

University of Toronto CENSURED



DEAR SUPPORTERS,

After more than four months of an unprecedented international campaign and academic censure, the University of Toronto administration finally offered the position of director of its International Human Rights Program in the Faculty of Law, to Dr. Valentina Azarova. This was a key condition for lifting the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) censure.

This is an incredible collective victory! Congratulations and thank you all for your solidarity and support!

What Did We Achieve?

Many of us have been at the University of Toronto for decades, and we can recall no prior event where the university administration has so clearly backed down.

Together, in concert with CAUT, we defended academic freedom and advanced CAUT's critical role in this mission.

Together we said no to the power of donor intervention to define the limits of scholarship.

Together we exposed and rejected the Palestine exception to human rights and expanded the conversation about scholarship on Palestine.

Together we practiced the possibility of a different kind of university community - one anchored in justice, in the pursuit of knowledge, and in the many communities of students, faculty, staff, alumni and communities - locally in Toronto/ Tkaronto and around the world - that give our institution its strength.

#WEareUofT

Thank you to the IHRP alumni, students, and Law Faculty for months and months of work to defend the integrity of your faculty and our institution. Thank you to those who took the bold step of resigning your positions of authority within the University in protest against injustice. We recognize your courage and integrity.

Thank you to the Black intellectuals and Indigenous scholars, the Jewish faculty, the Palestinian students, the Arab and Muslim lawyers and Independent Jewish Voices, Scholar Strike, and the colleagues from the Faculty of Medicine - who all took bold stands against systemic racism, the suppression of advocacy for Palestinian human rights and denial of accountability to defend academic freedom. Thank you to the many student unions and groups who organized actions and letters to raise awareness and ensure their voices - our voices - were heard. Thank you to the campus labour unions who are a backbone of the University, who once again provided a moral compass for its conduct. Thank you to the many departments, research units and centres that stood in solidarity with the censure, even at the risk of retribution. Thank you to those who cancelled, relocated or postponed events, who refused honours and appointments and who spoke up about the censure and the issues at stake.

Thank you to the distinguished international scholars - over 1300 of you - who pledged to honour the CAUT censure. The University is deeply invested in its stature in the wider academic world; these pledges made it clear that the international scholarly community - those whose scholarship makes up our reading lists, who serve as guest lecturers and review our programs, would not countenance this egregious conduct. Thank you to the international scholarly associations who offered statements and actions of solidarity.

Thank you to the IHRP's partner organizations Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, HIV Legal Network, Citizen Lab, Butterfly, and Immigration Legal Committee and The Shift for standing in solidarity with us and publicly expressing their disdain over how university administrators dealt with the scandal. Thank you to Naomi Klein and Nancy Olivieiri for early support and for decades of courageous work fighting for justice and institutional accountability. Thank you to Lina Duque for incredible mentorship in building campaigns and communications.

Our criticisms of the university's actions were brushed aside until the CAUT imposed censure. Thank you to the Canadian Association of University Teachers and the more than 72,000 academic staff you represent for unanimously endorsing the censure. Thank you for honouring the important legacy of founding figures like Bora Laskin, who helped to create CAUT some 70 years ago precisely to protect against antisemitism and other forms of systemic discrimination. UofT sought simply to ignore CAUT and the censure, but together we refused the administration's 'business as usual' hubris. Over these months, we were also inspired by and added our support to others who were bravely facing different but related injustices in educational sectors, including Javier Davila, Ritika Goel, Steven Salaita and Nikole Hannah-Jones.

While this is an important victory, it is also bittersweet.

The University of Toronto administration failed to silence faculty in their fight for accountability and justice. They failed to silence the conversation about Palestine. They failed to undermine academic freedom and its national champion, CAUT. But so far, the administration has also failed to address the deeper issues that created the scandal. While hiding behind a professed allegiance to academic freedom and collegial governance, the administration has refused to acknowledge the systemic threats to academic freedom - including through the operation of the Palestine exception; has downplayed the problem of donor interventions; and has ignored calls for better collegial governance practices and administrative accountability. Nor have they made efforts to rectify the damage done by their dishonourable conduct, let alone acknowledge any impropriety in their conduct or demonstrate meaningful accountability.

In this context, it is disappointing but unsurprising that Dr. Azarova has decided not to accept the offer to direct the IHRP program at the University of Toronto.

This was a position that she had already accepted last summer and was eager to start. Yet, the events of the past several months have not been without consequences. The behaviour of the administration understandably undermines confidence in UofT as a place to undertake serious research on human rights and their violations. The administration's conduct leaves question marks about their commitment to protecting this work from donor influence. The absence of a formal apology from the university or assurance that significant change is in the works is shameful and worrying. In this context, the lack of a successful search for Director of the program, a failure that sits directly on the table of the University of Toronto administration, has left the future of the IHRP program in doubt.

All this means that while the censure may be lifted, the work must continue.

We are emboldened by the extraordinary community and movement that are building. We are excited to deepen this work together. On October 21, 2021, we will be hosting an online event oriented to celebrating and reflecting on the campaign, and taking this work and coalition to the next level. Stay tuned for details!

With gratitude, in solidarity,

CensureUofT