

The campaign for Israeli divestment and the charge of anti-Semitism

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In response to an escalation of Israeli aggression over the past year, a growing movement has emerged on American campuses opposing the oppression of the Palestinian population. Student groups have held numerous protests at universities throughout the country, and most recently a movement has gained force that calls for the divestment of university assets from Israeli corporations and US firms doing business with Israel.

These groups have faced a wave of denunciations, including baseless accusations of anti-Semitism and support for terrorism. University officials have joined hands with Zionist organizations and representatives of both political parties in slandering students and faculty who have joined the movement. The specter of anti-Semitism is raised as part of an effort to de-legitimize any opposition to the policies of the Israeli government and its principal supporter, the United States.

The role of university administrations in bolstering the charge of anti-Semitism against supporters of divestment is particularly noteworthy. It is an anti-democratic attempt to intimidate and silence the political views of a section of the student body. The ferocity of the denunciations indicates in its own way the validity of the criticisms: because the policies of the Israeli state cannot be seriously defended through political argument, its supporters attempt to stifle any discussion.

The divestment campaign was launched in 2000 in a speech given by University of Illinois professor Francis Boyle. He called for a similar movement to that which developed on university campuses against the South African apartheid system during the 1980s. Over the past two-and-a-half years, the campaign has grown to include campus groups around the country which have circulated petitions and held rallies.

Beginning in the fall of 2002, university administrators began a verbal assault on students and faculty supporting divestment. In September, Lawrence Summers, president of Harvard University and former treasury secretary under Bill Clinton, became the first major university official to come out in opposition when he labeled the campaigns “anti-Semitic in their effect, if not their intent.” Summers linked the divestment campaign to “disturbing evidence of an upturn in anti-Semitism globally,” suggesting that those who supported divestment had a similar outlook to people burning synagogues, painting swastikas and assaulting Jews.

While claiming that his remarks reflected only his personal opinions, the intent was clear: to use his position as university president to brand opposition to Israeli policies—opposition that has been widely voiced at Harvard—as anti-Semitic, and therefore illegitimate. He offered absolutely no evidence for this charge, instead employing the tactic of the amalgam, lumping together instances of anti-Semitism with a movement critical of the policies of the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon.

Anti-Semitism, like all forms of bigotry and discrimination, must be opposed unconditionally. But Summers’ attempt to place within this category the divestment movement amounts to political slander, smacking of McCarthyism.

Summers was not alone in denouncing the divestment movement. The

president of Columbia and former president of the University of Michigan, Lee Bollinger, called comparisons between Israel and apartheid South Africa “grotesque and offensive” and dismissed without consideration well-documented evidence that the Israeli army has perpetrated human rights abuses against Palestinians. At the University of Michigan, President Mary Sue Coleman also came out in opposition to the divestment campaign.

In October 2002, over 300 university presidents signed an advertisement published in the *New York Times* and several other newspapers. “In the past few months,” the advertisement declared, “students who are Jewish or supporters of Israel’s right to exist—Zionists—have received death threats and threats of violence.” It called for universities to end anti-Semitism and strive for “an intimidation-free campus.” Given the context within which it was published, the advertisement implicitly supported those charging pro-Palestinian groups with anti-Semitism.

In the background of these developments was the promotion of a slander campaign organized by the Campus Watch web site, which is run by right-wing commentator Daniel Pipes. The stated aim of the web site is to expose “anti-Semitism” on college campuses. As part of its operations, the site has accumulated a list of “academics identified as apologists for suicide bombings and militant Islam,” a list that includes virtually anyone critical of Israeli policy. [See “Latest attack on academic freedom: ‘Campus Watch’ web site witch-hunts Middle Eastern studies professors in the US”]

That university officials have spoken out so quickly and sharply against divestment is an indication of the degree of opposition within university administrations to legitimate criticisms of Israeli policy. The source of this opposition is multifaceted. On the one hand, there are undoubtedly financial issues involved, including direct pressure from Zionist groups and wealthy alumni as well as corporations linked to university endowments. To a large extent, major universities are subservient to such sources of funding.

On the other hand, there is the general right-wing and pro-Israel orientation of the entire political establishment, with which all the major university administrations have close ties. The administrators have had the backing of both the Democratic and Republican parties, which vie with each other in their unconditional support for the actions of the Israeli government. In response to the divestment campaign, Democratic California Governor Gray Davis stated during his reelection campaign last year, “As long as I am governor of this state, we will continue to stand side by side with our friends in Israel, both in business and in friendship.”

Zionist organizations have been in the forefront of attempts to equate the divestment campaign with anti-Semitism and terrorism. These tactics were clearly in evidence at a national conference held at the University of Michigan by supporters of the divestment campaign. The conference was hosted by the Students Allied for Freedom and Equality (SAFE) and held in October 2002. In the weeks preceding the conference, a slander campaign was waged that took on an extremely crude and provocative

character.

Typical of the rhetoric used, Joan Lowenstein, president of the Jewish Federation of Washtenaw County, warned at a rally held several days before the conference, “When a group of propagandists hijacks the University of Michigan and uses its good name to promote anti-Semitism, we are under attack.... Israel is under attack from terrorist groups that seek her destruction, and Jews are under attack even here.”

Raymond Tanter, a University of Michigan political science professor, followed up Lowenstein’s speech with one even more provocative. “It is also true,” he said, “that the great military capacity of the Israeli defense forces cannot deter terrorists. So what do you do? You destroy [the terrorists’ leaders]. You kill them.”

The mass media also chimed in, including the *Detroit News* editorial page editor Nolan Finley. In an opinion piece denouncing the Michigan conference, Finley indicated that it was not just anti-Zionist politics that he found objectionable. “The first [divestment] conference,” he noted, “was held at Berkeley, which, with UM and Harvard, forms the ideological axis that incubates bankrupt, neo-Marxist leftism.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* is by no means an uncritical supporter of the divestment movement. The demand for divestment is legitimate, but it is inadequate to the task of elaborating a perspective for the Palestinian masses as well as the Jewish working population. It leaves unchallenged the imperialist set-up in the Middle East and is generally uncritical of the Palestinian national movement and, in particular, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The orientation that it advocates in the United States is the futile project of placing pressure on American corporations and the Israeli government.

Our attitude is one of socialist internationalism: only on the basis of an international movement of the working class is it possible to elaborate a viable perspective for the struggle against Zionism. [See “Socialist Equality Party public meeting in Britain: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the dead-end of Zionism”] This implies a rejection of any attempt to reconcile the interests of the Palestinian population with the capitalist system and the nation-state framework to which it is wedded. In particular, we reject the “two-state solution,” which is the implicit political perspective of the divestment campaign.

The perspective advanced by the *World Socialist Web Site* is that of mobilizing the broad masses throughout the Middle East—including Jewish workers—in a struggle for a genuinely democratic and egalitarian society. That means the dismantling of the Zionist state—a theistic state based on the dispossession of the native population—as well as the bourgeois national regimes of the Arab world. We call for the establishment of a United Socialist States of the Middle East.

In spite of these political differences, we unconditionally defend divestment supporters from the attacks that have been leveled against them. The basic charge—that the divestment movement is anti-Semitic—is entirely unfounded and dishonest. No real evidence is presented to back up this bald assertion, which is contradicted by the statements of the divestment supporters and the fact that many of the most prominent members of the movement are themselves Jews.

When reasons are actually given for the charge, they do not stand up to examination. They all rest on a false equation: opposition to Israeli policies equals anti-Semitism. One of the arguments is that the campaign is anti-Semitic because it singles out Israel while ignoring the abuses of other countries, particularly those in the Arab world. This is a red herring. Palestinian and other students have every right to “single out” a country that receives more aid from the American government than any other, and illegally occupies Palestinian land and oppresses the inhabitants.

Moreover, Israel has singled itself out through its flagrant breach of international law and its brutal and repressive policies. The Israeli state continually carries out incursions into Palestinian cities, killing civilians and often youth, demolishing homes and agriculture and crippling the

Palestinian economy. The Israeli government discriminates against Arabs living within Israel, curtails political parties that support the Palestinians and denies non-Jews certain social services. Israel is in blatant violation of many United Nations resolutions and is among the most violent of governments—for example, in its open policy of political assassination.

The charge of anti-Semitism rests not on rational argument, but rather on the creation of a false identity between the actions of the Israeli state and the interests of the Jewish people as a whole. This attitude was made explicit by Summers when he argued, “Where anti-Semitism and views that are profoundly anti-Israeli have traditionally been the primary preserve of poorly educated right-wing populists, profoundly anti-Israel views are increasingly finding support in progressive intellectual communities.”

The idea that the Israeli state is identical to the interests and aspirations of the Jewish people, and therefore criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic, is both historically and factually false. There are hundreds of thousands of Jews, both inside and outside of Israel, who oppose the policies being carried out by the Israeli state. The Sharon government does not represent the interests even of the majority of Jews living in Israel, let alone other regions of the world. Rather it represents a section of the Israeli elite, which, at the same time as it pursues an increasingly aggressive policy against Palestinians, promotes a domestic program of attacks on social programs and jobs. The conditions are emerging within Israel for a movement of Jewish workers against the Israeli government and the politics of Zionism.

One of the major factors fueling the ominous growth of anti-Semitism internationally is precisely the homicidal, colonialist policy carried out by Israel against the Palestinians. To recognize this irrefutable fact is not to in any way endorse anti-Semitic views or support those who hold them.

Those most vociferously attacking pro-Palestinian groups for alleged anti-Semitism are themselves unable to combat the spread of anti-Semitism. This is evident in the growing alliance between right-wing Zionists and the extreme-right Christian fundamentalists in the United States. The Zionist right has lined up—on the common basis of anti-Arab chauvinism and military aggression against Iraq—with groups in the US and Europe that have a long history of anti-Semitism.

It is just as false to blame Jews for the policies of Israel as it is to defend Israel as the expression of the Jewish people. The two perspectives are opposite sides of the same reactionary outlook, which views state actions in racial, ethnic or religious terms.

The contemporary character of Israel confirms an analysis made by Marxists a century ago: that throughout its history Zionism has represented the interests of a small section of the Jewish population. It is not now and has never been a distillation of the interests of the Jewish people as a whole.

Until the Second World War, only a small minority of the Jewish population supported the creation of a separate Jewish state. Many more were supportive of socialist movements that were internationalist in their orientation. They saw their interests as bound up, not with Zionism, but with the fate of the international working class and the struggle for socialism.

For example, a disproportionately large percentage of those traveling from the US to fight against Franco in the Spanish Civil War were Jews. They were denounced by Zionists, who would have preferred they emigrate to Palestine rather than sacrifice themselves in the struggle against fascism in Spain, a struggle that was central to the fate of Europe and the world in the years preceding World War II.

However, the rise and consolidation of power in the Soviet Union of a bureaucratic caste presided over by Joseph Stalin, and its suppression and ultimate annihilation of the genuine Marxists who had led the Russian Revolution, had catastrophic consequences for the socialist movement. The policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy—which claimed to defend the

principles of the Russian Revolution but, in reality, repudiated them—disarmed the working class in the face of the growing menace of fascism. This led to a series of defeats in the 1920s and 1930s, culminating in the most monumental defeat of the working class: the victory of the Nazis in Germany in 1933.

The crisis of the workers movement was the decisive factor that made the Second World War inevitable and allowed Hitler to carry out his genocidal policy against the Jews. The Zionists did not and could not offer any serious resistance to the fascists. Indeed, during the 1930s a certain section of the Zionist leadership in Germany collaborated with the Nazi regime in encouraging Jews to emigrate to what was then the British mandate of Palestine.

The horror of the Holocaust, however, and the apparent absence of a viable alternative, seemed to vindicate the notion that a national homeland in Palestine was the only way out for the remnants of European Jewry. This of necessity involved the expulsion of those who inhabited the land.

It is only within the context of the crisis of the working class movement that one can understand the ability of Zionism to attract significant support for its cause. Many Jews in Europe—including Russian Jews who faced a growing wave of anti-Semitism promoted by the Stalinist regime—saw no other choice. Moreover the Holocaust generated an outpouring of sympathy for the Jewish people internationally, which was successfully channeled by the Zionists into support for the establishment of a Jewish state.

During the postwar period, the Zionists won the support of the US government, which began to see Israel as an important means of advancing American interests in the Middle East. Since that time, Zionism has served as a political ally of American imperialism in the region, while at the same time advancing the interests of the Israeli bourgeois elite.

The conception that Israel represents the interests of the Jewish people is a false conception, the acceptance of which has required a sustained campaign on the part of definite social interests. It is these same interests that now employ this conception to attack the divestment movement and other critics of Israeli policy.



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