

New Zealand university professor subjected to pro-Zionist witch-hunt

John Braddock
6 April 2016

A professor of Sociology at the University of Auckland, Scott Poynting, has been forced to stop teaching following an orchestrated pro-Zionist campaign, prompted by a letter from him to the *Waikato Times* in November. The university has refused to comment on Poynting's status but he has, according to media reports, been placed on "study leave" until June when he is due to retire.

Despite an internal investigation finding Poynting not guilty of professional misconduct, Vice-Chancellor Stuart McCutcheon penned a grovelling letter to the complainants, apologising for the "considerable distress" purportedly caused. It concluded with an assurance that "Professor Poynting's employment with the University of Auckland concludes on 30 June 2016."

Poynting wrote to the *Waikato Times* following a news report of a protest by the Palestine Human Rights Campaign in Hamilton. Around 15 members of the group, which is part of the international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel, entered a shop and distributed fliers demanding that an Israeli-manufactured SodaStream soft drink machine be removed from shelves.

The Israeli ambassador to New Zealand, Yosef Livne, was quoted as condemning the BDS movement's tactics, describing the action as a facet of "economic warfare" against Israel. The report also cited a statement by SodaStream CEO Daniel Birnbaum from the *Guardian*, claiming the company's Palestinian employees were "given pay and benefits far higher than anything else they could find in the West Bank."

Poynting's brief response, published on November 28, read: "Thank you for explaining in your article how SodaStream generously provided work for Palestinians (*Waikato Times*, November 26). I understand that IG Farben provided work for large numbers of Jews. Not that I have anything against Germans, mind you." The letter was published over Poynting's name but did not identify his academic position.

SodaStream is currently a focus of the BDS movement. The closure of the company's factory on the West Bank in

2014 resulted in its 470 Palestinian workers losing their jobs. Poynting's comparison of SodaStream with IG Farben was a reference to the German chemical conglomerate's involvement in the slave labour program in Nazi concentration camps.

Poynting had every right to raise his opposition to Israeli policy and to make the comparison. While his letter did not explicitly endorse the BDS movement, it was clearly intended as an ironic riposte to the official propaganda about the treatment of Palestinian workers inside Israel.

The WSWs rejects the petty-bourgeois BDS campaign as politically bankrupt. It seeks to apply pressure on the Israeli regime to implement a two-state solution, i.e. the creation of an unviable mini-state that could serve only as a virtual prison for Palestinians. Underlying the BDS perspective is the deeply pessimistic view that it is impossible to mobilise the Jewish working class against the Israeli government and Zionism itself, and thereby develop a unified struggle of Jewish and Arab workers against their common oppressors.

Within days of the publication of Poynting's letter, the New Zealand Jewish Council and the Zionist Federation of New Zealand began smearing him as "anti-Semitic" and agitating to have him disciplined. The organisations laid complaints with the university and called on others to demand that the university, along with the publishers of the *Waikato Times*, disassociate themselves from the letter. A History Professor at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT), Paul Moon, joined in, demanding an apology for the "hatefulness" of Poynting's comments and a retraction.

Vice-Chancellor McCutcheon said the university had "suggested" to Poynting that he should write a second letter to the editor of the *Waikato Times* clarifying he was not intending to make anti-Semitic remarks. Poynting refused.

The Jewish Council claimed that Poynting's comments were an example of "Holocaust inversion," which it defined as seeking "to draw false parallels" between Nazi Germany and Israel. It said that the comparison is "part of the European working definition of anti-Semitism" which is also used, significantly, by the US State Department. The council

noted that US academic institutions, faced with “similar anti-Semitic comments from staff,” had moved quickly to distance themselves while undertaking the “necessary investigations.”

This international campaign, which seeks to suppress basic democratic rights of freedom of speech and intimidate legitimate political opposition, is based on the crude slander that those who oppose the criminal policies of the Zionist state of Israel are guilty of “anti-Semitism.” This falsification has been used in particular to intimidate and silence critics of the brutal Israeli war against the people of Gaza and its ever-expanding occupation of Palestinian territory.

Opposition to Zionism is not the same as anti-Semitism, or anti-Jewish racism. Zionism, the founding ideology of the Israeli state, is a reactionary, nationalist doctrine that pits Jews against Arabs. Its basic proposition is that the Jewish people must live within an exclusivist state—maintained and protected by US imperialism. Zionism is in fact the reverse side of the coin of anti-Semitism.

The Zionist state of Israel bears full responsibility for the near 70-year oppression of the Palestinian people, including the utilisation of methods similar to those used by the Nazis against Jews. During the eight-year US-backed blockade of Gaza, successive Israeli governments have subjected its residents to the most inhuman conditions, akin to those created by the Nazis inside the Warsaw Ghetto.

In August 2014, 225 Jewish survivors and descendants of survivors of the Nazi genocide warned of the spectre of fascism arising inside Israel. The group signed a letter condemning Israel’s massacre in Gaza and calling for an end to the genocide of the Palestinian people, saying that they were “alarmed” by the dehumanization of Palestinians in the Israeli media, and the emergence of “right-wing Israelis...adopting Neo-Nazi insignia.”

The fascistic sympathies of the Israeli leadership were underscored in October 2015 in remarks made by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the 37th World Zionist Congress. In a grotesque apologia for the Nazis, he laid the blame for the Final Solution and the murder of millions of Jews on the Palestinian national leadership.

Poynting is not the only victim of the New Zealand Jewish Council’s efforts to silence political opponents of the Israeli state. In August 2003, award-winning cartoonist Malcolm Evans was sacked by the *New Zealand Herald* following complaints by pro-Zionist lobbyists against his cartoons critical of Israel’s repression of the Palestinians. Jewish Council spokesmen demanded further punitive action against Evans, claiming he had intended to “incite racial hatred,” which is illegal under New Zealand law.

A sinister aspect of the campaign against Poynting has

been baseless and unsubstantiated attacks on his professional integrity. Before his posting at Auckland University, Poynting had taught at Macquarie and Western Sydney Universities in Australia, and Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK, where he was involved with the International State Crime Initiative, a group of scholars researching and exposing state crimes.

On its website, the Zionist Federation of NZ listed the titles of Poynting’s courses on state crime, human rights and anti-Islamic prejudice, then declared: “One can only guess as to what he may (sic) taught to his students?” The theme was amplified by the right-wing blog WhaleOil, which declared that it was “sickening” that the “Jew hating” professor was teaching at the university, and demanded he be sacked. WhaleOil celebrated Poynting’s suspension proclaiming he would “no longer be poisoning students” at the university.

The WhaleOil blog has close connections with the National Party government. Its founder and operator, Cameron Slater, is the son of a former National Party president, John Slater. In August 2014, Slater was invited, and partly funded, by the Israeli Embassy to tour Israel with a group of hand-picked foreign “journalists” in the midst of the murderous assault on Gaza.

The Tertiary Education Union (TEU) has refused to defend Poynting and his basic democratic right to free speech. TEU president Sandra Grey justified the union’s cowardly stance by saying that because Poynting had written as a private citizen, the matter was not work-related and therefore was not an issue of academic freedom. Grey, who is also a cofounder of Academic Freedom Aotearoa, declared: “He wasn’t speaking as an academic ... There was no misconduct, so the matter ends there.”

Regardless of whether Poynting was writing as a private citizen or not, the vicious campaign against him was aimed at silencing and removing him from the university. The case sets a dangerous precedent for the persecution of other academics and students on New Zealand campuses for making political statements.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact