

WSWS replies to letters on boycott of Israeli academics

Bill Vann
30 July 2002

The WSWS posts below a reply by Bill Vann to the large volume of correspondence we have received regarding our July 12 statement “Against the boycott of Israeli academics”. Vann’s reply is followed by a representative selection of the letters we have received from readers on the issue.

The July 12 statement was written in response to the call initiated by British Professor Steven Rose for European academics to cut off all contact with their Israeli counterparts as a means of pressuring the Israeli government to end its reoccupation of the West Bank and Gaza and resume negotiations with the Palestinian Authority.

The boycott’s implementation involved the firing of two Israeli academics—professors Gideon Toury of Tel Aviv University and Miriam Schlesinger of Bar-Illan University—by the British publisher of the journals Translator and Translation Studies Abstract.

The WSWS’ initial statement was followed on July 17 by “An exchange of letters on the boycott of Israeli academics”, in which we responded to some of the arguments in favor of the boycott submitted by one reader.

Since then, we have received further submissions responding both to our July 12 statement and the July 17 exchange. The issues in dispute go well beyond immediate tactics in relation to the Middle East. They highlight fundamental differences between Marxism and what is generally regarded as “left” or “radical” currents in their respective approaches to historical, theoretical and political questions facing the international workers’ movement.

As we made clear in the original statement, the WSWS opposes actions that victimize people based solely upon their nationality and is against the attempt to impose an international quarantine against individual Israeli scholars, i.e., barring them from conferences, publications and research collaboration.

“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,” we wrote.

According to some of our readers, concern for the fate of a relative handful of Israeli intellectuals is beside the point, given the horrific conditions confronting millions of people in the occupied territories daily. This line of argumentation could be used—and has been—to justify virtually any action that is ostensibly directed against the Israeli state, from the blacklisting of Israeli professors to suicide bombings in working class areas of Tel Aviv.

Outrage over the atrocities carried out by the Israeli Defense Force does not obviate the need to carefully consider the political content of the means of resistance. We reject those methods that disorient the working class or advance the conception that a progressive transformation of society can be achieved without the independent and revolutionary mobilization of that class.

We recognize the legitimacy of various forms of protest against the Israeli onslaught on the Palestinian people, including the demand for an

end to all aid to Israel and the call for disinvestment. But the fundamental question from our standpoint is how these demands serve to develop the socialist consciousness of the working class—both Jewish and Arab—in Israel and the occupied territories, and further the international unity of the working class.

Some of the letters received by the WSWS cynically distort our position, portraying it as support for Zionism and indifference to the oppression of the Palestinian people. Such dishonest allegations have their source among those petty-bourgeois “left” protest organizations that see the academic boycott as a means of expanding their influence, and are therefore livid at our opposition.

Other writers are clearly horrified by the events that have transpired in the occupied territories—the lockdown of millions in their homes, the killing of innocent civilians and the devastation of what little existed of a Palestinian infrastructure—and therefore question why anyone would oppose any action taken in protest against the crimes of the Zionist regime.

What characterizes many, however, is a demoralized approach that essentially rejects any possibility of a struggle against Zionism and the Israeli state that is based on the working class and internationalism. Some correspondents insist that there exists no Israeli working class; others declare that the very concept of uniting Arab and Jewish workers is unrealistic because of the sharp divisions, social and political, between them.

As a “united working class doesn’t exist as a political institution” today, some other means must be found to effect a progressive transformation of the Middle East and end the suffering of the Palestinian masses.

Essentially, this means an adaptation to bourgeois nationalism. The boycott itself is directed toward effecting what is known as the “two-state” solution: a negotiated settlement that would bring about a formally independent Palestinian state on the territories of the West Bank and Gaza.

The Palestinian masses, we are told, will be won to socialism only to the extent that they witness socialists all over the world carrying acts of solidarity with the existing Palestinian leaderships. How can we not support the “armed struggle,” one reader demands, when it is backed not only by Hamas, but also sections of Fatah and the formerly pro-Stalinist Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine?

We do not believe that the struggle against the oppression of the Palestinian people will find a solution in the creation of a Palestinian mini-state. For more than half a century, the national question has appeared to many to be the axis of the Middle East conflict. But masses of people have passed through bitter experiences with the existing nationalist movements, all of which have proven politically bankrupt. Everywhere, history has demonstrated the organic incapacity of the national bourgeoisie to establish genuine independence from imperialism or lay the foundations for economic development capable of improving the lot of the masses of workers and oppressed.

The backing for suicide bombings, the last gasp of the once romanticized “armed struggle,” is a demonstration of the political dead-end reached by these nationalist movements. While desperate conditions and decades of oppression—not to mention the failure of the national project itself—have tragically created a layer of young Palestinians prepared to give their lives in this fashion, the politics of those who promote this practice are thoroughly reactionary.

Those who try to legitimize such actions by citing the far greater crimes of the Israeli state are not striving to establish the unity of the Arab and Israeli workers in a common struggle against the Arab and Israeli ruling elites and against capitalism. They are pursuing entirely different ends.

Israel is a capitalist state, which means it is founded on the exploitation of the working class. While characterizing these workers as “colonialists” may prove satisfying for those venting frustration and moral outrage, it does not provide the basis for an objective or revolutionary perspective.

The conditions that presently exist in Israel are the product of complex historical developments. The lack of a socialist consciousness among the Israeli workers is the product of the betrayal of the international working class by Stalinism, Social Democracy and, of course, the bourgeois nationalist movements in the Arab world as well.

For decades a substantial portion of the Jewish immigration to Israel has come from what was the Soviet Union, sparked first by the reactionary policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy and then by the abysmal conditions created by the collapse of the USSR.

Despite the considerable problems in the development of consciousness among the Israeli workers, there exists enormous opposition within Israel to Sharon and the ongoing war against the Palestinians. Repeated polls have shown a substantial majority favoring the abandonment of the settlements and the withdrawal of all troops from Gaza and the West Bank.

These popular sentiments can find a progressive way forward only to the extent that socialists fight consistently for an internationalist position, and do not surrender to the frustration of the moment. This is the opposite approach to the type of opportunistic politics that begin with what is possible “right now,” given what is perceived to be the existing consciousness of the working class.

The only foundation upon which a real and lasting peace can be created in the region is the struggle to unite workers of all nationalities and religions in the establishment of the United Socialist States of the Middle East as part of the world socialist revolution. Promoting illusions in the capacity of the Palestinian bourgeoisie to realize the democratic and social aspirations of the masses will not further that task. Nor will it be advanced by backing a “two-state” solution as a “practical” goal. Any deal reached between the Israeli regime and the existing Palestinian leadership will only deepen the class oppression of workers on both sides of the “green line.”

A number of readers have asked what was the position of our movement during the campaigns for disinvestment and for a boycott of South Africa in the 1980s. We did not support the call to blacklist individual South African scholars, some of whom faced repression and retaliation for their opposition to apartheid.

While backing the demand for an economic embargo against the regime, we warned during that period that the politics of those leading the campaign for boycott and disinvestment served to subordinate the struggle against apartheid to winning the support of the major corporations and the politicians of the ruling parties in Europe and America. A significant section of big business viewed apartheid as irrational from the standpoint of its own interests, and supported the transition to what it foresaw as a more economical and potentially profitable form of rule. Our movement insisted on the necessity of the working class mobilizing its independent strength in support of the South African workers, including through blocking arms and other shipments.

Those who cite South Africa as a model for the boycott of Israeli academics don't bother themselves with the nationalist and reformist politics that underlay the boycott campaign against apartheid, nor on what the supposed “success” in South Africa has actually produced. With the involvement of not only academia, but also the multinational banks, corporations and imperialist governments, the legal framework of apartheid was done away with and a new regime led by the African National Congress brought to power. Economic power shifted only slightly, and mainly toward a tighter grip by international finance capital.

Eight years later, the gulf of inequality between the poor and the wealthy is as great or greater than under white minority rule, though a slight redistribution has taken place to a thin layer of blacks brought into government and onto corporate boards. For the broad masses, conditions grow increasingly desperate, with nearly one third of the population unemployed and a quarter infected with the HIV virus. While these conditions are commonly referred to as the “legacy of apartheid,” they are also the legacy of a power transfer that kept capitalism intact, a transition that was realized in part through the boycott campaign.

None of those opposing our statement answered the question of why the boycott should be limited to just Israeli academics. Why should it not include US and British academics, given that Washington and London have long supplied the money, bombs and bullets used to oppress and kill Palestinians, and that both governments are responsible for crimes even worse than those carried out by Israel? Some accused us of “relativizing” the Israeli atrocities, or argued that it was easier to boycott Israel than the US because of the latter's size and its ubiquitous role in the world market.

But, in point of fact, the Israeli academic is no worse than his counterparts in other parts of the world. How many voices of protest have been heard within the US academy against the Bush administration's worldwide militarism, the war crimes in Afghanistan, the coming war against Iraq or the suppression of democratic rights at home?

In the end, some of the British and other European academics who promoted this campaign, as well as their US colleagues who support it, may see themselves playing some role in the forging of a Middle East peace. Whatever their intentions, to the extent that they realize this aspiration outside of a genuine mobilization of the working class, they will be acting not independently, but as emissaries of their governments, and will be representing the interests of their national ruling elites in reshaping the Middle East to meet the needs of capital.

It is our belief that intellectuals and academics can play a progressive role in the transformation of society only to the extent that they subordinate themselves to the building of a revolutionary workers' movement based on the program of international socialism. The present boycott campaign runs counter to that aim.

Bill Vann

For the WSWS editorial board

Dearest comrades,

I've been subscribing to your Web site for a very short time, yet the impression it has made on me is simply tremendous... all I can say is, WELL DONE AND KEEP UP THE BRILLIANT WORK!! I only wish I'd found out about the WSWS a lot sooner... I've studied and followed Marxist-socialist theory and alternative media for some time; your site is truly profound in its enlightened worldly view and depth of thought and knowledge... quite amazing!

Anyway, just thought I'd drop you a note to say “congratulations” and don't EVER give up the good fight, because sources such as yours are infinitely invaluable, both to the ignorant masses and informed intellectuals everywhere...

Peace and good wishes,

MD

PS: You were 100 percent CORRECT to oppose the boycott of Israeli academics. Socialism cannot expect to win the world's people if its

apparent adherents advocate such racist attitudes and support further divisions between nations and nationalities. The integrity displayed by the writers/editors of the WSWs in relation to this and other news stories is truly inspiring and highly impressive. Keep it up!

22 July 2002

Hello,

I just wanted to drop you a line to say I ran into your essay on the Israeli academic boycott and it was the most articulate and clear-minded article I've seen regarding policy towards Israel. I find the boycott to be in bad taste because it is hypocritical for us to not scrutinize and alienate ALL countries that are so inhumane—and I could think of 20 countries off the top of my head that fit this bill.

I saw the petition supporting the boycott and noticed there were a lot of Arab names on it. I could only imagine that if the boycott were against Saudi Arabia (which certainly is as unjust and discriminatory as Israel) they would not only have refused to sign it, but called it "anti-Muslim" and "anti-Arab." I do feel angry that Israelis are living very well at the expense of the Palestinians. But while protesting this, I remember that I too live well at the expense of other people. Most of these overly self-righteous people refuse to acknowledge this. L.

21 July 2002

Dear Sir:

I am basically against dealing with my enemies at all. I think this is human nature. When the US decided to boycott Iraq and other nations, it did so knowing the harm it did ubiquitously to the innocent and its enemies. Although this is wrong, I now want to see the complete annihilation of the state of Israel and agree wholeheartedly with Bernard Baruch's sentiments to Franklin Roosevelt when the Zionists pushed for his support back in 1944 and earlier. The state was put there over his objections anyway, and it has proven him correct over and over. The sympathies or concerns for the indigenous population were never a consideration for those that wanted this state, and today this is translated in atrocities day in and day out.

Collective guilt has been the name of the game of the holocaust Zionists, who have waged war against the goy lo these many years. These same people have collectively demonized the Arab and caused a war of unprecedented magnitude and brought shame on the US for this folly. The state of Israel and the US are two criminals that should not be allowed the company or welfare of the world at large.

FS

18 July 2002

Dear Editors: While JB's letter was heated and bare-knuckled, it landed many accurate punches, while your prolix retort was sadly disappointing. Let me make only one point, small but indicative of the phony outrage being generated over this incident, in which you apparently share—your describing it as involving the "sacking of employees." Come, come, surely you know how academic journals work. An editor will invite colleagues in the field to join the editorial board, thus to provide an imprimatur of approval and standing by their unpaid association with the journal. Professor Baker was being consistent as a supporter of a boycott of Israeli academia in requesting the two Israelis voluntarily to disassociate themselves from her journal (and note, please, that she is its publisher as well as editor). The blame should lie on them for their graceless refusal to step down, that refusal expressing Israeli nationalism rather than academic dignity. Professor Baker sets an example of brave consistency, and, from that example, wider boycotts of the wicked Israeli government and its overwhelmingly complicit Jewish citizenry may be encouraged. Sincerely

NM

18 July 2002

Dear Editor,

I have read "An exchange of letters on the boycott of Israeli academics" from 17 July, 2002, and found a striking similarity in expression of reader JB with another protesting reader ML, as recorded in "Answers to a radical numbskull: once more on the gulf between Marxism and protest politics" from 12 April, 2000, by Patrick Martin. Namely, they are both about to start vomiting at the end of their letters. Reader ML wrote: "You guys make me want to throw up!" And JB: "Your citing it in your editorial makes me want to vomit."

The reason these middle class radicals and petty-bourgeois "lefts" always need so much to vomit in the last sentences of their letters is, I think, entirely in the nature of their ideological diet. They are obviously consuming too much of high caloric but low quality politics—all kinds of empty slogans with too little substantial ingredients and scientific basis, and all that uncooked and mixed together.

So it is no wonder that there is such an outburst of angry logorrhea, accompanied by disorder in the stomach. The emptiness of their argument compels them to shout and vomit, in order to hide the hollowness of their position and laziness to read and develop their knowledge. And, of course, to escape an excellent logical question raised by the WSWs' response: why one should impose this sanction only against Israeli academics, and not against US and UK academics who would, according to their logic, be even worse villains? So really: "Why not refuse any dealings with American and British academics and call for them to be fired as well?" ...

Anyway, I wish to both JB and ML pleasure in reading the WSWs, and hope that as a result we will be able one day to welcome them to the WSWs and the Fourth International, who are, I believe, open to everyone who by honest endeavor and self-cultivation sincerely wants to contribute to accomplishing the historical tasks of the international working class.

DP

Beijing, China

18 July 2002

Dear WSWs Editors, I regularly read articles on the WSWs Web site and had previously found them consistently well-reasoned and of an admirably high standard. In general, I would congratulate and recommend your efforts and site. However, I was much surprised and not a little dismayed to read today your reaction to the "University Professors Call for European Boycott of Research and Cultural Links with Israel." This piece is, in my opinion, a very sad remove from your normally high standard of analysis, and marks an absolute low in all that you have published to date. It is, indeed, a tissue of misrepresentation, innuendo and snide insinuation of political immaturity and base motives on the part of those adopting an honorable political position, and smacks overall of jealousy and/or ideological calculation...

[The Israeli academics] were not "thrown out of their positions"—they very much continue working at their respective institutions—but their contributions to an academic paper at UMIST were refused in the sense of the proposed academic boycott, solely as a means of exerting pressure on Israel to respect International Law. This may be an unpleasant and even humiliating experience for them personally, but the tactic is legitimate and the ultimate solution lies in the hands of the Israeli State... Yes, "one can seriously argue that such methods will help create a receptive audience for anti-Zionist sentiment in Israel!" First of all, at least 1/4 of the Israeli population is already decidedly anti-Zionist—why should they not be strengthened by this action, as the blacks were in Apartheid SA?...

You write: "By crudely equating Jewish academic institutions with the Israeli state and its crimes, the academic boycott plays directly into the hands of Zionist ideologues." This supposed equation only happened inside the WSWs author's own mind: The blockade is not specifically against "Jewish" academic institutions (if such a thing even exists), but against all Israeli academic bodies, of which non-Jewish persons may (still) be part. The WSWs author seems here to himself fall prey to one of the central lies of Zionism, namely: Zionism = Jewish State = Jewish

People = Judaism... "A correct course of action ... would be the very opposite of such a boycott: to strive for maximum engagement with their Israeli and Arab counterparts," you write. Maximum engagement, i.e., subvention and support of both academic and armed Israeli institutions, has been tried by the EU (particularly Britain, Germany and France) for decades—the political results engendered being painfully obvious—while the likelihood of such favours being extended to any "Arab counterparts" are well below absolute zero. If this action could be converted or extended to primarily include military and weapons transfers, it would be so much the better—at the moment it is a start in the right direction. And also, why was such "maximum engagement" not used in the case of SA? If I remember correctly (and I do), then "maximum DIS-engagement" was very much the motto of the day! The work produced by Israeli academics is NOT "subject to a moral censor"—it stands for itself and may be debated after the resolution of the urgent political problem at hand—avoiding a major genocidal war in the Middle East. The academics will have more time free for "independent thought," as they won't have to travel to international conferences at the expense of the EU, a body whose attempts at mediation are regularly spurned by their government. This should be food for thought with time for digestion... Yours sincerely,

OR

18 July 2002

Hi,

I have followed your Web site for a while now. It has a consistently high standard of writing, and your principles and morality are always evident—even though I may sometimes not agree with you.

Your article against the boycott again shows morality and principles, along with refined and honest analysis. At last anti-imperialists of real humanity and decency. For some time I have veered back towards a defensive-aggressive position of my people, and still do support any military action confined to eliminating terrorist leaders or activists.

However, your standards show that, despite what I have thought, the Fourth International and its principles are not dead, far less irrelevant.

Best Wishes,

DL

17 July 2002

I happen to agree with the author of the letter you printed in today's newsletter. I would like to hear your definition of "working class". The ISRAELI JEWISH "working class" is extremely small and there are hardly any Ashkenazi Jews in it. So how is this tiny group of people supposed to rise up and cause the monolithic state, which is funded by foreign powers, to effect the changes you support? Do you really consider university professors part of the "working class"????!! Israel is a thoroughly bourgeois state.

Furthermore, it is different from all the other states in the Middle East in that it was formed as a proxy state when the colonialists had to leave in the 1920-50s. It did not exist beforehand. Most Israelis came from the colonialists' home countries. Most of the "settlers" in the occupied territories are Americans. How does this figure into your analysis? I think over time your analysis is going to change. I don't want to get your back up—I rely on your newsletter for news that is not allowed in the media here in the US—but, as a working class intellectual myself, I think you're in reaction to this letter and haven't taken the time to think through your analysis of the situation as completely as you might. The author of the letter made a very pertinent point: That every citizen is an actual or potential member of the military (unless they have the courage to refuse, in which case they are no longer allowed most of the rights given "all" Jewish Israeli citizens). How do you fit this into your political analysis of class warfare? I am really curious about this. In the end, I don't think relying solely on political ideology will provide an answer. It hasn't in the past. The issue is people—their lives, their rights, their aspirations. And 99.9% of the Israeli population is collaborating with an extremely

repressive regime...

TS

17 July 2002

Dear Editor, I strongly disagree with your stance concerning the boycott of Israeli academics. Israeli academics have had 54 years of freedom and full access to both Israel itself and all the rest of the world. Palestinians have not. There is a horrible humanitarian crisis going on in the Middle East and it has been going on for a very long time, with Israeli policies denying the Palestinians even basic human rights. Frills that we usually call freedom, such as the ability to come and go as you please, are taken for granted by most people... but not by the Palestinians, because the Palestinians are subject to Israel's punitive checkpoints, curfews and closures. In addition, as a Palestinian if you manage to leave your house it might be permanently occupied by Israelis when you return. Stay and it might be bombed or bulldozed. Plant a tree and it might be uprooted. Build a water tank (a cistern because Israel refuses to let your village have water) and the IDF can use it for target practice, letting all the precious water drain into the rubble and ruin all around. Sign up for a class at the local university, but good luck getting there. Risk long imprisonment and torture by Israel merely because you are a Palestinian male over the age of 15. Leave the country and you might not be allowed to return to your family and the place you were born, and your father was born, and his father and his father and his father. Stay and you might be maimed or killed in an extra-judicial targeted assassination... There are many pro-Israel academics writing and living in America. Some even use their elevated status at our Ivy League schools to call for collective punishment of the Palestinians, or ethnic cleansing of all Arabs from "the Holy Land," ideas I find rather abhorrent. But pro-Israel writers are allowed to pontificate on all kinds of cruelties and put forth all kinds of prejudices and propaganda. There are also many Jewish pro-Palestinian/pro human rights voices in America, trying desperately to be heard over the Zionist thunder that booms through most of our mainstream papers and news. The boycott of Israeli academics will not silence anyone, but it might help prod people who have had more than 54 years of freedom to apply their skills and energy to finding just solutions that respect the rights of everyone in the "Holy Land" not just a select few who happen to be Jewish... Sincerely,

ASA

15 July 2002

Dear Editor, As Israel continues its brutal attack in the West Bank with the aim of crushing the Palestinian people into submission to the Zionist apartheid "solution," the WSWS has chosen to attack those academics who, in the last few months, horrified by the Israeli brutality, have decided to act. The arguments you raise are quite commonly raised in the discussions of this issue from the right and from the "Zionist left" (and the academic boycott issue has indeed raised quite a furor in the Israeli academic community—in marked contrast to the deafening silence regarding Israeli crimes—and this fact alone testifies to its effectiveness in shaking up the complacency of the local academic elite). But it is discouraging to read these hollow arguments coming from a socialist group, attempting to ground them in supposedly Marxist principles. Palestine is today at the forefront of the anti-imperialist struggle, and the Palestinian people are facing a regional superpower backed by imperialism. The solidarity and support that the Palestinians receive from the international left will go a long way in determining whether the Palestinian masses and the masses throughout the Middle East turn to revolutionary socialism. Your statement against those academics who have taken a concrete step in opposition to Israeli crimes, coming at a time when a million Palestinians have been on curfew for three weeks, and when the threat of ethnic cleansing is looming, can only raise a wall of distrust towards revolutionary socialism when read by those facing imperialism in the Middle East... In the anti-imperialist struggle in

Palestine, the Israeli academy can hardly be regarded as a progressive force. As an institution, it is part and parcel of the Israeli system, with numerous connections to the Israeli military complex and political elite. While formally it preserves some independence from the state, this independence has never manifested itself in any type of opposition to the 35-year occupation of the West Bank and Gaza ...

Since the beginning of the Intifada on September 29, 2000, the vast majority of Israeli academics have reacted either in enthusiastic or passive support of the policies of the Israeli governments—a rude awakening for those of us who had believed that during the previous years some dent had been made by the post-Zionist intellectuals. A Jewish Israeli does not put him or herself in personal danger by protesting, and indeed since the beginning of the Intifada a small “radical left” has been protesting, but academics have not been flocking to join. Since many of the academics would like to regard themselves as “liberals,” the most convenient situation for them is a conspiracy of silence—if no one raises the demand that intellectuals take a stand, they can support the atrocities by ignoring them... Convincing the Israelis to break from the policies of their ruling elite is indeed a crucial goal. As explained above, university academics are much more closely enmeshed with this elite (and to this extent they are not “soft targets”) than the Israeli working class, and generally favor the maintenance of the status quo. It is thus more likely that they will break with the ruling elite if their progressive colleagues from abroad make known to them that their support for the crimes of the Israeli regime is unacceptable than if they send them a message of business-as-usual by continuing collaboration... 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? It should first be noted that the fact that other brutal crimes were and are committed throughout the world does not help the Palestinians suffering Israeli brutality at this moment one bit. Palestine is now one of the foci in the anti-imperialist struggle. This does not diminish the responsibility of combating other manifestations of imperialism, such as the looming attack on Iraq (which is not unconnected), but neither does the existence of other struggles imply that we can “relativize” the Zionist atrocities in order to justify inaction (in Israel a common line is “look what the US did in Afghanistan—we are no worse”). True, since the direct agent of these atrocities is a small client state, boycotts are easier to implement, just as it is easier to avoid buying Israeli products than American ones...

Of course the academic boycott is one limited initiative, but has already sparked debate in the aloof and self-absorbed Israeli academic community, which would rather play dumb. I do hope the day is near when workers in the US and Britain will block arms shipments to Israel, but until then there is no justification to attack the initiative by some academic workers to block an important weapon of the Zionist regime: the legitimacy accorded to Israeli racism. HK

14 July 2002

Dear editor, As a dissident Israeli, I would definitely approve a selective boycott of Israelis—not academics, who are most likely members of the anti-Sharon and anti-occupation camps, but Israeli sports groups, Israeli entertainers, etc. White South Africa was deeply hurt by being refused admission to international sports events and competitions, and by its entertainment groups being refused appearances abroad. It’s psychologically more effective than economic boycotts, which are sometimes counter-productive, as they hurt the victims of the regime rather than its leadership and supporters. The same principle must be applied here, otherwise, you will simply strengthen the Zionist canard that

all anti-Israel measures are driven by anti-Semitism. Best wishes, YL

14 July 2002

Dear editor,

The daily shelling, bombing and demolishing of all vital infrastructure of the territories of Palestine occupied in 1967 raised, finally, a kind of reaction from some concerned and progressive academics in the western countries—people who managed to live peacefully with the gloomy facts of the racist and colonialist nature of the state of Israel—that shows itself by ideology and practice—not only in the 1967 occupied territories, but in all different aspects of life.

The Israeli academy—which is, as the academy all over the world, a part of the state elite, and closely associated with the ruling classes—never manifested themselves as an opposition. The university institutions, and the academic organizations never raised their voices against the occupation, or even against the plight of schools and universities in the West Bank and Gaza during the first and the second Intifada.

Since the beginning of the ’80s, Israel’s board of higher education has prevented the foundation of a university that would teach in the Arabic language—a demand that was raised by the organizations of the Arab population in Israel. There was no voice from the Israeli academics raised in support of these demands. (At the same time, Arab students who studied in elementary and secondary schools in the Arabic language, and are obliged to study their higher education in the Hebrew language are denied support classes, at the very same time that Jewish immigrants to Israel got such classes for free) ...

Israeli academics don’t oppose racist and antidemocratic practices inside the walls of their institutions. Conferences and academic panels that deal with issues such as “the demographic problem” (the very fact that Arab residents and citizens do live inside the state of Israel) are completely legitimized. On the other hand, people who try to deal inside the Israeli universities with the crimes that were done to the Palestinian people, are persecuted (the most famous case is that of Teddy Katz, who wrote a M.A. thesis about the expulsion of the Arab residents from the village Tantoura during the 1948 war)...

Since the blow of the second Intifada, universities began to persecute left academics: nine lecturers from Haifa University were threatened with “internal trials” because they took part in a demonstration of the Arab student union that was banned by the university authorities; Dr. Illan Pappé, a prominent historian was almost expelled from the university accused ... of “offending his colleagues” because of his support for the boycott petition!...

You see equivalence between “Zionism” and “Judaism”. To interpret acts against Zionists and Zionist associations as “persecution as a result of one’s nationality, ethnicity or religion” is to suggest that “being colonialist/Zionist” is an inherent part of being a Jew... and it is an extreme anti-Semitic statement, that is backed by the Zionist movement’s ideology, as well as by other racist groups...

You suggest that the boycott will throw the Israelis deeper into the Zionist trap. Aren’t you thinking, for one moment, what a policy of “business as usual” will do to the Palestinians? Won’t the effect of such a policy be disappointment and disillusionment with the concept of “international solidarity,” “international revolutionary movement” etc., etc.? Aren’t those Palestinians, who number more than eight million, worth taking into consideration while planning your policy? ...

Do you think that the main effort in the struggle for the de-colonization of Asia and Africa was convincing the colonialists that it’s not nice to be oppressors? How many of the colonial and semi-colonial countries would have gained even the limited independence that they have today? Or should they wait until the revolution will win in the imperialistic countries, and then the victorious workers will give those poor guys from the Third World their independence and self determination...

Comradely,

IB

A Jewish graduate student from Haifa University

14 July 2002



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact