



Why left-wing students should not support boycotts of Israel

Produced by Workers' Liberty students

"Permissible and obligatory are those and only those means which unite the working class, fill their hearts with irreconcilable hostility to oppression, teach them contempt for official morality, imbue them with consciousness of their own historic mission, raise their courage and spirit of self-sacrifice in the struggle. Precisely from this it flows that not all means are permissible. When we say that the end justifies the means, then for us the conclusion follows that the great revolutionary end spurns those base means and ways which set one part of the working class against other parts..."

Leon Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours*

Since Israel's brutal invasion of Gaza in January 2009, calls for international boycotts of various aspects of Israeli society – whether academic, cultural, sporting, economic or simply thoroughgoing, root-and-branch boycotts “of Israel” – have gained prominence. Many trade unions have adopted some form of pro-boycott position, and the tactic is also being debated in the student movement. At present, unfortunately, the dominant voices opposing it are supporters of the Israeli government and those who believe that student unions should have nothing to do with big political issues.

Workers' Liberty condemned and opposed Israel's invasion of Gaza, and we condemn and oppose its occupation of the Palestinian territories. We believe solidarity with the Palestinians should be the left's starting point on the question of Israel/Palestine. But we believe that the proposal to boycott Israel is reactionary, counter-productive and will hinder efforts to build an effective movement of solidarity with the Palestinians.

In this briefing, we set out our arguments against the boycott, and for a different kind of solidarity with the Palestinians and the Israeli left.

Why boycotts will not help the Palestinians

We oppose the oppression of the Palestinians by Israel both because we are against oppression in general, and because it undermines the development of the kind of politics we want to see in the Middle East – revolutionary politics, with workers of different national and religious groups uniting in the struggle against capitalism. Unless they fight for the right of every people to freely determine their own future – a right the Palestinians are currently denied – workers in the region will never build a movement capable of overthrowing capitalism.

So the urge to “do something” for the Palestinians is a good one. But boycotts of Israel are not a good thing to do. They are likely to be ineffective; in so far as they are effective they will harm the Palestinian cause, and have other negative consequences too.

It's unlikely your student union shop stocks many

Israeli goods; it's unlikely your university has many links with the Israeli government. The boycott is not so much about directly exerting pressure as about creating a general political climate. And the political environment it creates will not benefit the Palestinian struggle.

Many, perhaps most, Israelis support their own government's policy. The Palestinians have every right to struggle for their freedom now, regardless of what support they have in Israel. But what they need most of all is Israeli allies.

The Palestinian struggle has been going on for decades, but has not succeeded. The Israeli government is too strong. It will most likely take big political (and social) upheavals within Israel to force it to change policy. In fact, it will probably require the replacement of this Israeli government by a very different one. So the attitude of most Israelis matters.

In Israel, there is an anti-occupation movement, involving both Arabs and Jews. There are demonstrations against Israel's wars, sometimes larger and sometimes smaller. (The opposition to the 1982 invasion of Lebanon mobilised 250,000 people, the equivalent of 2.5 million in a country the size of the UK.) There are anti-settlement, anti-separation fence, anti-road block and anti-house demolition campaigns. There are anti-racist groups. Perhaps most impressive in courage if not in numbers are the Shministim, anti-war high school students who have gone to prison for refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories. One of these comrades toured the UK on a speaker tour Workers' Liberty organised in March last year.

This left, broadly defined, is small and weak, like in Britain, but it exists. It needs support and solidarity.

There is also, of course, the Israeli working class, the great majority of which is ethnically 'Jewish'. Parts of it are organised, and have fought big struggles. Most workers, and at least the leaders of their trade union organisations too, currently support the government. But as socialists, we think it is self-evident that what Israeli workers think should be of concern.

Boycotts will certainly weaken the left, internationalist, pro-Palestinian wing inside Israel, and strengthen the right, by making Israelis feel as if a hostile world is pressing down on them (of the course the history of the

Holocaust and anti-semitism play a role here too). The more effective they are - for instance, the more Israelis lose their jobs or livelihoods as a result - the stronger this negative impact will be. Boycotts will harm, not help, the Palestinians.

Do boycotts work? The case of South Africa

One comparison frequently made by supporters of the boycott is between Israel and apartheid South Africa, against which there was a high-profile and widely-supported international boycott. In fact there is not a lot of evidence that the South African boycott worked. It ran from the early 1960s to 1994, with little effect. What was decisive was the struggles of black workers and poor in the townships, who from the late 1970s became organised, for instance in the multi-racial trade unions. They brought the apartheid regime to its knees, forcing it to hand over to the ANC for fear of something 'worse', i.e. a workers' revolution.

