

US Academics Approve Boycott of Israeli Universities

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Members of the American Studies Association (ASA) approved by more than a two-thirds majority Monday a boycott of all Israeli academic institutions.

The association, which has 5,000 individual members and 2,200 library and other institutional subscribers, describes itself as the “oldest and largest association devoted to the interdisciplinary study of American culture and history.”

It is by far the largest US academic group to join in the global boycott campaign. The Association for Asian-American Studies endorsed the academic boycott last April, while the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association announced December 15 that it is recommending the boycott to its members. Next month, the Modern Language Association, with 30,000 members, is set to discuss such a resolution at its convention.

The ASA resolution begins with a denunciation of the US government for its “significant role in enabling the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the expansion of illegal settlements and the Wall in violation of international law, as well as in supporting the systematic discrimination against Palestinians, which has had documented devastating impact on the overall well-being, the exercise of political and human rights, the freedom of movement, and the education opportunity of Palestinians.”

The statement goes on to charge that “Israeli institutions of higher learning are a party to Israeli state policies,” while adding that there are “Israeli scholars and students who are critical of Israeli state policy” and as a consequence face “isolation and threat of sanction.”

The international Boycott, Disinvestment Sanction campaign against Israel has until now had limited effect in terms of Israel’s economic relations, recording largely symbolic successes in the field of academic boycotts. These boycotts, initiated in Britain in 2002, until now, had not spread to the US.

There is no doubt that the overwhelming support for the resolution by the ASA membership reflects broader sentiments in the population as a whole as it has become more conscious of, and repulsed by, the crimes of the Israeli state against the Palestinian people.

It is for this reason that the ASA has come under intense attack for its resolution. Two universities—Brandeis and Penn State, Harrisburg—have already announced that they are severing ties with the association.

Appearing on PBS television’s Charlie Rose show, Larry Summers, the former president of Harvard University and treasury secretary in the Obama administration, denounced the

resolution as “abhorrent,” “beyond outrageous” and “anti-Semitic in its effect.” Having in the same breath expressed his supposedly principled opposition to all academic boycotts, Summers went on to call for an effective boycott of the ASA, expressing the hope that university administrators would stop having their institutions’ “funds used to finance faculty membership and faculty travel to an association that is showing itself not to be a scholarly association but really more of a political tool.”

Similarly, Alan Dershowitz, Harvard law professor and outspoken defender of torture, denounced the ASA “for singling out the Jew among nations,” “applying a double standard to Jewish universities” and “complicity with the oldest and most enduring prejudice.” The substance of his argument consisted of pointing his finger at China, Russia and Iran and asking why they were not boycotted.

These attacks merely repeat the well worn slanders of anti-Semitism that are employed ceaselessly by the Israeli government and its Zionist supporters to silence any discussion of Tel Aviv’s violence and oppression against the Palestinians and its relentless acts of military aggression in the region.

According to ASA members, the attacks have been backed up with hate mail, threats and talk of legal action against the association.

It is evident that Jewish members of the ASA played a prominent role in supporting the resolution. In a statement endorsing the action, Eric Cheyfitz, Cornell University professor of American Studies, wrote: “I am a Jew with a daughter and three grandchildren who are citizens of Israel. I am a scholar of American Indian and Indigenous studies, who has in published word and action opposed settler colonialism wherever it exists, including of course the Palestinian West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem.”

The initiative came under implicit criticism from what on the surface may seem a surprising source. Speaking at the memorial service for Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, while saying that the PA backs a boycott of products made in the Israeli settlements on the occupied West Bank, declared: “But we do not ask anyone to boycott Israel itself. We have relations with Israel, we have mutual recognition of Israel.”

The comment drew heated denunciations from Palestinian activists. It reflects, however, the political standpoint of the PA, which serves as a police agency of the US and Israel against the Palestinian masses, in return for the wealth and privileges that a statelet on isolated bits of the West Bank can provide to a thin layer of Palestinian officials and politically connected businessmen.

There is no doubt that those within the ASA who supported the boycott resolution have done so out of genuine outrage against the brutal and illegal US-Israeli policy and feelings of solidarity with the Palestinian people. They must be defended against their right-wing and Zionist attackers. However, the issue of how to fight Israeli oppression raises fundamental questions of political principle. From this standpoint, however sincere the sentiments underlying the resolution, its thrust is ultimately misguided.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has for over a decade opposed academic boycotts against Israel and continues to do so. In a statement issued in July of 2002 in response to the initiation of the boycott movement by British academics, the WSWS explained:

“Measures targeting ordinary Israeli citizens serve to reinforce Zionism’s efforts to inculcate the fatalistic and deeply pessimistic idea that the entire world is against the Jewish people and that the state of Israel offers their only sanctuary.

“A correct course of action for academics opposed to Israeli aggression against the Palestinians would be the very opposite of such a boycott: 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.”

Such boycotts, in the end, are exploited by the Sharons and Netanyahu for their own efforts to create a siege-like environment to reinforce nationalist sentiment. They serve to obstruct the development of opposition to the Israeli government and Zionism among Israeli academics, intellectuals and the population as a whole, and undermine the effort to build a unified struggle of Jewish and Arab workers against their common oppressors.

Supporters of the ASA resolution affirm that it is directed not against Israeli “individuals” but against Israeli institutions of higher learning. However, it is not at all clear how this intention would be realized in practice, or how it would be understood among Israeli scholars, much less working people.

Israel, like all societies, is sharply divided between a ruling financial and corporate oligarchy that controls its government, and a working class that is exploited and oppressed, without any political voice. The lack of an alternative working class leadership armed with a socialist program opposed to Zionism is what allows the Israeli government to continue its unending repression of the Palestinians and militarist provocations, despite the desire of large sections of the population for an end to the conflict.

A boycott of Israeli academics begins from the standpoint of collective guilt, that average Israelis are responsible for the government that rules over them. The same argument could be used to call for a boycott of US universities, which are every bit as much “a party to” crimes of US imperialism that are considerably more massive than (and in fact include) those of the Israeli state. What of Harvard University and its notorious Kennedy School of Government, which has trained so many scoundrels who have implemented the predatory policies of US imperialism? There is hardly a university that does not allow CIA recruiters free reign, and many of them are parties to major Pentagon contracts.

While the universities in the US are politically and financially tied to a state that bears central responsibility for the oppression of peoples all over the world, holding American academics, including the members of the ASA, responsible for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, torture and worldwide spying would be deeply reactionary and undemocratic.

The decisive question is the necessity to distinguish between a government and the broad mass of the population. While methods that attack the Israeli government, as well as its imperialist backers in Washington, are entirely legitimate, those that lump together that state with ordinary people, including many who loathe the Netanyahu government and are victims of its economic and social policies, are not.

Underlying this form of boycott is an outlook of liberal outrage combined with pessimism, a conviction that it is not possible to win Israeli working people, the great majority of the population, away from the policies of the state’s rulers and from Zionism.

This is bound up with the politics of nationalism and support for the so-called “two-state” solution, i.e., the creation of a Palestinian statelet on some portion of occupied territories alongside Israel. The idea is that the Zionist regime will be shamed into accepting such a policy. Twenty years after the Oslo Accords, the unviability of this so-called “solution” has become manifest for ever-growing layers of the Palestinian population.

The alternative that must be fought for is that of uniting Arab and Jewish workers in a common struggle to create a society that provides unrestricted democratic rights and social equality for all. This means a struggle against the entire imperialist setup in the region and for the creation of the United Socialist States of the Middle East. This requires not the isolation of Israelis, but a maximum struggle among them against Zionism and for the development of socialist consciousness to prepare this united revolutionary struggle.

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