

US State Department moves to suppress criticism of Israel

Dominic Gustavo
29 November 2020

On Nov. 19, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the State Department would designate the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement as anti-Semitic, and that any non-profit groups supporting BDS would be cut off from government funding. In effect, all opposition to or criticism of the Israeli state is to be declared anti-Semitic, paving the road for a vicious assault on free speech and democratic rights.

Speaking in Jerusalem alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Pompeo referred to the BDS movement as a “cancer” and vowed to identify any organizations that were affiliated with the movement, stating that the US “will regard the global anti-Israel BDS campaign as anti-Semitic... We will immediately take steps to identify organizations that engage in hateful BDS conduct and withdraw US government support for such groups.”

Pompeo went on to visit an Israeli settlement in the occupied West Bank, the first secretary of state to do so; he later toured the Syrian Golan Heights, a strategic high ground occupied by Israel during the 1967 Six Day War and later annexed illegally. The State Department went on to mandate that goods produced in the occupied territories may be labeled “Made in Israel.” Such provocative moves are clearly meant to legitimize the Israeli state’s flagrant violations of international law and its imposition of a brutal apartheid regime upon the Palestinians.

In a separate press statement, Pompeo laid out the official line of the US government regarding the BDS movement: “It is the policy of the United States to combat anti-Semitism everywhere in the world and in whatever form it appears, including all forms of discrimination and hatred rooted in anti-Semitism. The United States strongly opposes the global discriminatory boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) campaign (Global BDS Campaign) ... As we have made clear, anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism. The United States is, therefore, committed to countering

the Global BDS Campaign as a manifestation of anti-Semitism.”

He went on, “To advance this policy, I have directed the Office of the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism to identify organizations that engage in, or otherwise support, the Global BDS Campaign... The United States urges governments around the world to take appropriate steps to ensure that their funds are not provided directly or indirectly to organizations engaged in anti-Semitic BDS activities.”

What Pompeo crudely gives voice to are the efforts of the US government, in alliance with far-right Zionists, to equate criticism of the Israeli state with anti-Jewish hatred, thereby delegitimizing any popular opposition to Israel’s decades-long oppression of the Palestinian masses and providing a pretext to crack down on groups and individuals who dare to speak out against Israel’s crimes.

For the Trump administration—which has emboldened neo-Nazi and other fascist elements and has carried out a vicious oppression of migrants—to profess concern over anti-Semitism represents hypocrisy of the most disgusting form.

BDS is a global pro-Palestine movement that seeks to pressure the Israeli state into changing its policy through the application of boycotts and other forms of protest. The reformist campaign has a notable presence on college campuses in the United States, and the threatened cutting of federal funds is an attempt by the Trump administration to pressure universities into silencing these groups in a blatant assault on students’ democratic rights of free speech and expression.

The latest move by the State Department was widely condemned by human rights groups. Bob Goodfellow, the Interim Executive Director of Amnesty International USA, denounced it as an attack on democratic rights: “The Department of State’s targeting of groups

advocating for using peaceful means, such as boycotts, to end human rights violations against Palestinians as antisemitic violates freedom of expression and is a gift to those who seek to silence, harass, intimidate and oppress those standing up for human rights around the world.”

JVP Action, an arm of Jewish Voice for Peace, said in a statement to the *Washington Post*: “As a proudly Jewish and pro-BDS organization, we know that movements from equality, justice and freedom are expressions of solidarity, not just for Palestinians but also for Jews... Organizing for Palestinian freedom is not—and never has been—anti-Semitic.”

The move is the latest in a years-long effort by the Trump administration—with the support of far-right Zionists and the tacit complicity of the Democratic Party—to silence criticism of Israel. Last year, President Trump issued an executive order expanding the federal governments’ interpretation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which prohibits state funding to organizations that discriminate on the basis of skin color, race or national origin) to include anti-Semitism.

The order encouraged the adoption of a working definition of anti-Semitism outlined by the right-wing International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which described criticism of Israel and of Zionism as inherently anti-Semitic.

It must be said that conflating anti-Semitism and opposition to Israel is in itself deeply anti-Semitic; it promotes the reactionary idea that all Jews have a sort of inherent loyalty to Israel, and it ignores the massive opposition that exists to the Israeli government both within Israel and among the international Jewish diaspora.

Trump’s executive order was cited in a lawsuit filed against New York University last year, which claimed that NYU was endorsing anti-Semitism by granting an award to a pro-Palestine student club. Backed by the Trump administration and Zionist organizations, the lawsuit was clearly meant to serve as a precedent for stifling free speech on college campuses. The lawsuit provoked widespread opposition from students and academics. Last month, NYU reached a settlement with the Department of Education and agreed to adopt the IHRA’s reactionary definition of anti-Semitism, laying the groundwork for student groups opposed to Israeli policies to be suppressed.

On the state and local level, the anti-BDS laws have been passed in much of the US. Since 2015, 30 states, including New York and Florida, have enacted anti-boycott legislation. The laws seek to punish individuals,

non-profit organizations and companies that support boycotts of Israel by prohibiting them from receiving government funds. Many of the laws prohibit state pension funds from being utilized by companies that support such boycotts. Some laws call for the drawing up of McCarthyite blacklists of individuals and organizations that support boycotts.

These unconstitutional and anti-democratic laws have been passed in both Republican- and Democratic-controlled states, often by large bipartisan majorities. The laws were passed at the behest of powerful pro-Israel lobbies such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), and the Israel Allies Foundation (IAF), which is headquartered in Jerusalem and serves as an umbrella group of Israeli lobbies. In many cases the legislation was itself drafted by these lobbies. In 2015, following the passing of the anti-BDS law in South Carolina, IAF used the bill as a base to draft a “model act,” a bill that would serve as a template to be disseminated to other state legislatures for immediate consideration.

The Democrats, who have spent the last four years howling about an imaginary Russian meddling in US affairs, have had nothing to say about this overt interference in American politics by a foreign power. The rapid passage of these anti-free speech measures is an expression of the desperate need of the ruling class to suppress the enormous popular outrage that exists at the complicity of the US government in the crimes of the Israeli state.

The right-wing slander against BDS and other pro-Palestine groups, along with the drive to silence any opposition to Israel, is part of a broader campaign by the most reactionary layers of the ruling class to systematically undermine free speech and democratic rights. Given the strategic importance of Israel to the ruthless machinations of US imperialism—particularly its preparations for war against Iran—the ruling class views popular opposition to the Israeli state as especially threatening to its interests.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)