

An exchange of letters on the boycott of Israeli academics

17 July 2002

The World Socialist Web Site on July 12 published the statement “Against the boycott of Israeli academics,” opposing a boycott being organized by liberal and radical academics in the US. The WSWS statement has provoked an outpouring of correspondence, both pro and con, on the issue. Below we are publishing one of the letters attacking the position of the WSWS followed by a reply by Editorial Board members David North and Bill Vann.

To the editor:

I am saddened to see WSWS take such an openly Zionist stance against the boycott.

Where is the outrage at the censorship of Palestinian academics in America? You guys are Zionist hypocrites masquerading [sic] as socialists.

Let me preface this by the statement that I am Jewish, speak Hebrew, had a Bar Mitzvah, was president of my university’s Hillel chapter, and have traveled extensively throughout Israel.

Opposing a boycott because it might make the worthless Israeli left even more limp is the worst opportunistic argument you could make.

Peace Now is a Zionist organization opposed to one-person, one-vote.

Israel is not a legitimate nation by any Marxist definition; it is a colonial state pure and simple.

Israel is so illegitimate that attaining the level of South African apartheid would be an advance from its present virulence.

The bulk of its citizenry are very recent (since 1967) transplants from the US, UK, France and Russia; it enjoys no organic historical economic existence, its economic life is a completely fabricated result of US military and indirect aid. Its language is an artificial reconstruction of a long-dead one, the only benefit of which might be the easier learning of its cousin Semitic language—Arabic.

All of its citizens are registered members of its armed forces; therefore they are all legitimate military, economic, cultural, academic targets in a civil war.

Israel is a theocracy combined with a racist law of return which guarantees even me the right to displace others solely based on my Bar Mitzvah.

Brilliant Marxist Jewish academics like Steven Rose should be saluted for their honesty and courage.

Marxist Jews do not appreciate your Christian guilt complex for the Holocaust when translated into obsequious support of Israel.

The founders of Israel itself opposed saving over a million Jews when offered the chance by Eichman (read Tom Segev’s *The Seventh Million*.)

Israel is indeed a puppet of the US and UK, but it is a key pillar in global imperialism.

Who is making history there, the Jewish left or the Arab masses?

The Israeli left is a pro-apartheid left.

Those Israelis who are willing to consider themselves to be Arabs and to fight for a unified Arab democratic republic have any right or hope of remaining in the state likely to result from the growing crisis.

Professors who continue to be employed by the state of Israel should not be welcomed in any democratic university. If they don’t like it, if you

don’t like it, then they should choose to resign one of their posts.

At the very least, the fact that they are paid agents of the Israeli government should be clearly acknowledged so that their views can be put into the proper perspective.

Once again, I repeat: Peace Now is a Zionist organization bent on institutionalizing Israeli apartheid. Your citing it in your editorial makes me want to vomit.

JB

* * *

Dear JB:

The statement issued by the *World Socialist Web Site* opposing the international campaign for a boycott of Israeli academics has provoked a large amount of correspondence, both pro and con. Your letter, however, stands out both for its dishonesty and its distillation of the retrograde moods underlying this campaign.

You preface your message by telling us that you are “Jewish, speak Hebrew, had a Bar Mitzvah, was president of my university’s Hillel chapter and have traveled extensively throughout Israel.” To this, we can only reply, “Mazel Tov!”

These are not political arguments, nor do they legitimize a deceitful twisting of the WSWS statement to portray us as “Zionist hypocrites masquerading as socialists” or attribute our perspective to a “Christian guilt complex for the Holocaust.”

The International Committee of the Fourth International does not need a lecture from you or anyone else on the struggle against Zionism, the defense of the Palestinian people or the character of the Israeli state. The material posted on the WSWS over the past four years speaks for itself. But more than that, the Trotskyist movement has a principled record of opposing Zionism that spans decades, reaching back to well before the founding of the Israeli state itself.

This standpoint is based neither upon “guilt” nor the type of outraged liberalism expressed in the boycott campaign. It proceeds from the interests of the working class, both Arab and Jewish, and the struggle for international socialism. Our perspective is both historical and internationalist, two qualities that are utterly absent from your approach.

Your letter ignores completely the incident that gave rise to the WSWS statement—the dismissal as an act of compliance with the boycott of two Israeli scholars—Gideon Toury and Miriam Schlesinger—by an Egyptian-born British professor, who is also co-owner of the publishing company that employed them.

You tell us what basis there is in Marxism for supporting the owner of a publishing business venting her frustration over the reactionary policies of a foreign state by firing two of her employees because they happen to be of that nationality.

During the Second World War, Trotskyists in Nazi-occupied France published a German-language newspaper, *Arbeiter und Soldat*, which was circulated among Germans wearing the uniform of the fascist state that was exterminating millions. They recognized the necessity to forge unity with these working class soldiers. Several of them—both French workers

and German soldiers—lost their lives in this heroic demonstration of internationalism.

This internationalist outlook and practice is the essential foundation of the Trotskyist movement and of Marxism itself. It is diametrically opposed to the demoralized and fundamentally nationalist outlook expressed by the firing of the two Israeli academics and by the entire content of your letter.

There is a really extraordinary level of cowardice and hypocrisy involved in the boycott campaign. You ignore the question we raise about why one should impose this sanction only against Israeli academics. You yourself describe Israel as a “puppet of the US and UK,” so why not refuse any dealings with American and British academics and call for them to be fired as well?

Are American or British academics any less “paid agents” of their governments than their Israeli counterparts? Do you have some evidence that they are more courageous or self-sacrificing? Why not ask all of them to resign from institutions that undoubtedly contribute to the US and British war machines, not to mention that of Israel itself?

For that matter, why just direct the action against professors? As others have pointed out, a boycott that sought to have an economic impact on Israel might better target Israeli-developed software, Intel computers or Microsoft products produced with the aid of Israeli research. But of course, that might affect the portfolios of some boycotters. Firing a few Israeli scholars is a no-cost method of expressing one’s “solidarity.”

Why has the opposition of the WWSW to the boycott campaign evoked such vitriol from yourself and others, to the extent that you find it necessary to blackguard us by grossly distorting our position? We believe this reaction is fundamentally that of a petty-bourgeois “left” milieu which is trying to pass itself off as the leadership of the anti-imperialist struggle. We say emphatically that it is not. Moreover, to the extent that the moral outrage of this milieu is harnessed to a reactionary instrument like an intellectual blockade, it has no progressive content whatsoever.

Israel, you tell us, “is not a legitimate nation by any Marxist definition; it is a colonial state pure and simple.” The truth, as Oscar Wilde once noted, is “never pure and rarely simple.”

Israel’s creation coincided with the decolonization process in the Middle East, Africa and other areas where the empires of Britain, France and lesser European powers held sway. Which of the new nations created during this period were “legitimate ... by any Marxist definition?” Virtually all of them were established within the boundaries drawn by the old colonial powers. They essentially involved transferring the levers of power from the old European colonialists to a native bourgeoisie that acted as imperialism’s agent.

The ability of Zionism to win mass support for its reactionary nationalist project of creating a Jewish state in Palestine is bound up with the betrayal of the European workers’ movement at the hands of Stalinism, paving the way to the Second World War and the Holocaust. Until then, far larger numbers of European Jews looked to socialism than to Zionism as the means for achieving equality.

What you write about the Zionists’ indifference to the fate of European Jewry—outside of its emigration to Palestine—is, of course, true. But socialists do not share this indifference, nor can they ignore the effect of this tragic history on the consciousness of millions.

We still live with the consequences of these events today. You characterize the Israeli left as “worthless” and “limp.” Is this opposed, presumably, to the European left or the left in the US, which have shown great vitality? The crisis of leadership and perspective that exists in the Israeli working class is not very different from that which exists in other parts of the world.

It is conditioned by the same international developments, particularly the protracted crimes of Stalinism culminating in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It has been exacerbated by those revisionist movements that

adapted themselves to Stalinism and bourgeois nationalism, endowing these historically bankrupt tendencies with revolutionary potential. History has already passed judgment on that prognosis.

Moreover, the disorientation that exists in Israel is not unrelated to the degeneration of the secular nationalist and left tendencies in the Arab world itself, and the growth of backward theocratic and xenophobic movements.

All Israelis, because of military registration, “are legitimate military, economic, cultural, academic targets in a civil war,” you tell us. On this basis, one would presumably support the suicide bombings organized by Hamas and similar organizations.

There is a point where the perspective behind these terrorist attacks and the outlook underlying the academic boycott intersect. Both are oblivious to the development of the political consciousness of the Israeli working class and intellectuals. Both reject the possibility of developing an independent revolutionary socialist movement, based on this class. And both are ultimately aimed not at a fundamental transformation of society, but rather at pressuring the United States and the Israeli regime to alter their policies.

Unlike you, we do not write off the Israeli workers, youth and intellectuals as one big lost cause. Our opposition to the boycott tactic is based on its effect on the consciousness of these social layers. As we said in our statement: “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.”

Obviously, for someone who sees Israel workers merely as “military targets” this is not a concern. But for those convinced that the ideals of socialism can win a mass audience and overcome the influence of Zionism, it is paramount.

“Who is to make history there, the Jewish left or the Arab masses?” you ask. You go on to tell us that only those Israelis “who are willing to consider themselves Arabs and to fight for a unified Arab democratic republic have any right or hope of remaining in the state likely to result from the growing crisis.”

The alternatives you present are entirely false. History will be made neither by “the Jewish left” nor the “Arab masses.” The first category is a subjective one, consisting of a small and confused minority, while the second is composed of widely disparate and antagonistic elements. The international working class will make history, once it is armed with a socialist and internationalist perspective and program.

As for the project of creating “a unified Arab democratic republic,” history has shown that the struggle for socialism is far more feasible. Where has such a state emerged and what qualities does the Palestinian bourgeoisie possess that suggest that it could give birth to such an entity?

We do not adapt ourselves to the politics of Arafat, much less to those of Hamas. The creation of a new nation state in which the Palestinian bourgeoisie exerts its control will be neither democratic nor socialist.

At the beginning of the last century, Marxists supported the demand for “self-determination” of oppressed peoples with the aim of creating the best conditions for winning the confidence of the workers within the oppressed nation and uniting them with the working class of the oppressor nation in the common struggle for socialism.

Decades after the end of colonial rule and the creation of formally independent nation states, it can be stated unequivocally that nowhere has the emergence of these new states put an end to oppression. Any Palestinian state, whether created on the Bantustan-like parcels envisioned by Israel’s rulers, or even on the full territory of pre-1948 Palestine would be riven by class divisions and inequality.

What your world view excludes—and this is true of the boycott perspective as a whole—is the working class, Arab and Jewish, which alone can carry out a genuinely progressive transformation of the Middle

East.

The task is not to convince the Israelis to consider themselves Arabs (some of them are Arabs, by the way) any more than it is to get the Palestinians to convert to Judaism. It is to get both to consider themselves socialists and internationalists and to understand that the overthrow of the Israeli state and the defeat of imperialism in the Middle East are the responsibility of Jewish and Arab workers alike.

One last point. You suggest that the WSWS is in political agreement with Peace Now because we pointed out that one of the fired Israeli academics was an activist in this organization, as well as a former chairperson of Amnesty International.

“Peace Now is a Zionist organization bent on institutionalizing Israeli apartheid,” you write. “Your citing it in your editorial makes me want to vomit.”

This again is an unfounded political slander based on a willful distortion of the statement we posted.

While we have nothing in common with Peace Now, a tendency that identifies with Zionism and a “two-state” solution to the crisis, it should be noted that this movement has demanded an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories and the negotiation of peace with the Palestinians, the very aims touted by the boycott organizers.

What do the initiators of the academic boycott petition, whom you describe as “brilliant Marxist Jewish academics,” have to say? In a July 15 letter to the *Guardian*, Steven and Hillary Rose write that “every rational person knows that the only prospect of a just and lasting peace lies in Israel’s recognition of the legitimacy of a Palestinian state and the Arab world’s acceptance of a secure Israel behind its 1967 borders.” This formulation would appear nearly identical to the perspective of Peace Now.

It is not a perspective that our movement shares. We do not believe that a new peace agreement and the carving out of another state will resolve the fundamental problems that have given rise to the wave of repression and violence that is engulfing both the Palestinians and the Israelis. For workers on both sides of the “green line,” a secure future and a society based on egalitarian and democratic principles is possible only through the struggle for a United Socialist States of the Middle East.

Sincerely,

David North and Bill Vann



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact