

Britain: lecturers' union boycotts two Israeli universities

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British academics organised in the Association of University Teachers (AUT) voted April 22 to boycott the Haifa and Bar-Ilan universities, and to consider extending the action to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The resolutions, which potentially apply to some 48,000 AUT members, passed with 98 delegates in favour against 94 opposed.

Those academics backing the boycott measures were no doubt motivated by a justified sense of outrage against the crimes inflicted by the Israeli government against the Palestinian people. Such legitimate motivations do not, however, alter the reality that the ban represents an ill-conceived, divisive, and self-defeating effort to oppose the Israeli occupation. It does nothing to assist the struggles of the Palestinian people and, most damagingly, further exacerbates political confusion among intellectuals, workers and youth. Academics should give their full support to every progressive protest action against the crimes of Ariel Sharon's government, while fighting to overturn the boycotts.

The AUT's decision in favour of the targeted ban followed a tactical shift on the part of those who for the past three years have been campaigning for a general boycott of Israeli universities. In the 2003 AUT conference, a motion calling for a blanket ban was defeated by a two-to-one majority. Birmingham University's Sue Blackwell, who has been the leading proponent of the academic boycott within the AUT, admitted that singling out particular Israeli colleges was a manoeuvre designed to boost support for their position. "It's a tactical attempt to get it through," she told the *Guardian*. "We've got to be a bit more sophisticated.... To call for a general boycott of all Israeli institutions, without specifying the reasons, is harder for people to swallow.... We now have a boycott against a quarter of the universities in Israel, and we intend to continue the fight."

Academic links were severed with Bar-Ilan University on the grounds that it has affiliations with a college in Ariel, one of the largest Zionist settlements on the occupied West Bank. Haifa University is now to be boycotted "until it commits itself to upholding academic freedom, and in particular ceases its victimisation of academic staff and students who seek to research and discuss the history of the founding of the state of Israel." This is a reference to the alleged victimisation of Dr. Ilan Pappé, an academic who has promoted research into the mass expulsion of Palestinians in 1948. Haifa University denied the charges made against it and denounced the AUT motion. Jerusalem's Hebrew University also faces an AUT boycott if allegations that

Palestinian land was seized by the college are proved true.

Those supporting the boycott were given a boost in the lead-up to the conference when, for the first time, the Palestinian Authority expressed its support along with 60 Palestinian academic unions and non-governmental organisations. Palestinian opinion, however, is by no means unanimous on the issue. "We are informed by the principle that we should seek to win Israelis over to our side, not to win against them," a statement issued against the boycott by East Jerusalem's Al-Quds University read. "We believe it is in our interest to build bridges, not walls; to reach out to the Israeli academic institutions, not to impose another restriction or dialogue-block."

The lecturers' conference had been preceded by an intense debate, largely conducted through the *Guardian*. The newspaper published joint letters both for and against the boycott resolutions that were signed by a total of 280 academics. Bitterly divided discussion has continued in the aftermath of the conference, with a number of AUT members resigning from the union in protest. Others are now collecting signatures to force the convening of an unprecedented AUT special conference in order to force a proper discussion. The union leadership, which opposed the boycott demand, had originally attempted to prevent the motions from being tabled at the annual meeting. Delegates defeated this effort, but the resolutions were only advanced at the end of the final day, leaving no time for any discussion either for or against the boycotts.

The immense confusion that has been generated by the AUT resolutions demonstrates how the boycott is counterproductive. Protest campaigns should always strive to clarify, not confuse, and they should be capable of mobilising democratic and progressive forces around the world.

However, opposition to the ban has been raised by academics and intellectuals who support the Palestinian cause but also have principled objections against boycotts they believe they undermine academic freedoms. These individuals have found themselves bracketed together with pro-Zionists who consider any protest measure directed against Israel or the Sharon government to be illegitimate.

"Are they really intending to boycott the Palestinians and the Israeli Arabs who study and work in these institutions, or are they really calling for a boycott of Jews?" Israel's deputy ambassador in London, Zvi Ravner, asked rhetorically. "The last time that Jews were boycotted in universities was in 1930s Germany." This

statement is a slander against the boycott's supporters, but it is nevertheless indicative of just how easily the ban can be exploited by Zionist ideologues who allege anti-Semitism in order to evade any focus on the suffering of the Palestinian people.

The widespread disorientation produced by the AUT resolutions was due in part to a lack of clarity on what exactly the boycott of specific Israeli universities entailed. At the conference, a Palestinian activist group was quoted calling for academics to "refrain from participation in any form of academic and cultural cooperation, collaboration or joint projects with Israeli institutions; [and] advocate a comprehensive boycott of Israeli institutions at the national and international levels, including suspension of all forms of funding and subsidies to these institutions." The only people to be exempted from the consequences of these actions are those "conscientious Israeli academics and intellectuals opposed to their state's colonial and racist policies."

Israeli academics should certainly be given every encouragement to speak out against the Sharon government, but the concept of subjecting them to a political test as a condition for intellectual contact is fraught with danger, and will be unworkable in practice. What exactly does it mean to oppose Israel's "colonial and racist policies"? Does it merely entail opposition to the occupation of the West Bank, or does it require academics to reject every aspect of Zionist ideology? If the latter is deemed to be the case, all but a tiny minority of Jewish scholars in Israeli universities would have to be boycotted, irrespective of how sympathetic they were to the plight of the Palestinians.

The political dangers of the boycott campaign's inherent ambiguities were demonstrated in 2002 when two Israeli academics were removed as contributors to linguistic journals published by Manchester University's Professor Mona Baker. This decision was made solely on the nationality of the two scholars; one had even been chairperson of Amnesty International in Israel, and was active in the Peace Now organisation.

The *World Socialist Web Site* rejects the conception that the Palestinian struggle can be advanced by isolating and excluding Israeli academic and cultural institutions. We instead fight for an anti-Zionist struggle that strives to unite Israeli and Arab intellectuals, workers, and youth, based on the perspective of socialist internationalism. As we wrote in our 2002 statement, "Against the boycott of Israeli academics": "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."

"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."

Demands for an academic ban are driven by a deeply demoralised outlook, characterised by scepticism regarding the

possibility of winning over the Israeli people to a principled struggle in solidarity with the Palestinians against the Sharon government.

Ilan Pappé, the academic at the centre of the controversy at Haifa University, expressed this sentiment clearly in an April 20 op-ed piece for the *Guardian*, which explained why he supports the ban. "I devoted all my adult life, with others, creating a substantial peace movement inside Israel, in which, so we hoped, academia will play a leading role," he wrote. "But after 37 years of endless brutal and callous oppression of the people of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and after 57 years of colonisation and dispossession of the Palestinians as a whole, I think this hope is unrealistic and other means have to be looked at to end a conflict that endangers peace in the world at large."

At the 2003 AUT conference, an extensive—and therefore revealing—discussion was held on the proposed ban. Sue Blackwell admitted that the underlying conception of the boycott was that of collective punishment for Israel. "If in a few years time Britain is still in occupation of Iraq, and if Tony Blair has been re-elected despite this, then it may well be time for international pressure to be brought to bear, since the British electorate will have failed in their moral duty," she told the delegates. "However, judging by last week's local ballot results I have every confidence that Tony and his cronies will pay for their war crimes by losing the next general election. The difference with the Israeli electorate is that they have, sadly, just re-elected their own war criminal, Ariel Sharon. This places a moral responsibility on the rest of the world to take whatever legal and peaceful action they can."

According to Blackwell's logic, every US university should now be boycotted, given George Bush's re-election last November; and if, as expected, the Blair government is returned to power on May 5, British universities should be added to what would be a long and growing list of proscribed academic bodies.

The notion that the entire people—let alone the academics—of Israel, Britain or the US are collectively responsible for the crimes of their respective governments is both false and reactionary. Like all of the major imperialist nations, the Zionist state is riven with deep class antagonisms and social contradictions that do not find organised political expression due to the absence of an independent party of the working class. It is this absence of an alternative leadership and programme to that of Zionism that explains Sharon's ability to pursue his offensive against the Palestinians despite substantial support amongst Israelis for an end to the conflict.

Protest measures and punitive actions against the Zionist regime's oppression of the Palestinian people are necessary and correct, but the only measures worthy of support are those that contribute to the development of a joint fight of Israeli and Arab workers against their common enemy, rather than sowing confusion and fostering divisions.



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