

Stephen Hawking and the academic boycott of Israel

Chris Marsden
15 May 2013

Physicist Stephen Hawking has decided not to attend the fifth annual Presidential Conference in Israel. This is an official governmental showcase. Entitled “Facing Tomorrow,” it asks: “What is the desired dynamic in relationships between people and leaders in the face of powerful processes of change?”

Featured speakers and high profile attendees include former US President Bill Clinton, former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. Along with Peres himself, the conference will also be addressed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

It is entirely principled to refuse attendance at such a gathering, as Hawking decided to do. It is a forum for heads of state who have committed countless crimes against the working class in the Middle East.

Hawking could also have attended and, as he explained in his letter to the conference organisers, “stated my opinion that the policy of the present Israeli government is likely to lead to disaster”—thereby using it as a platform against the government.

Hawking’s decision not to attend the meeting is being utilised, however, by the initial instigators of the general academic boycott of Israel, UK academics Stephen and Hilary Rose, to promote their campaign. Writing in the *Guardian*, the two speak of Hawking’s stance as “potentially a turning point” for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. The terms they employ demonstrate once more how politically divisive their stand is and how, whatever their intentions, they end up strengthening the hand of the Israeli ruling elite.

The Roses boast of “more and more scientists coming to regard Israel as a pariah state.” They then complain that a Middle Eastern country has “managed to secure membership of the European Research Area,” only to

praise “European parliamentarians” for challenging its membership.

They add that “it was an Israeli engineer who developed the drones that the US now employs in quantity,” and that the role of Israeli universities in supplying the Israel Defence Forces “with the sociological, psychological and technological methods it employs to suppress Palestinian protests against the occupation” is proof that the “complicity of Israeli academia in Israeli state policy is incontrovertible.”

The stand taken by Hawking in fact legitimises none of these assertions, upon which the academic boycott campaign is based. The 71-year-old theoretical physicist pulled out of the event after initially receiving entreaties from supporters of the boycott and after then consulting with Palestinian colleagues.

Hawking signed a statement published by BRICUP (British Committee for Universities for Palestine), affirming “his independent decision to respect the boycott, based upon his knowledge of Palestine, and on the unanimous advice of his own academic contacts there.”

Hawking did not endorse the wider actions advocated by the boycott’s organisers. Nor is he the recent convert to a defence of the Palestinians the Roses make him out to be. In 2009, he denounced Israel’s three-week attack on Gaza, telling Riz Khan on *Al-Jazeera* that the response to the firing of rockets was “plain out of proportion... The situation is like that of [Apartheid] South Africa before 1990 and cannot continue.”

His statements have not prevented him from maintaining contact with Israeli academics, and he has not indicated that this will now change.

When the boycott was initially mooted in 2002, the World Socialist Web Site opposed it from the standpoint of the isolation and political confusion it

would help foster among Israeli workers and youth and the Israeli ruling elite's ability to exploit it to foster Zionist sentiment.

On 12 July 2002, we wrote noting the decision by Mona Baker of the University of Manchester to remove two Israeli academics, Dr. Miriam Shlesinger and Professor Gideon Toury, as contributors to linguistics journals published in the UK.

The WSWs rejected "this and all attempts to attribute to the Israeli people collective responsibility for the subjugation of the Palestinians. Such accusations of national guilt and the tactics that flow from them are deeply reactionary in every instance."

A correct course of action for UK academics, we said, would be "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 noted that applying a tactic like the Israel academic boycott to Britain or to the US—i.e. boycotting British or American academics because one held them all collectively responsible for their governments' crimes—would be deeply undemocratic, which shed light on the undemocratic character of such a boycott directed at academics in Israel. We also noted how the Israeli boycott opened up its supporters to charges of anti-Semitism.

These warnings have only been confirmed by the statements made by the Roses. They speak of Israel supplying drone technology to the US and of an undifferentiated academia colluding in the subjugation of the Palestinians. But how then do they, as UK academics, avoid similar denunciations of their own guilt for the much worse crimes of British imperialism and why not extend the boycott to American academics?

Allegations of "collective guilt," whether levelled against academics or all Israeli citizens, are a gift to the Netanyahu government.

Its defenders have all too predictably responded to Hawking with denunciations of his violating of academic principles of the free exchange of ideas and accusations of hypocrisy. Conference chair Israel Maimon, who previously served as a cabinet secretary under Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert, called Hawking's stand as "incompatible with open, democratic dialogue." Alan Dershowitz decried him as

an "ignoramus", a "lemming" for supporting an anti-Semitic campaign.

It is in the political interests of Netanyahu, Peres and company to foster a siege-like atmosphere by reinforcing the notion of a unified interest of all Jews in safeguarding the state of Israel, the very conception that underlies and shapes the boycott campaign.

In July 2011, the government passed the *Law for Prevention of Damage to the State of Israel through Boycott*. This makes it a civil offence for any individual or organisation to call for a boycott, defined as "deliberately avoiding economic, cultural or academic ties with another person or another factor only because of his ties with the *State of Israel, one of its institutions or an area under its control, in such a way that may cause economic, cultural or academic damage*," [emphasis added].

In addition, it has proved its own commitment to preventing genuine dialogue between Israeli and foreign academics. In December 2012, human rights expert Rivka Feldhay was barred from taking part in a science symposium in Berlin because Netanyahu did not want to allow the participation of an Israeli "who tarnishes the name of Israeli soldiers and pilots," the *Guardian* reported.

Her crime was to have signed a petition in 2008 supporting reservists refusing to serve in the Palestinian territories. For this she was denounced by the National Security Council as "an enemy of the state."

Rather than targeting ordinary Israelis for the crimes of the state that rules them, workers and intellectuals in the UK and elsewhere must base themselves on an appeal for unified political action against the ruling class internationally. Israeli workers and intellectuals can and must be politically convinced that their future lies in rejecting the false political perspective and ideology of Zionism and seeking instead the creation of an egalitarian society for Arabs and Jews alike—the United Socialist States of the Middle East.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact