discuss how we could push for more radical action. Issues of structure also emerged, with communists being shut out of working groups, particularly the public facing comms group. Structural issues were rooted in questions of the camp's lack of a democratic culture, as well as the 'militancy' of those who had assumed the leadership.

A period of intense factionalism in the camp coincided with an apathetic, non-militant leadership taking charge and negotiations with the university shortly thereafter stalling. Meetings ran long into the night and arguments about the symbolism of our actions were drawn out long past them being productive. An hour and a half was spent discussing whether or not we should wear black or white for a vigil. The camp's lack of democratic culture also became increasingly evident. At a meeting on the Monday before Nakba Day, much of the leadership were elsewhere and we took a vote on occupation as escalation; a building was decided and plans were to be drawn up in the next meeting. In that next meeting, with the leadership present, they overturned the vote by simply saying no. Their suggestion instead was that the people who wanted to escalate could go ahead and that they would support from right where they were. Needless to say, that didn't happen: not much did without the express support of the militant wing. At one point an attempt to occupy a building called The Catalyst was made, but we were thrown-out quickly and marched back to campus for the daily rally. During this march we engaged with members of the public: in an incident of note, a member of the local PSC was punched in the face.

Fittingly, during this period it often rained: with the encampment consistently flooding, we erected a dry gazebo at the back and attached tarps to the open sides of the other gazebos to keep out the wind and rain. The rain found its way in regardless. At the front of the lawn where the encampment was erected there is still a muddy ditch where we would use a broom to push water out of the front gazebo, taking some of the earth with it. During this time the UK general election was called. Whilst I have no doubt that some people remained optimistic, the dour atmosphere seemed to reflect at once both the outcome of the elections, a right-wing labour government, and the progress with our demands. It appeared that those most concerned with the general election were the leadership of the encampment.

With those occupying the encampment enduring the bleak weather, political disappointment and navigating the occasional dry spaces of the encampment, restlessness mounted. The entrance to the dry room had a sign threatening those coming in to remove

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<sup>2</sup> The "Revolutionary Communist" party, a Trotskyite Party that was the result of Socialist Appeal being thrown out of the Labour Party under Kier Starmer. Known not for their policies or positions (they generally lack them), but for being so-called 'wreckers'.

their shoes on pain of death. Fortunately, the mounting restlessness and proximity created a new sense of unity, resulting in a series of minor Agitprop actions.

This first Agitprop action was an abject failure. There is no analysis to be done. We entered the Philip Robinson Library around midday and distributed leaflets whilst shouting slogans. Whilst this no doubt purged some of our collective restlessness, our perception by the wider student body was negatively impacted due to potentially having a hand in causing a minor seizure. There was brief post-exam disruption as well, consisting of shouting slogans, but the impact appeared negligible.

On the night of May 27<sup>th</sup>, we had a successful action. We visited the Herschel building late in the night, pasting posters and leaving red handprints on the glass doors and outside walls. The sign for the building was also smeared with red paint. This action was accompanied by a temporary (albeit slightly accidental) occupation of the Student Union building. This drew the attention of campus security, who were locked outside, and resulted in twenty police officers getting called to the scene. Campus security were out-manoeuvred: the temporary occupation allowed for the uninterrupted 're-decoration' of the Herschel building and assembled a police presence in response to students using a building they could plausibly be expected to use at that hour, i.e. a building open to students out-of-hours. This seemed to have settled the restlessness and planning began for the day that would be known after the fact as 'Black Wednesday', 'al-Shifa Hall Day' or simply 'May 29<sup>th</sup>', depending on who you ask. Our agitprop had seen its first success and there was a general mood for escalation.

### *The al-Shifa Hall incident<sup>3</sup>*

I can distinctly remember the meeting in which we decided to target King's Hall, hereafter al-Shifa Hall, in the Armstrong building, which is the space used for graduations, exams and other events. At the time of my own graduation, I joked that I was shocked to be allowed back in there after what occurred that day. Prior to the big meeting, I was part of a small working group who had weighed the pros and the cons of various locations, working to bring it down to two options that could be brought to the wider group. Our options were: al-Shifa Hall or the Marjorie Robinson Library. I was delegated to talk about the pros and the cons of targeting the Marjorie Robinson, and chaired part of the big meeting. There was a brief discussion of occupying part of the medical school, attached to the local hospital, but that was quickly shut down: we are not Israeli. After deciding to target al-Shifa Hall, a group split off and began to plan the finer details.

That night, the mood was feverish and energetic: I was unable to sleep, and I doubt that anyone else aware of the plans could either. Our numbers would be greater than anticipated: the local branch of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) had organised a rally taking place that day. There seemed to be no way we could fail. We had acquired materials, sent people to scope the inside of the building and waited for when we would begin. I woke that morning to the sunlight and warmth, like the first days of the encampment. There was

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<sup>3</sup> al-Shifa Hall is generally considered *the* incident from the encampment. Nothing else during the encampment really comes close to the scale or consequences that al-Shifa Hall reached. Whenever I speak to anyone from the encampment about it, inevitably we return to the question: Where were you on al-Shifa Hall day? In that respect at least, it became our 9/11. I've had a thousand conversations with old comrades about al-Shifa that more or less end with 'Jesus Christ' and hanging of heads.

a catch-up meeting at midday and security were clearly getting nervous. We organised our buddies and groups with whom we'd enter the building and stick with, distributed the equipment for locking doors and planned out who would have which banners. A comrade and I spent the morning painting a banner that read 'al-Shifa Hall'. Myself and two other comrades took to smoking within the bounds of the camp: we wouldn't be there for much longer after all. Distractions were planned and these were carried out as we approached four o'clock in the afternoon of May 29<sup>th</sup> 2024.

There was another debrief at around half-past three. My buddy and I went to our team's meeting spot early, 15:50, and waited. Twenty minutes later, our team had entered the Armstrong building, without us. I ought to have taken it as a sign. We ran in through the main entrance of the building, facing the hospital. We found a photographer comrade of ours and she ran with the both of us into al-Shifa Hall. At half-past four, there were barricades up and fifteen or so of our comrades had made it in. The important corridors and internal doors had not been taken. We were trapped in al-Shifa hall without access to a toilet, food, water, or a way out. Somewhere I had lost my buddy: the last I saw of them was outside the barricade with another comrade, surrounded by police.

I cannot speak to what was happening outside for the most part. We were in the hall and waiting for the PSC rally to begin and hopefully help us out: out of the hall or help them into the occupation. We started to see more and more police go past the doors and occasionally glance in as the time the rally was intended to begin. It worried us to begin with and we used leftover tables to build a secondary barricade in case the police or campus security broke through the main barricades. A line of tables, two high, stretched from one of the walls halfway into the hall. As the banner hadn't made it inside, we marked out in black tape 'al-Shifa Hall' on the projector board<sup>4</sup>. Some comrades had found a little balcony that looked out. This balcony seemed to be a service balcony for the huge organ in al-Shifa Hall. The gate to the courtyard led out into campus and was closed by security. All our comrades who hadn't made it into the hall were either there, locked in the Armstrong building's courtyard; or outside, waiting on PSC.

The rally began whilst I was sitting behind the table barricade in the middle of the room, my keffiyeh off to finally get some air after the exertion of the day. I looked up at the clock on the wall and it was some time past five. Our comrades were still chanting in the courtyard outside. We could hear them but there was no way for us to reach them easily. Once someone tried to shout through the window at us but we couldn't make out what they were saying. Our single lifeline was a comrade with their phone shoved into the corner of the room for signal. Eventually, I made my way up to the balcony behind the organ. The photographer and I were the only ones up there. It was getting quieter; dark and heavy clouds pressed low. The gateway onto campus stood in a deep alcove and just barely I thought I saw it push in on itself. Then again. Then the police in the courtyard were running to hold it. Then again. They held it. It broke.

They tried to keep it shut but it was no use. As the gate broke open, there was a sea of keffiyeh-clad people holding Palestinian flags high. I shouted down to our comrades in the hall and they rushed to the windows to look. The people were here and there arose in us confidence that the building would soon be ours, or we'd at least be released. Neither were the case. Police and protesters clashed outside whilst inside security staff set-off the

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<sup>4</sup> The banner made it into the courtyard, from what I can tell. The banner was enormous though and not really of much use for anything really. There are a handful of pictures of this somewhere though I do not have them.

fire alarm and shouted at us from another, smaller balcony. At one point, one of our comrades had somehow managed to get into the building from outside; as they stood on the balcony we cheered, but they were soon led away by the police after turning up their nose at a legal notice. Then, outside, we saw someone nearly dragged into the police line for arrest but the crowd held them close. Inside the courtyard someone was having a seizure and someone had broken something in their leg. We couldn't tell who these comrades were, how severe their injuries and if they were receiving help or not. Eventually, the police regrouped their lines and with batons, riot gear and a dog, the crowd was turned away. Our comrades in the courtyard managed to escape with them at some point as well, I couldn't say how. It had rained heavily at points throughout and the courtyard was wet and empty.

It was starting to get dark outside. There were more and more police and campus security moving past the doors. Earlier in the day there had been talk of the use of tear gas, we had glimpses of batons and the violence but also the fierce resistance of our comrades. We knew about the injuries. The end seemed to have come for al-Shifa Hall. We planned to man our barricades and then, when they fell, lock arms and not let them take us one at a time. We saw less and less police though. We waited for a moment longer, always checking the windows through the barricades. Then up on the little balcony, a security guard informed us that if we wanted to leave, we could, that the doors were unlocked. That was that then. They led us out and we found a few stragglers at the camp, tending to it in case the remaining police moved in to take it all away as we thought they might. Our comrades had blocked Tyne Bridge in order to distract the police and save us occupiers from arrest. As we ran to the bridge, we learned of the arrest of some of our comrades and went to Forth Banks Police station instead.

I have one distinct memory of this time after Al-Shifa Hall. Five of us, three in block who had been inside Al-Shifa and two from the kettle, were sprinting down Pilgrim Street to Tyne Bridge. We were tired, dirty, wet with sweat and rain. As we ran, a comrade held the Palestinian flag high and let it stream behind us.

Outside the station, we were met by police again. It was raining heavily and pitch dark by the time we had all arrived. Some of us waited through the night, some of us did not. The next day, all of our comrades were gradually released throughout the afternoon.

### *After al-Shifa*

It is hard to say what the mood was after al-Shifa Hall. Downtrodden would be correct, however under- or misstated, but there was still a defined way forward. There would be no more attempts at occupation. Al-Shifa hall had put a dent in our numbers and enthusiasm for similar actions. Nonetheless, the following week PSC (along with other organisations such as the 'Shut Down Rafael' campaign, later succeeded by 'People Against Rafael') held a well-attended march to the Armstrong building in protest of the UEB and Northumbria Police's repression on 'Black Wednesday'. There were also further efforts at direct action. This included a Herschel-style hit on the back of Merz Court that was interrupted by security: the red paint lingered but the posters did not. The Agriculture building was later targeted, though our experiments in watering down the paint for sake transport resulted in the sign turning pink rather than red. More effective were the buckets of paint poured over the stairs that led onto campus, cordoned off by the University's maintenance team with caution tape and marked by us with a handwritten sign reading 'genocide in progress' to add a twist of irony to their caution tape.

In the middle of the month, a comrade was taken from the encampment in the early hours of the morning. If it weren't for a woman vaping outside the student union, we never would have known of his arrest. Many of us had to lie low after that. There were meetings discussing leaving the camp up over the summer. The thinking was that a skeleton crew could maintain the camp for the rest of us to return to after summer. The debate went back and forth and back and forth and nowhere. It seemed to me that people were clinging on to a thing that was already in a state of decay. The dry tent had long since collapsed with the wind, as had the food tent. A gazebo donated by the Young Communist League (YCL)<sup>5</sup> had collapsed so completely it had to be taken out of the camp in pieces. The grass had been trampled to mud and pallets placed as walkways. Regardless, the state of the encampment had deteriorated. I think my tent was the sole occupied tent on camp that didn't leak. The encampment limped on until graduations, but nevertheless it had to go. Whilst I wasn't present when the encampment was erected, or when it was dismantled, I am proud to have been involved during its most intense period. On July 21st the final rally was held, drawing a large crowd that assisted in taking down the tents and dismantling the barricades.

I wish I could have seen the encampment just one more time before it came down. A few days later I was back in Newcastle and went to go see where it stood. The sun had dried up all the water, so puddles were no longer a problem. The place I had slept for just about a month and a half was now a brown rectangle, baking in the sun.

### *Concerning factionalism*

I spoke above about opposing groups forming within the encampment. The two orientations were 'communist-anarchist' (though later many anarchists migrated to the latter faction) and 'liberal-anarchist'. I was a part of the former. Following 'Kings' Gate-gate', there was a push for further escalation amongst some participants of the encampment: we had won a meeting of the executive board after all. Yet there was immense pushback on this from the leadership: their position seemed to be that it was enough that we were there, encamped. Though we couldn't have known the content of the UEB's meeting— how to prevent escalation as opposed to how to meet the demands of the students —it seemed like a victory that could be built on. Following this meeting those interested in further escalation met separately to consider how we could build toward this. We would meet and discuss our issues with the current direction of the camp. During these initial discussions, our critique took form as: 'Peace camp' rhetoric, lack of transparency and democratic systems, and the lack of militancy as evidenced by the absence of further escalation.

The intent was to push a line that was overtly communist: slogans that challenged imperialism were progressively falling out of favour and speeches moralised at the crowd. The intention was to bring a more radical politics that engaged with the question of class to the forefront of the camp. Occasionally in our meetings we fell to chatting shit but I think that was only a natural outcome, if a bit undisciplined of us.

When we brought our concerns to the increasingly visible clique of leaders, we were mostly dismissed. The lack of democratic systems (i.e. any sort of consensus or committee based democratic system) was very clear. An implicit though all too visible leadership had emerged from those engaged in the Communications team, who were responsible for

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<sup>5</sup> The youth and student wing of the Communist Party of Britain (CPB) that lingered after the dissolution of the original Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB)

external and press relations. Though the Comms team was nominally open, with any participant in the encampment able to join, people were consistently prevented from joining the requisite signal chats or meaningfully participating in the work. Through these roles they had accrued significant influence. This was demonstrated in their casual overturning of the initial proposal of occupation-as-escalation, despite such having been voted through with a strong majority in a previous meeting they were absent from.

In short, an undemocratic system was built up around a group of friends who preferred the encampment as it was. There is no doubt they were there for the right reasons, but were unwilling to consider changes in strategy that would apply additional pressure to the university. This was exacerbated by the informal leadership's refusal to recognise their leadership. Decisions were made in Comms meetings, after being pushed through general meetings with little scrutiny, became the policy of the encampment and yet any authority was disavowed. Proposals from those outside of the leadership, however, were picked over relentlessly. The longest meetings at the camp were those where a proposal had come from someone other than the leading clique or when neither group felt like they could give ground to the other.

We were then told by these same people that the picket of King's Gate had been an utter failure, despite it provoking an emergency meeting from the UEB. Whilst I can't comment on the degree to which emergency meetings are common place with Newcastle University's Executive Board, it seems that we had failed to capitalise on the initial fears of escalation. I believe this undercut any negotiations due to a perceived lack of threat of further action. In a word, the lack of action taken after 'Kings' Gate-gate' undercut any attempt to progress the demands and also any attempt to increase the local student movement's militancy. We were eye to eye with the UEB and then we blinked. The encampment had shied away from confronting and beginning to combat imperialism, as represented in this case by universities materially supporting international wars and apartheid regimes, and had appeared incapable in the face of their ostensible enemy whilst also restricting the development of their own politics.

From the circumstances of an underdeveloped politics and an unwillingness to present a meaningful challenge to imperialism, there followed the rhetoric of the 'peace camp'. This was most often used to dismiss calls for further action and betrayed a poor analysis of the situation. We had already taken up some of the university's property, which was often rented out to external bodies and used during internal events. To a bourgeois enterprise, we had already committed an incredibly grave, aggressive and domineering act. We had removed an income stream from them. Therefore, there was no sense in the term 'peace camp' as the encampment's establishment was an 'aggressive' act. This rhetoric stripped a hard-won militancy that came from the blockade of Kings' Gate. Many were riding a high and then dragged back down with the lack of follow-through. This reflected the rhetoric of the camp as a whole going forward: overtly revolutionary slogans were progressively less common. No more 'There is only one solution! Intifada! Revolution!' instead we had: 'How do you spell justice? BDS!'. One was a call for overthrow and uprising, the other for consumer boycotts. Whilst the latter slogan referred to a campaign lead by Palestinian civil society, an important component of the Palestine Solidarity Movement, privileging such references over those slogans addressing the broader struggle of the Palestinian resistance represented a political regression. Both at the level of representation and at the level of strategy, the anti-capitalist, revolutionary character of the encampment's politics began to become merely implicit.

The treatment of us following these critiques was certainly something as well. The lack of discipline in meetings led to some unfortunate jokes that made their way back to their subjects. These were jokes in poor taste and frustrated our efforts to advance our line, as going forward our critiques could be dismissed as more commie nonsense from the guillotine crew. It was taken as an opportunity to continue as is rather than examine why we felt there was a need for change.

As the encampment continued and as a result of the developing situation, some of our critiques were spontaneously addressed. People grew tired of sitting around doing nothing and action started up again. As such, restlessness rather than political radicalism was the reason action recommenced. This also saw the disappearance of the 'peace camp' rhetoric as it was hard to claim to be a peace camp when you spent your nights trying to run campus security ragged. The democratic systems never materialised: the term 'horizontal organisation' was thrown around the time of writing by those involved in NAOC. The lack of engagement with our wing in the working groups was also never resolved. Whilst we eventually assumed responsibility for the direct action group, our participation in other working groups was restricted. Needless to say, whilst the direct action group established a national reputation for the Newcastle encampment as radical, internally we exerted none of the influence that the Comms team had acquired.

Not one of our critiques had been resolved to satisfaction. The significant delay in resuming action resulted in a diminished impact, as well as a dwindling militancy of the camp. As stated above, despite the reputation of the camp nationally, the actionists were few and far between and had generally spent the early days critiquing the camp's structure and being ostracised for it. The idea of the peace camp seemed to go away but the anti-imperialist slogans have only begun to creep back into the local student movement recently. There was an attempt at a coalition structure for the organisation born of the camp but that fell through when their sole outside representative resigned ('in a strop', according to their minutes) so they could focus on their degree. This fell through and seemed undemocratic even from its embryonic stage. Of course, a Leninist structure, meaning democratic centralism with an elected central committee and an executive committee, would have been best, and I told them so.

I still avow the necessity of the factional split ('one divides into two'). Even if the resulting split only provoked the leadership to think about their standpoint and double down, the pressure towards a revolutionary politics was good in itself. There is no question that we should have assumed a more conciliatory attitude, and been far more disciplined. If we had, it is likely we could have exerted a greater influence on the direction of the encampment, and avoided the current lag in the local student movement. The lesson of the faction is that of ensuring a campaign cannot be taken out from under principled militants.

### *External relations*

Despite the prominence of the Comms team, external relations did not seem a priority to the majority of the leadership. A comrade of mine was our liaison with the trade unions on campus and during their period of engagement with the camp, relations with the unions were good. Whether or not they were sustained is up for debate. It seems as though there was no more direct contact with the UCU or really any of the unions unless they reached out first. It seemed a kind of arrogance: 'How dare they not support us? Where are they all?' is what the thought process resembled. An assumption that the staff would support the

student body neglected to consider the position of staff as employees of the institution under protest. Whilst the range of consequences student participants faced was limited by their position of 'service users', the staff were constrained by their dependence on the university for income. Closer cooperation with the unions could have led to a more united front against the UEB and therefore have moved us closer to fulfilling the demands of the encampment. The combined pressure of workers and students (alongside outside organisations) would have been an immense boon to our cause.

The student movement was almost entirely cut off from the wider movement by the end of the encampment. The YCL seems to have been instrumental in the beginnings of the camp, but no real attempt seems to have been made to maintain relations, particularly after the 'liberal-anarchist' and 'communist' groups butted heads. Despite this, attempts to maintain relations with Newcastle Apartheid Off Campus, the organisation that sprang from the camp and generally representing the liberal-anarchist group, did briefly continue but ceased after the last member of the YCL had too many commitments to continue work with NAOC.<sup>6</sup>

Connections with wider campaigns were also generally neglected or poor. There were regularly many PSC members who regularly participated in and visited the encampment, which seems to have been the only thing that maintained relations between the camp and PSC. Furthermore, it seems as though this was the most unified the wider movement was with the student movement, and it was only so united because there was a physical space that forced admixture. PSC worked very closely with the camp and was on many occasions important to action occurring or to material support being provided. For instance, it was likely their rally on al-Shifa Hall that prevented the people inside the hall being arrested as, once turned away from the hall, they marched to Tyne Bridge, drawing police presence away from the university.

Relations with the North East Anarchist Group (NEAG)<sup>7</sup> were good for the most part and remained good to all appearances. There was a recurring joke that NAOC was just the youth wing of NEAG, which whilst inaccurate goes to illustrate their good relations. As well, they were very important on the early days of the encampment with their presence being large and organised but dwindling as they all had to go back to their day jobs.<sup>8</sup>

The same cannot be said for relations with other external campaigns. The Shutdown Rafael (SDR)<sup>9</sup> campaign members were overbearing with the camp, turning up periodically to attempt to order people around. For example, during the al-Shifa Hall incident a leading member of SDR is alleged to have tried to force students into the police line. Among other

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<sup>6</sup> Local YCL has since suffered many departures, including myself, over the decision of national CPB-YCL to come out in support of the supreme court's ruling that 'sex' in the Equalities Act of 2010 referred to so-called 'biological sex'. A ruling which excludes trans people from the spaces aligning with their actual gender an act undoubtably made to force trans people from public life.

<sup>7</sup> NEAG are a large affinity group(?) of seemingly mostly anarcho-communists based in the North East, known for their being just pretty effective and unproblematic. Uphold Capybara-Thought! Long Live the great rodent!

<sup>8</sup> NEAG and the local branch of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) seem to have large overlap in membership so in general when you read NEAG it can often be substituted for IWW without issue.

<sup>9</sup> A campaign began by a former member of the SWP and leading member of North East Against Racism (NEAR) which sought to shut down the Pearson Engineering factory on Scotswood road that is directly owned by the Israeli government (its CEO is the Israeli Finance minister).

things, members of SDR threatened a member of the SWP<sup>10</sup> on camp and generally acted like fools. This did not give them a wonderful reputation to the students and they are infamous still at the time of writing. Having a terrible reputation, some jokes were made about them in a group chat that then leaked. A lack of discipline again seems to have been the issue, on their part for saying that being called an idiot is racist and sexist as well as on our part, for fostering a culture that could have allowed that type of demeaning joke to be made. Their separation from the camp did not help but neither did the fact that we only worked together in stressful circumstances, such as al-Shifa Hall day. This lack of cooperation led to a general lack of understanding between participants in the encampment and the SDR campaign. This one is more of a cautionary tale though, given that SDR has now been succeeded by People Against Rafael (PAR)<sup>11</sup>, with elements of its leadership no longer at work in the campaign. Working closely with other sections of the movement will build up the movement as a whole. It probably was not the best that SDR fell apart given that what came after has proved even more argumentative and ineffectual. In short, relations with SDR fell apart because they proved argumentative and generally unreasonable, though more work should have been done to mitigate these difficulties, rather than dismiss them as a campaign entirely.

### *Forms of action*

The direct action that occurred against the university ranged from not very effective at all (the Agriculture building) to putting the fear of God into the UEB (the blockade of King's Gate). There were two types of action that occurred against the university: 'public' and 'secure'. Public actions include the daily rallies, die-ins and marches. Secure actions include the attempts at occupation and agitprop efforts.

The impact of rallies diminished as the camp wore on. The rallies were initially good for ensuring the camp was seen and, importantly, heard. In the early days, you could hear the rallies from Northumberland Street. It is safe to say that you could hear the rallies from anywhere on campus. There was no way to get away from them really. We held rallies right in the path of most people leaving campus at five o'clock, intended to coincide with the increased foot traffic from the end of people's shifts. They were the perfect way to increase the presence of the camp. Nonetheless, they began to become routine: five in the evening was shouting hour on campus. There were attempts at adapting this tactic, but many people in the camp were very attached to having a rally every day. When it was pouring down with rain, we stood chanting; on one of the hottest days of the year, we stood chanting. Rallies are generally tiring and take a toll on the mind and the body. There were several instances where camp members were talking and discussed being just about to fall asleep and then hearing chants at the edge of their hearing and snapping back awake. This happened to me on multiple occasions, mostly when I went back to nap at home before showering, though it did happen when I slept on camp a few times. Several people I know would have dreams about being late to rallies. In short, after a while the rallies ceased to raise the profile of the camp and just began to drag on the morale of its participants.

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<sup>10</sup> The Socialist Workers' Party, a heterodox Trotskyite and Cliffite (see Tony Cliff) party known for its central committee having been staffed by a rapist and those comfortable defending said rapist (see Martin Smith AKA 'Comrade Delta'). General fairly toothless, if a bit annoying, these days.

<sup>11</sup> Much like their predecessor campaign, People Against Rafael do not have an amazing reputation among the local left. This is for many of the same reasons that SDR were not looked upon kindly.

Other public actions, such as die-ins and marches, had a similar effect. They didn't raise the profile of the camp any more than the rallies did, particularly the die-ins which are uniquely quiet and seemed only to make the people on the encampment feel like something was being done. Louder, larger marches seemed to be the most effective of the lot. It informed the public that the question of Zionism was widely and passionately felt. The speeches raised the public's awareness for any who stopped to listen, which was unfortunately vanishingly few from what I could tell. It also gave a boost to the people at the camp, showing that there was in fact a groundswell of public support behind us, which was key to morale (particularly with the daily rallies being so very draining).

The most effective public actions were the actions that were spaced out from one another and large scale. They concentrated resources into one location or a series of locations at one moment, which was good for making the biggest display and making a show of things is what public action is about. The audience is necessary to public action, be it the government, UEB or the public: they are the targets of a public action, with the intention of showing the scale and intensity of disapproval over the ties between British institutions and Zionism. If a public action happens over and over again, same time, same place, same content, then it will lose its effectiveness because it has been seen and heard before. In short, those actions directed toward the public that were repeated became the least effective of all, however effective they were in the beginning. Lastly, there is only a certain amount of awareness that can be raised and repeatedly trying to 'raise awareness' where it already mostly exists proves a waste of time.

Secure actions ranged more widely in effectiveness. Actions like the blockade of King's Gate and Al-Shifa Hall occupy a middle position, with the minor agitprop actions being carried out with greater or lesser degrees of success. These types of action seem on disruption rather than a present audience. They necessarily only require two things: that the target institution feels some kind of pain or at least nuisance from that particular action and that the general public is informed of the reasoning for the action, though at times this can be covered by co-ordinated public actions where there is no room in secure actions.

The action that arguably met both requirements was the 'hit' on the Herschel building. Whilst the hit on the Herschel building, consisting of daubing it in red paint and agit-prop, had a minor impact on the university's maintenance costs. The agit-prop pasted on the building was intended to prompt the general public to consider why the building, and the university as a whole, was the target of such action, and gestured towards the university's ties to Zionism and its broader role in reproducing imperialism-capitalism. Relying on a desire to conduct independent research and discovery on the part of the general public was not ideal, but I am unsure if it was in the capacity, or even the desire, of the camp to educate about the university's place in imperialism and the world-system.

On the whole, the camp only cost the university £50,000 in total. Given that the university's endowment is nearly £90 million, the encampment's financial impact on the university was marginal. All we seemed to do in terms of impacting the targets of the secure actions was to annoy campus security and put ourselves in danger of arrest. This goes to show that while there was an effect stemming from secure action, there was not much time given to thinking through how this would then damage the university and help to drive wedges in the cracks between the institutions of capitalism. Ideally, secure actions should have been positioned within a broader strategy that considered how to cause a significant financial impact on the university, with the aim of severing the university's ties to Zionism, a function of imperial capitalism, and to widen any cracks produced between these

institutions. This strategy would have united the educative and disruptive functions of the secure actions in a cohesive campaign, with the emphasis varying according to a given action. The secure actions as they took place though, including the Herschel building, were not part of a sustained and thought-out campaign but arose from a restlessness and anger that found resolution in paint and posters. They were 'spontaneous' occurrences, as opposed to the products of deliberation.

The King's Gate blockade suffered as well from many of these drawbacks. It was almost entirely spontaneous: there was no plan going in for how to end the action or what the action itself would consist of. Me and a few others tried to block people going into the building, only letting people out, but others simply picketed the building. Lenin would have wept at the bowing to the pillar of spontaneity. The blockade appeared to have some success, though this seems to stem predominantly from its character as a rapid escalation. Where we had only done rallies before, the seemingly about-face turn to blockading buildings, of course, shocked and frightened the UEB. Instead of using this fear and shock to threaten more action and extract concessions, we sat on that success and it was revised to a failure.

It is difficult to say what exactly went wrong with Al-Shifa Hall due to the apparent variety of missteps. Plans, of course, don't survive contact with the enemy, but the planned occupation of al-Shifa Hall did not survive breathing the same air, let alone contact. To begin with, nobody really seemed to know the building. Whilst efforts had been made to scout the building in advance, this by no means guaranteed that people could accurately interpret these reports. I was a part of the 'first wave' of the occupants: my role would consist in being among the first to enter the hall whilst another team secured the corridors that would grant us an exit and access to the toilet. Despite this role, I had not been briefed on the layout of the building, and remained unaware of how to get to al-Shifa Hall through any of the entrances of the Armstrong Building.

Prior to the occupation, there had been several large but quiet meetings on the encampment. From this, security had guessed that something was going to happen, and an FOI request shows that the UEB had correctly predicted the Armstrong Building as a potential target for occupation. Needless to say, we had lost the element of surprise. The response to the teams trying to secure the building was also supposedly very repressive, with a comrade of mine having chairs thrown at them by security and having to scale the barricades to safety in al-Shifa Hall.

The time of the action was also not perfect. There were still people inside the building who had to be cleared out, not just from the rest of the building but from the parts of the building that we were trying to take. A better time would have been late at night to minimise that kind of incident.

In short, al-Shifa Hall was incredibly poorly planned and the things that went well were more coincidental than part of the planning. The exception to this was the timing of the PSC rally which al-Shifa Hall was explicitly timed to coincide with.

Aside from the poor planning, there seemed to be a not unsound rationale behind it. It could have contributed to the education of the public by raising the profile of the camp and then potentially the anti-imperialist struggle, if our slogans moved away from those characteristic of the 'peace camp' rhetoric. It would also have disrupted the university massively as for the duration of the occupation it is unlikely they would have continued to utilise the building as a whole. This presumption was based on the fact that the university appeared to have almost entirely shut down King's Gate after the blockade, which didn't

involve us getting inside the building. Shutting down an entire university building is the reasonable height the camp could have aimed for. It should be quite respectable how close we did come.

However, the response to al-Shifa Hall by the authorities and the effect this had on people at the camp was undoubtedly the direst consequence of the action. Many were beaten and there were a handful of hospitalisations. The police tore hijabs off and turned batons on students and members of the public alike. Campus security were seemingly under orders not to get too violent and so for the people inside the hall, they decided to irritate, setting off the fire alarm multiple times as well as watching and filming us at most times. While the claim of psychological warfare by some of the people in the hall seems dramatic to me, there was a clear attempt to exhaust and frighten us and, of course, it had different effects on different people, with some seemingly unaffected and others openly distressed. Perhaps worst of all though, the “Revolutionary Communist” Party were present at the kettle with copies of *The Communist* for sale. Hawking their wares amid state repression.

al-Shifa Hall’s legacy seems to be more one of a horribly distressing situation, which I don’t deny as someone who was in the hall. It was one of the longest, most stressful days of my life and I think it is the same for many people. This is not to say that we did not put up an incredibly good fight. Northumbria police were fought to a standstill for five hours and on multiple occasions were their lines broken. Had it been successful, there could have been an even greater swell of public support but with its failure, even previously engaged members of the camp took time away and after al-Shifa Hall things began to fall apart. Its failure almost completely took the wind out of the sails of most people still at camp. The thinking seemed to be how can we continue, when we have failed so spectacularly. The promised social media campaign, ‘making May 29<sup>th</sup> our 9/11’, did not appear and I don’t think it is unreasonable to say that most people don’t know what happened on May 29<sup>th</sup> if they were not there themselves or know someone in the movement who was there. It does not hang over the UEB like it ought to. There was a brief groundswell of public support for the students following al-Shifa Hall though, like the media campaign, it was not properly capitalised on by the Comms team.

The last cardinal sin of the encampment was that it limped on the way it did. I remember coming back for my graduation and seeing the camp in a state of total disrepair, muddy, wet and coming apart at the tent pegs. Had we continued to pull in numbers like we had before al-Shifa Hall it is conceivable that the camp could have lasted until the new academic year but most of the students went home over the summer and the perception seemed to be that the camp was for students and students alone. This wasn’t strictly the case but it was not the most open and welcoming environment at times. We would have been greatly served by a system of induction sessions like the camp at the University of Nottingham had. I heard from some friends not involved in the encampment that they would like to get involved but they didn’t know how. It is likely that resolving this would have contributed to improving the problem of diminishing participation after al-Shifa Hall.

It is good that it lasted until graduation though, giving the out-going students one last look and one last chance to consider the connections between their daily lives and the global system of imperialism.

### *The positives*

Now to be less negative.

The camp was an excellent social space and existed as essentially a commune for the first few days. Parts of the movement that may never have willingly come into contact with one another didn't just come into contact but existed in very close proximity, forcing interaction if not debate. For example, I would never have met the only palatable SWP member in the North East without being at the encampment for as long as I was. I would never have become friends with so many members of NEAG as I have. Those members of NEAG as well now have a friendly connection to Marxist-Leninist/communist circles that they might not have had otherwise. Parts of the movement became more united than they perhaps would have been otherwise. There is a situation now, that perhaps existed before but is newly clear to myself, where most sides of the anti-capitalist left can stomach each other more easily because of intra-organisational personal relationships. The camp in some cases was an exercise in that and in left unity.

Working together on things like al-Shifa Hall has a tendency to bring people closer together. You don't generally go through being locked in a building for five hours and not get close to the people who were also locked in there with you. This goes the same for most other kinds of action, going on marches and rallies ensures you can talk to more people from a wider spectrum of backgrounds, some from communist circles and others from anarchist circles. Having friends or trusted contacts in multiple political areas allows for work to be coordinated more easily across organisations and campaigns. Further, it allows tactics and strategy to be developed that can strengthen the movement as a whole.

Furthermore, the camp put the fear of God into the university on multiple fronts. If a building was decorated with red paint, it was often shut down for a few days (though I am unsure exactly how many were closed, as well as for how long). For instance, the Agriculture building was partially shut down in response to the sign on the side of the building being covered with red paint. King's Gate as well was shut down for a long while after the blockade, with internal memos showing that the UEB encouraged people to work from home if they could, which seems to me to be most people in an administrative setting.

May 29<sup>th</sup> was also partly a victory in this regard. Campus security was markedly more hands-off after the fact and a particularly militant security guard (nicknamed 'wannabe antifa' for the snood he wore) seems to have lost his job for his response to student protesters. They seemed to move from perpetually watching the camp from by the arches to looking at us through the cameras wherever we went and calling the police if it seemed like something was going to happen.

In short, the university were afraid, of what exactly I can't say with any certainty but it should be a point to consider that we have the capacity to make them fear mass action. We just need our mass action to be more successful than it turned out in practice. Their fear can make them sloppy and heavy-handed; it can potentially cause our over-estimation which can be an advantage if used well enough.

Lastly, the camp served as a valuable political education for many who participated. Recently, a comrade of mine said that right now we have the opportunity to practise 'below ground' organising before our failures become too high consequence to risk. Whilst this statement referred to more recent activity, it can likewise be applied to the period of the encampment. It was the opportunity for those involved in the student movement, and the wider Palestine Solidarity Movement, to resist imperialism domestically with a relatively diminished risk of repression. Needless to say, the consequences faced by the contemporary student movement are far less severe than those faced by student movements of the past: today students are unlikely to be murdered by agents of the State on campuses for acts of

protest (see the Kent State Massacre) and this is doubly so in Britain with its drastically less militarised police force. In many cases, a simple 'won't do it again, honest Mr' will be enough to mitigate severe consequences. Though there are some fairly high profile exceptions to this rules and I say all this as someone whose desk campus security used to rifle through and rearrange. It was a good, semi-low consequence environment in which we could practice organisational principles and experiment a little bit with less established methods of organising. Personally, I developed a disdain for any attempts at 'horizontal organisation' and organic centralism. 'Horizontal leadership' seems to entail an absence of formalised and defined roles, as well as a lack of a democratic culture which produced a casualised and largely unaccountable leadership. If a role is important it must be defined and given to someone, if they are not doing a good job, they must have that role taken away from them. A fear of authority is understandable but authority and responsibility vested democratically can be taken away the same way.

It was also a good venue for the development of the politics of the members of the camp, though this did not necessarily happen all the time. A version of the camp that was more open to dissent could have been even better for this.

Most obviously as well, the camp is now an opportunity to examine our failures and try to ensure that in similar scenarios that these failures are not repeated over and over and over again.

### *On Aims*

Lastly, the aims of the encampment are something I have neglected to mention in detail here. Recently, I was given a copy of the first printed run of the demands of the encampment and, though it was before my time at camp, I know that they were intentionally made to be difficult for the university to carry out. I believe this was to move the struggle forward and beyond the confines of campus and purely *student* organisation and to bring into focus the ways in which Zionism is a tool of the imperialist-capitalist world system. A few developments happened with the stated aims of the camp, in particular with relation to the demands.

As the leadership did not quite seem to see the initial conceit of the demands, the aims of the camp deviated from mounting a challenge to the imperialist system by highlighting the place of one of its institutions within its cogs and instead became to force the university to capitulate on all seven counts. They are both in their own ways admirable and both worthy of critique, yet only the latter failed. We are no closer now to achieving the demands of the encampment than we were after al-Shifa Hall or after May 8- or after the establishment of the camp. If achieved, compelling the university to capitulate would have driven a wedge in the gaps between the institutions serving imperialist-capitalist reproduction, but would have required: mass action, with a larger fraction of the public involved (and because the aim of the encampment became university capitulation we could not mobilise the public as now our cause was constrained to students and staff), and the unions to have been properly engaged (their involvement being marginalised, despite their support up until writing).

Broadening the struggle, as was the initial aim of the encampment, could have facilitated that particular kind of mass action. However, it is a very high-minded aim in my opinion and it is difficult to get people to quantify or even imagine what taking on a global system directly actually, concretely means for the individual taking action. This was the aim

that should have been kept in mind the whole time, knocking out imperialism's legs from underneath it to stop its crimes abroad rather than focusing all our anger on the one institution. Again, it would have been a losing battle to try and reconstruct this aim: there were other problems with the camp that were more pressing ( i.e. democracy, etc) and the targeting of one institution is simply good enough reason for most people. It is preferable to inaction but it was unstrategic action, unable to envision the larger picture of things. The university, for example, did not need to continue with our demands following capitulation and if they had there is no telling of how the then Conservative government would have reacted or how the rest of the Russell Group would have reacted. Imperialism will fall before a broad front, not a thousand pin pricks. We then should have aimed for two things. Aimed to widen the cracks in imperialism by winning some kind of reform or change of position from the UEB and also to broaden the student struggle and ensure it is subsumed into the wider class struggle.

It is hard to evaluate the camp wholly and impartially on my own but I have given it my best effort. To summarise, going forward we must do the following or rather keep in mind the following lessons: formalise democratic structures in order to preserve a coherent politics and strategy, strengthen and broaden our alliances with the wider movement, particularly the labour movement, and plan for how we continue on after repression. I would like to emphasise the last of these. Things are getting worse quickly, it will soon no longer be the practice round as my comrade remarked. What comes next is make or break and if we cannot suffer and endure blows from the bourgeois state then we are fucked.

This could not possibly be a comprehensive history and analysis. It would need more time and more discussion with others who were there at different points and with differing perspectives on certain situations to come close to being exhaustive. Particularly outside perspectives from May 29<sup>th</sup> as well as perspectives on the resolution of the factionalism, as I am aware of some kind of mediation but stood aside for that part of the situation. Slightly less emotional perspectives would also be valuable as well as the camp did mean a lot to me for its duration and as such, I know I wasn't the most impartial at times through my evaluation.

Oh well, that is all.