

British lecturers' union overturns boycott of Israeli academics

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After an unprecedented international campaign, British academics voted at a special council meeting of the Association of University Teachers (AUT) on May 26 to overturn the boycott on Haifa and Bar Ilan universities. The boycott agreed on in April required 48,000 British university staff to sever all links with the two Israeli universities.

The decision to call a special meeting of the union to discuss the boycott took place after an uproar within the union, whose members opposed the ban as an attack on free speech and international collaboration, an integral part of intellectual intercourse and scientific research.

The AUT's boycott targeted two Israeli Universities: Bar Ilan University because it has affiliations with a college in Ariel, one of the largest Zionist settlements in the illegally occupied West Bank; and Haifa University, because of its alleged victimisation of Dr. Ilan Pappé, the well known academic who has authored important research into the mass expulsion of Palestinians in 1948. Haifa University had denied the charges and threatened the AUT with legal action if the boycott was implemented.

The boycott had been supported by 60 Palestinian academic unions (although not all such organisations backed it), the Palestinian Authority and some non-governmental organisations.

Jon Pike, an Open University philosophy lecturer, led the campaign to get the ban overturned. He collected sufficient signatures to force the convening of an AUT special council where a proper discussion could be held. Union branches up and down the country held meetings attended by unusually large numbers of members and submitted resolutions calling for the boycott to be dropped.

The universities themselves argued that the boycott would contravene anti-discrimination laws and their

own research and funding contracts, which assume equality of access and opportunity, irrespective of national, religious or ethnic origins or affiliations.

The opposition to the boycott led to an extensive campaign involving a wide variety of forces in Britain and internationally:

- * A number of Nobel laureates from the UK, Europe, the US, and the Middle East petitioned the AUT to drop the boycott.

- * An online petition against the boycott attracted 40,000 signatures.

- * The American Association of University Professors and the American Political Science Association condemned the boycott.

- * The Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the Palestinian Al-Quds University signed a joint statement calling for academic cooperation.

The boycott also had supporters, some of whom used the pages of the *Guardian* newspaper to promote their views, drawing parallels with the boycott of South Africa's apartheid regime. The ban's promoters, such as Sue Blackwell, from Birmingham University, and Professor Steven Rose, a biologist from the Open University, defended the boycott by citing the crimes committed by the Israeli government against the Palestinian people. But the course of action they advocated was ill-conceived and divisive.

The *World Socialist Web Site* opposed the academic boycott, arguing, in part, that it could only have a negative effect on the consciousness of the working class because it associated the struggle against Zionism with measures curtailing academic freedom.

Boycotts and protest actions against the Israeli government and its backers in Washington and London, such as calls to block the movement of military equipment and isolate the Sharon government, are

entirely legitimate. But we reject the conception that it is possible to advance the struggle of the Palestinian people by isolating Israeli academics and academic and cultural institutions, many of which have made important contributions to the development of science and an understanding of the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the contrary, we seek to encourage a serious dialogue on the subject that cuts across national divisions, politically encourage those workers and intellectuals in Israel seeking to oppose the occupation, and arm them with a socialist programme.

The proposed academic boycott was a propaganda gift for the Zionists. It provided the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon with a golden opportunity to muddy the waters by associating the initiative with a growth of anti-Semitism in Europe. One senior Israeli professor went so far as to say that the British academic community was repeating what the Nazis did to German academics. The Israeli government used the ban to mobilise the Zionist lobby in London and internationally.

The Sharon government interpreted the overturn of the boycott as a victory, even though the opposition to the boycott was in the main characterised by hostility to the illegal and inhumane treatment of the Palestinians.

Speaking in advance of the AUT council meeting, Jon Pike said, “The boycotts contradict principles of academic freedom. They are counter-productive in terms of securing peace and reconciliation between Israel and Palestine.... The people who have been opposing the boycott also oppose the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. We are critical of Israeli activities in the occupied territories and the way that impacts in particular on teachers and students.”

Such was the degree of controversy surrounding the boycott that the AUT, after taking legal advice, held the meeting as a closed session, open to members only. Following the meeting, the AUT said it would now base its policy on providing “practical solidarity to Palestinian and Israeli trade unionists and academics” by agreeing to a motion committing the union to a full review of international policy, working alongside the lecturers’ union, Natfhe, and the Trades Union Congress.

AUT General Secretary Sally Hunt said, “It is now time to build bridges between those with opposing views here in the UK and to commit to supporting trade

unionists in Israel and Palestine working for peace.”



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