British university teachers' union votes for boycott of Israeli academics

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Delegates at the first conference of the newly formed University and College Union (UCU) of Britain voted May 30 to recommend a boycott of Israeli universities and academics. In a 158 to 99 vote, the delegates passed a motion condemning the "complicity of Israeli academia" in the 40-year occupation of Palestinian land and backing a call by Palestinian unions for a "comprehensive and consistent international boycott of all Israeli institutions."

The resolution called on the union, recently formed by a merger of the Association of University Teachers and the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education, to circulate the boycott proposal to all union branches for "information and discussion." The head of the UCU, Sally Hunt, who had opposed the measure, said she could not "at this time" call for a vote of the membership, but would hold such a vote at some point in the future.

The boycott recommendation is the culmination of five years of agitation for a boycott of Israeli academics within the British university lecturers' unions. At various points similar resolutions were passed in the two unions that merged to form the UCU.

A similar boycott resolution is under consideration by the National Union of Journalists and Britain's largest union, UNISON, a public service union with over 1.3 million members. Boycott initiatives have also been taken by the Irish Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union; the Ontario region of the Canadian Union of Public Employees; and the Congress of South African Unions (COSATU).

The *World Socialist Web Site* has strongly opposed calls for a boycott of Israeli academics in the past and continues to do so. While such measures are undoubtedly motivated by legitimate outrage over the brutal and illegal repression of the Palestinians by Israel, they are misguided and can only obstruct the development of opposition to the Israeli government and Zionism among Israeli academics, intellectuals and working people.

Instead, they play into the hands of the Israeli state and its backers in Washington and London, sowing political confusion, reinforcing nationalist sentiments among both Palestinians and Jews, and impeding the development of a common struggle for democratic rights and social equality for all the peoples of the Middle East.

By singling out Israeli professors and universities for quarantine and blaming the Israeli people for the crimes of their government—crimes that are no greater than those of the US and British governments in Iraq and elsewhere—the proponents of the boycott inevitably provide cannon fodder for defenders of Israeli policies to level the charge of anti-Semitism. That is precisely the accusation that has been taken up by Israeli officials and their political allies in the US and Britain.

Thomas Friedman, the foreign affairs commentator for the *New York Times*, in a column published July 17 branded the UCU resolution as "rank anti-Semitism." To the extent that he attempted to justify this smear, his arguments amounted to pointing the finger at Syria's alleged murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the Sudanese government's role in Darfur, and asking why the union was not calling for academic boycotts against these countries.

One of those leading the offensive against the British union is Harvard Law School professor Alan Dershowitz. He is calling for a counter-boycott of British academics if the union's proposal is implemented and threatening to "devastate and bankrupt" those responsible for the measure. "We will isolate [British academia] from the rest of the world," he declared.

Dershowitz, who previously achieved notoriety for defending the use of torture, led a witch-hunt against professor and author Norman Finkelstein, a critic of Zionism and the misuse of the charge of anti-Semitism against opponents of Israeli policies. As a result of Dershowitz's efforts, Finkelstein was denied tenure earlier this month at DePaul University in Chicago.

As the *London Jewish Chronicle* pointed out in a recent article, many of the most prominent figures in the British campaign to boycott Israel are Jewish or Israeli. The newspaper quoted Haim Bresheeth, an Israeli professor of media and culture at the University of East London, who said, "I am Jewish and an Israeli, and I don't wish harm on either side. But how long can this occupation go on?" He added, "What we are asking for is not violent. It is civil action against a military occupation."

But Uri Avnery, a founding member of the Gush Shalom peace movement in Israel, warned of the politically detrimental impact of the proposal, saying a general boycott "drives people

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in Israel into the hands of right-wing demagogues and stigmatizes everybody."

Avnery's statement points to the false and reactionary content of the notion that Israeli academics, and by implication the entire Israeli people, are collectively responsible for the crimes of their government.

Like all nations, Israel is riven with deep class antagonisms and social contradictions. They do not find organized political expression due to the absence of a genuinely independent party of the working class. It is this absence of an alternative leadership and program to that of Zionism that explains Israel's ability to pursue its offensive against the Palestinians despite substantial support amongst Israelis for an end to the conflict.

The political dangers of the boycott campaign's underlying premises 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 of whom had been chairperson of Amnesty International in Israel and was active in the Peace Now organization.

On all political issues, it is necessary to make a distinction between a government and the broad mass of the population. 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 Israeli government, are entirely legitimate. But action against the Israeli people, many of whom oppose the right wing Kadima-Labour coalition headed by Ehud Olmert and are themselves the victims of its economic and social policies, are not.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in a statement published in July of 2002: "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.

"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."

The boycott, by banning collaboration with Israeli academics, some of whom are of world stature, would prevent the kind of international work that is the hallmark of science today. It is impossible to carry out serious scientific work, be it for a cancer cure or space research, on a national basis, as the international character, composition and activities of those universities at the forefront of scientific and intellectual research demonstrate.

Nor can the struggle of the Palestinian people be advanced by excluding Israeli scholars, some of whom have made important contributions to the understanding of the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Their work should be critically addressed and debated, not subject to censorship that would push scholars closer to the Zionist state rather than encourage independent thought.

Underlying the academic boycott campaign is a demoralized outlook—a form of outraged liberalism that sees no way of convincing the Israeli people to break from the policies of their ruling elite and take an independent road. Having written off the Israeli working class, the boycott proponents seek to vent their political frustration by lashing out at ordinary Israeli citizens.

This outlook is bound up with support for a nationalist program, in the form of the so-called "two-state" policy, i.e., a Palestinian state in the occupied territories alongside Israel. Recent events in Gaza have underscored the unviable and futile character of this program, and, indeed, any policy that starts from an acceptance of the imperialist set-up in the Middle East and the permanence of bourgeois regimes, Israeli and Arab alike.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is implacably opposed to Zionism. But we do so based on the program of socialist internationalism and through the methods of the class struggle.

We seek to convince Israeli workers and intellectuals that the interests of the Jewish people lie not in the militaristic policies of the Israeli ruling elite, but in the creation of a society based on full democratic rights and social equality for Arabs and Jews alike, in the form of the United Socialist States of the Middle East.

In the struggle against Zionism, only those methods are permissible that contribute to the development of socialist consciousness and facilitate the independent political mobilization and unity of Arab and Jewish workers against their common enemy.

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