There were also problems with the boycott as it was constituted – the bourgeois leaders of the ANC, for instance, tried to use it to prevent direct links between the independent trade unions and workers' organisations in other countries. But, overall, the left was right to support the boycott. Its aim was to make apartheid South Africa stink in the nostrils of world public opinion, and rightly so. Israel's treatment of the Palestinians also stinks, but the differences are decisive. Israel-Palestine is not South Africa.

For Marxists, "apartheid" was not simply a term of abuse, but had a definite class content. It was a peculiar social system in which a white caste, intertwined with the capitalist ruling class, denied the black majority elementary political rights in order to enforce their super-exploitation. The answer, short of socialist revolution, was a single state with equal rights for all. For democrats, let alone socialists, there could be absolutely no question of 'national rights' for the whites, of collective rights for whites as a group (as distinct from living with individual equal rights after the overthrow of apartheid). The majority of the people in the single state of South Africa supported the boycott. It was therefore right to support it, with whatever criticisms and scepticism.

The Israelis are not a narrow caste, and Israeli is not an apartheid state, but a nation - one that denies rights to and oppresses the Palestinians, but a nation nonetheless. Iraq, Iran and Turkey are not "apartheid states" because they oppress the Kurds, and Russia is not an "apartheid state" because of its occupation of Chechnya.

Israel's social structure is decisively different to that of apartheid South Africa. It is a national entity, not simply a narrow settler-caste. Within Israel, there are Israeli-Jewish-Hebrew speaking capitalists, workers, intermediate layers. The great majority of the working class is ethnically 'Jewish', and for the reasons explained above, their view matters. They do not have the right to support the denial of rights to the Palestinians, but they do have the right to want to keep their own national rights. That is why in Palestine, unlike in South Africa, the best immediate settlement from a working-class point of view is two states (with

equal rights for everyone in both states, of course).

We can see why the Palestinian trade unions and others support a boycott. In the desperate situation they face, this is understandable. But we do not agree. The existence of two nations, with two working classes, makes things more complicated.

In terms of the Arab citizens of Israel, they face discrimination in many areas of life. We oppose and condemn this. But the situation more resembles the racism and discrimination historically faced by black and ethnic minority people in the UK or US than it does apartheid South Africa. Israeli Arabs have formally equal rights, they can vote, there are Arab members of the Knesset. There are Arab members of the Israeli national sports teams which some want to boycott. None of this is to suggest that their situation is anything other than one of a very severely discriminated-against minority facing intense racism, but apartheid is simply not an accurate description.

Some of the military-administrative techniques of oppression adopted by Israel in its war against the Palestinians resemble those used by the South African regime. But the social and political realities of Israel-Palestine and South Africa are fundamentally dissimilar. Recognising that in no way lessens our hostility to the oppression of the Palestinians; in fact it grounds it in reality.

Is Israel "the" problem? Should we support any measure that hits Israel?

Israel's oppression of the Palestinians is a big part of the problem; the major problem, in fact, and the one we should focus on. But it is not the *only* problem. A big part of what is wrong with the way some left-wingers talk about Israel-Palestine is their totally one-sided and un-nuanced condemnation of Israel.

What, for instance, about the fact that most of Israel's neighbours do not and have never recognised its right to exist – and have tried to crush it in three wars (1947, 1967, 1973)? What about the fact that many Arab states have also mistreated the Palestinians (particularly Jordan, which has carried out terrible massacres)? Israel's imperialism, its chauvinism, its nationalism (Zionism) have to be understood within a network of interlocking, antagonistic and mutually reinforcing imperialisms, chauvinisms and nationalisms. Again, this is not to excuse Israel's crimes, but to understand their context – and therefore understand how to fight them. To refuse to do this means distorting reality, and therefore, in effect, giving up on changing it.

We repeat: the urge to do something to stop oppression is good. That does not mean that doing anything, no matter how harmful and counterproductive, is a good idea.

What about academic boycotts?

If anything, academic boycotts are even worse. Many Israeli academics have been highly critical of the Israeli government's policy towards the Palestinians; and it is quite clear that we need to build links between academics and students in Palestine, Israel and other countries to make solidarity with the

Palestinians and fight for a democratic settlement.

The fruits of such boycotts can be seen by what happened in 2002, when Manchester academic Mona Baker sacked Israeli colleagues Gideon Toury and Miriam Shlesinger from journals she ran. Shlesinger is the former chair of the Israeli section of Amnesty International, who had been active in a Jewish-Arab group defying IDF blockades to deliver supplies to Palestinian towns in the West Bank!

Some argue that academic boycotts should apply to those academics who refuse to condemn and oppose their government, but clearly that's not how Mona Baker understood the boycott. We might also add that since many boycott supporters oppose not just Israel's policies but its existence, how far would Israeli academics have to go to escape the net? What if they oppose the war against the Palestinians but support a two-state settlement and maybe even – shock, horror – call themselves Zionists, as Benny Morris (one of the radical “New Historians” who have challenged much of the official history of Israel's founding) does?

In any case, why is Israel the only country in the world to which these standards should be applied? Should we boycott Chinese scientists, literature professors and mathematicians who refuse to condemn the Tiananmen Square massacre, or perhaps even support the Stalinist regime? What about boycotting Chinese universities as a whole, since after all they are much more directly state-controlled, with dissent much tightly limited than in their Israeli equivalents?

In fact, no one advocates such boycotts. Israel is singled out. This is a problem with the boycott movement in general. Supporters of boycott need to explain why they do not also advocate boycotting other states which commit human rights abuses, for instance Turkey for its treatment of the Kurds or Sri Lanka for its horrendous massacres of the Tamils – or indeed the US or Britain for their imperialist adventures across the world. Should we be advocating that British students and academics boycott themselves?

Be consistent!

There are good reasons why, in general, the left is sceptical about boycotts as a form of struggle.

They promote ideas of consumer rather than workers' power, power residing on people's shopping lists rather than in their workplaces. They are often counterproductive. But Israel seems to be a special case. Why?

Obviously, it's sometimes necessary to focus on particular struggles at particular times (eg Israel-Palestine at the time of the Gaza war); and clearly even the best activists will have a limited amount of time and energy, and therefore have to pick and choose what they want to be active on. In general you should try to take up as many different issues as possible, and be universalist in your opposition to exploitation and oppression. (One of the problems with the boycott Israel movement is that it often fails to acknowledge other similar or worse situations that exist in the world.) There is nothing about taking a position on Israel-Palestine, or making practical solidarity, that suggests being inconsistent by failing to take up other struggles.

Boycotting an entire country, however, is different. If a student union is going to boycott Israel, shouldn't it logically boycott all states which deny human rights? The only possible answer to this is try to make out that Israel is different, perhaps unique, usually by grotesquely exaggerating its (real) crimes and, in effect, downplaying those of other states.

The danger of anti-semitism

Workers' Liberty has also written a lot about the potentially anti-semitic implications of a widespread boycott campaign. What do we mean by this? Clearly, no one on the left is anti-semitic in the sense of racist far-right-style raving. However, we do think there are two distinct issues that mean that boycott creates a danger of anti-semitism.

Firstly, those who support a boycott, and justify this by exceptionalising Israel, are often remarkably soft when it comes to opposing anti-semitism. There are numerous examples, so let us pick a few. i) The Socialist Workers Party, a key force behind the boycott campaign, regularly invites jazz musician Gilad Atzmon, an ex-Israeli citizen who, despite being from a Jewish background himself, is effectively an anti-semitic conspiracy theorist, to play at its events. Even radical anti-Zionist Jews, some of whom support a boycott, have condemned this, but the SWP does not relent. ii) On demonstrations against Israel's 2006 invasion of Lebanon, SWPers joined in chants of “we are all Hezbollah”, explicitly aligning themselves with a far-right, anti-semitic Islamist force. iii) In summer 2008, an SWP petition about the BNP described the Holocaust as a massacre in which “thousands of LGBT people, trade unionists, and disabled people were slaughtered” – no mention of the millions of Jews! In other words a culture is being created on the left where anti-semitism is seen as more acceptable than other forms of chauvinism.

Secondly, we believe the logic of the boycott is itself anti-semitic – not in the straightforwardly racist sense, but in the sense of being comprehensively hostile to most Jewish people alive. Clearly, the idea that all Jews, wherever they were born and wherever they live, should identify with and support Israel in order to be “properly Jewish” is offensive nonsense. Indeed, many Jews around the world oppose Israel's government and its project in the occupied territories. But nearly 50% of the world's Jews live in Israel itself, and it is clear that even the great majority of those who don't support the existence of an Israeli-Jewish national entity in some form – the main exceptions being far-right religious 'anti-Zionist' groups like Neturei Karta.

This means that, while they may set out simply to target supporters of the Israeli government, boycotts almost inevitably become focused on targeting the biggest site of support “for Israel” (that is, any support for the existence of an Israeli-Jewish national entity) – Jewish communities.

The corporations that boycott campaigners choose to target certainly raise some questions. Starbucks (which certainly deserves criticism for its appalling workers' rights record, both in terms of how it treats the workers who supply its coffee and the workers who sell it on UK high-streets) has been targeted on the basis that it

“funds Israel” and specifically “donates its profits to the Israeli military”. Its Jewish CEO, Howard Schultz, is a supporter of the state of Israel (as well, obviously, as being a ruthless capitalist exploiter) but claims about Starbucks directly “funding” Israel or its military are fabricated and stem largely from a hoax letter written on an anti-Zionist website.

Even if one thinks it is legitimate to target Starbucks on the basis that one of its bosses is a supporter of the state of Israel, it is not a big leap from targeting a company because its Jewish owner supports the state of Israel to targeting a company because it is assumed that its Jewish owner (or its owner who is assumed to be Jewish) supports the state of Israel. Marks & Spencer, for example, was founded by Russian Jewish immigrants who became convinced Zionists. But today its concrete “support” for Israel hardly extends beyond capitalist norms that apply to most big multinational retailers (i.e. it stocks Israeli goods and has links to commercial operations in Israel), and yet it is still a prominent target for boycott campaigners.

“Left-wing” boycotters should ask themselves: how will making a tiny, tiny dent in Marks & Spencer's UK sales figures make life better for the Palestinians? How will it do anything apart from convince people that “consumer power” is something to be relied upon and, worse, create an atmosphere in which businesses known to be, or to have been, Jewish-owned are placed under direct suspicion of “Zionism” and all made potential targets?

Jewish community organisations have fallen foul of boycott-type campaigns, too. In the 1980s, some left-led student unions tried to ban student Jewish Societies on the basis that they were “racist” because they supported Israel. Student members of the organisation that became Workers' Liberty took a lead in opposing the bans and they were fought off.

Of course, some Jewish Societies did and do support the Israeli government; they are politically wrong, and the left should oppose that. But if, for example, a Chinese students' society came out in support of the Chinese government, would it be right to try and ban them? No – it would be a racist outrage.

This is not to say that everyone who supports a boycott, or most of its supporters, are anti-semitic. It is not to deny that many boycotters are militant fighters against anti-semitism in other respects. But it is to say that these issues should be considered and give supporters of the boycott serious pause for thought.

Solidarity, not boycotts

Given the politically problematic, limiting and potentially deeply counterproductive nature of boycotts, we do not believe they are a useful tool for building a movement that can make solidarity with the Palestinians on a rational, internationalist basis. As socialists, we believe that the main people fundamentally capable of effecting progressive change in Israel-Palestine are the Palestinian and Israeli working classes, and that working-class and student movement activists elsewhere in the world can be most effective by supporting initiatives that aid the development of united working-class struggle against the occupation on the ground.

Political programme matters here; we believe that a solidarity movement can only be meaningful if it is based on politics that recognise the existence of two distinct national groups in the region and aspires to the unity of their working-classes rather than an endless cycle of nationalist and chauvinist hostility.

One of the tragedies of the boycott is that a number of trade unions have adopted it and then done nothing, literally nothing, to actually support the Palestinians. The union which has done most to support the Palestinians is the RMT, which during the year that it opposed boycotts sponsored a speaker tour with a refuser and campaigned in support of Arab rail workers sacked due to racist discrimination in Israel. (The leadership then got the policy changed and has done little since.) We need positive campaigning activity.

We believe that activists should put their time and energy into building material support and solidarity for initiatives like the Workers' Advice Centre, which organises both Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian Arab workers, including many migrant and precarious workers shut out by the mainstream Israeli trade union movement. We should support organisations like the Democracy and Workers' Rights Centre in Ramallah, which organises Palestinian workers to fight for independence as well as for workers' rights within the currently occupied territories. We believe activists should support forces within Israeli society like the refusers' movement, who are on the frontline of attempts to undermine the Israeli state's expansionist, militarist project. Boycotts are not complementary to such activity – they cut against it.

Boycotts are at best a diversion and at worst a dangerous dead-end. Activists should fight for positive solidarity instead.

If you agree, you should:

- ▶ Copy this briefing, circulate it as widely as possible, and use its ideas in articles, publications etc.
- ▶ Organise a meeting on your campus to put forward the idea of positive solidarity with the Palestinians instead of boycotts of Israel. Invite boycott supporters if you can and make it a debate. We'd also be happy to send a speaker.
- ▶ Put a motion to your student union or campaigning group setting out this position, mandating positive actions of solidarity – links with and support for Palestinian student and other organisations, with Israeli anti-occupation and pro-Palestinian rights groups, with the Israeli refusers etc.
- ▶ Get in touch with us to discuss wider solidarity campaigning. We organised a successful speaker tour with an Israeli refuser last year, and hope to do the same again this year; and also to take a delegation to Israel Palestine.

If you disagree, or aren't sure, get in touch with us to discuss and debate!

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