

Against the boycott of Israeli academics

By World Socialist Web Site

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The *World Socialist Web Site* emphatically condemns the international campaign calling for a boycott of Israeli academics.

Britain's Professor Steven Rose of the Open University first advocated the academic boycott, and a petition to this effect has so far been endorsed by over 700 academics. It seeks to oppose Israel's military reoccupation of the Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but however well intentioned, it only serves to sow political confusion amongst intellectuals, workers and youth.

Nothing illustrates the political dangers inherent in the academic boycott better than the most high profile action taken thus far in its support. This month two Israeli academics, Prof. Gideon Toury of Tel Aviv University and Dr. Miriam Schlesinger of Bar-Ilan University, were removed as contributors to linguistics journals, the *Translator* and *Translation Studies Abstract*, by their publisher, Professor Mona Baker of the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (Umist).

Baker took care to make clear that her decision was "political, not personal". Nevertheless, the fact remains that the two were thrown out of their positions solely for being Israeli citizens. Dr. Schlesinger previously held the post of chairperson of Amnesty International in Israel, and has regularly been involved with the activities of the Peace Now group, defying Israeli army blockades to deliver supplies to Palestinian towns in the West Bank. But even if they did not hold progressive political views, no one should ever fear persecution as a result of their nationality, their ethnicity or their religion.

No one can seriously argue that such methods will help create a receptive audience for anti-Zionist sentiment in Israel: quite the reverse. By crudely equating Jewish academic institutions with the Israeli state and its crimes, the academic boycott plays directly

into the hands of Zionist ideologues. Measures targeting ordinary Israeli citizens serve to reinforce Zionism's efforts to inculcate the fatalistic and deeply pessimistic idea that the entire world is against the Jewish people and that the state of Israel offers their only sanctuary.

A correct course of action for academics opposed to Israeli aggression against the Palestinians would be the very opposite of such a boycott: to strive for maximum engagement with their Israeli and Arab counterparts, to encourage a serious dialogue on the issues posed that cuts across national divisions rather than reinforces them. In addition, Israeli academics have produced some outstanding contributions to scientific understanding, including serious works on Palestinian and Arab history. This body of work must be critically addressed and debated, not subject to a moral censor that would push academics closer to the Zionist state rather than encourage independent thought.

The academic boycott expresses a demoralised outlook—a variety of outraged liberalism that sees no way of convincing Israeli people to break from the policies of their ruling elite and strike out on an independent road, and so lashes out at what are essentially soft targets on which to vent political frustration. To target individual Israelis, who bear no responsibility for the policies of the Sharon government and may even actively oppose them, is both unjustifiable and politically dangerous. We would ask those who would lend support to such actions: consider very carefully the signals that are being sent out, however inadvertently, given that in Europe we are already witnessing physical attacks on Jewish people, as well as synagogues and cemeteries, by Arab youth who view this as a legitimate expression of solidarity with the Palestinians. Nothing must be done that lends the slightest legitimacy to such backward sentiments.

The action against the two academics in any case

treats Zionism as if it was simply a question of personal morality and shows no understanding of the complex struggle against a political tendency whose ascendancy was rooted in a retrograde response to the tragic experience of European Jewry. It also shows no understanding of what is required for a successful struggle against the Israeli state, which functions as an armed garrison of US imperialism in the Middle East.

In this respect, one might ask, why is the assertion of collective guilt applicable only to Israeli citizens? US and British imperialism have a historic record of brutal crimes against the oppressed peoples of the world far worse than Israel. They are both currently involved in frequent bombing sorties in Afghanistan and Iraq, and are planning to wage war once again against the people of that long-suffering country. Moreover, every politically literate person is well aware that behind Sharon's war machine stands the Bush administration and the Blair Labour government. So why not call for a boycott of British and American academics? To raise the question serves to illustrate the undemocratic character of the action taken against the two Israeli intellectuals. If such a boycott had been called, one can only imagine the indignant response of many of those who have mistakenly appended their signature to the present petition.

The *World Socialist Web Site* rejects all attempts to attribute to the Israeli people collective responsibility for the subjugation of the Palestinians. Such accusations of national guilt and the tactics that flow from them are deeply reactionary in every instance.

Israel, like the US, Britain and every country, is deeply divided by social and class antagonisms. These already find political expression in oppositional sentiment towards the Zionist establishment and its war crimes, and which must take on greater dimensions in future. To reject this is to deny any possibility of convincing Jewish workers and academics of a political alternative to Zionism, hence the resort by the supporters of the boycott to ostracism and coercion.

The advocates of the boycott cite the example of the Anti-Apartheid Movement's campaign against South Africa as their historical precedent. This deserves an answer. There is a significant difference between advocating disinvestment and refusing to entertain or otherwise appear on a public platform in South Africa, both of which are legitimate forms of political

opposition to apartheid, and blacklisting and expelling Israeli academics from Britain. It would be another thing entirely if a British academic chose to turn down an offer to lecture at an Israeli university as a matter of personal conscience—though we would ask them to consider the alternative of using the lectern as a platform to publicly attack the policies of the Israeli government.

We are strongly in favour of properly considered efforts to mobilise opposition to the ongoing persecution of the Palestinians. Protest actions, such as calls to block the movement of military equipment and other measures to isolate the Sharon government, should be directed against those who are guilty of the crimes being perpetrated on the West Bank and Gaza Strip and conceived of as part of a broader political struggle directed against the Bush administration and the Blair government.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has a principled record of opposition to Zionism, but we do so based on the programme of socialist internationalism and through the methods of the class struggle. We seek to convince Israeli workers and intellectuals that they should reject a false political perspective and ideology: that a secure and prosperous future for the Jewish people lies not in the militaristic policies advocated by Ariel Sharon, but through the creation of an egalitarian society for Arabs and Jews alike—a United Socialist States of the Middle East. In the struggle against Zionism, only those methods are permissible which facilitate the independent political mobilisation of the working class and the unity of Arab and Jewish workers against their common enemy.



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