

UK government's planned anti boycotts, divestments and sanctions law criminalises opposition to Israeli repression of Palestinians

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The UK's Conservative government has initiated legislation that drives a coach and horses through the right to freedom of expression and opposition to government policy.

The Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill would prevent public bodies like universities and local councils from independently using boycotts or divestments to sanction foreign governments for actions such as genocide, unlawful military invasions, war crimes, crimes against humanity and racial discrimination, as well as in response to their policies on climate change or pollution.

In an extraordinary display of hostility to democracy, sanctions will only be permitted if endorsed by the government's own foreign policy. A gagging clause even prevents institutions from saying that they would have acted in a way prohibited by the legislation if it were lawful to do so.

Failure to comply will result in fines prescribed by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, currently the arch-right winger Michael Gove. Only the security services and defence contractors will be exempt.

If it had been in place in the 1980s, the legislation would have made it illegal to boycott apartheid South Africa. It is one of a raft of dictatorial measures aimed at closing down all avenues of protest and social opposition in the working class, including the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act and Public Order Act which eviscerate the right to protest and award the police sweeping new powers, and the Minimum Service Levels (Strikes) Bill which outlaws effective strike action in key sectors.

The new Bill specifically targets the pro-Palestinian

Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement in Britain that seeks to replicate the 1980s boycott of apartheid South Africa and pressure Israel into ending its occupation of Palestinian territories. While the legislation allows the government to "specify a country or territory" to which the Bill does not apply, meaning they will endorse actions against Russia or China in line with their imperialist war aims, such exemptions cannot *by law* be applied to Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories or Syria's Golan Heights, occupied illegally by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war in defiance of international law and countless UN resolutions.

This vindicates the warning made by the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) and the Socialist Equality Party that the antisemitism witch-hunt which began in the Labour Party was the spearhead of a wider assault on democratic rights and opposition to war and oppression.

Falsely accused of being anti-Semites and of turning Labour into an existential threat to British Jews on the basis of his support for the Palestinians, former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn acquiesced to the witch-hunting out of the Labour Party of long-term allies like Ken Livingstone, Marc Wadsworth and Chris Williamson—plus hundreds of other members. He accepted the implementation in the Labour Party of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, conflating opposition to the state of Israel and its policies with hatred of Jews.

The WSWS warned that Corbyn's actions were laying down a path along which this campaign could march on every area of political life in the UK. For

example, in August 2019 the London Borough of Tower Hamlets refused to host a charity event marking the end of the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign's London Big Ride 4 Palestine on the grounds the event might infringe the IHRA definition.

A major effort was then launched by the government to commit universities to the IHRA definition, shutting down the legitimate political opinions of opponents of Israel's apartheid regime. The WSWS wrote in October 2020, "That such a reactionary campaign has reached this stage is devastating proof of the blows dealt to the working class and youth due to the lack of principle and political cowardice displayed by Jeremy Corbyn during his five-year leadership of the Labour Party."

Most prominently in recent months, a vicious witch-hunt has been waged against musician Roger Waters, using antisemitism slurs in an attempt to shut down his concert tour of Europe as punishment for his opposition to Israel, to NATO's war in Ukraine as well as Russia's, and his support for imprisoned journalist Julian Assange.

Introducing the new legislation, Gove declared that boycotts such as the BDS campaign "may legitimise and drive anti-Semitism as these types of campaigns overwhelmingly target Israel" and unduly politicise public institutions. Last year Gove declared, "The BDS campaign is designed for only one purpose: to attack and delegitimise the state of Israel and the idea that there should be a Jewish state at all."

The Tory government has gone so far in singling out Israel for special treatment in the legislation that even supporters of the antisemitism witch-hunt have expressed nervousness over the exposure of its anti-democratic essence and the lies used to justify it, including the Union of Jewish Students and Dame Margaret Hodge—a committed Zionist who spent years staging provocation after provocation against left-wing Labour members.

The legislation does not distinguish between Israel's internationally recognized borders and the territories it has occupied since 1967, putting it at odds with United Nations resolution 2334 that confirms the illegality of Israel's settlements and giving de facto support to Israel's illegal annexation of the territories.

Hodge warned that "the Bill plays into the hands of anti-Semites by doing the one thing we should never, ever do: single out Israel as the one place that can never

be boycotted." The same can be said of the IHRA, which excludes Israel from political criticism in a way the South African government could only have dreamed of.

The crackdown on criticism of the Israeli state is aimed above all at criminalizing the political left and lining the population up behind British imperialism and its allies, who can do no wrong, against their demonized opponents. Allegations of Russian war crimes that do not even need to be proved merit the largest set of sanctions in world history; Israeli war crimes are barely acknowledged to exist.

Anticipating a far broader eruption of the class struggle after a wave of strikes in the UK, the government is stepping up its class war preparations. As mass political opposition develops in the working class out of mounting social tensions—exacerbated by the US-NATO led war against Russia in Ukraine, the lasting effects of the pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis—this Bill and many other pieces of repressive legislation will be widely deployed.

The same concerns have motivated identical moves against BDS, and Roger Waters, in Germany. Amid massive social tensions, the ruling class everywhere is rapidly passing repressive legislation and blackguarding left-wing and anti-war views.

To defeat this assault requires a socialist programme and leadership that defends democratic rights through the mobilisation of workers internationally, based on their common class interests, against their increasingly dictatorial governments.



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