

Comment

Academic boycott - a legitimate form of peaceful protest

By Sue Blackwell

The vote at Association of University Teachers (AUT) Council on April 22, was a historic moment. The previous time we had discussed academic boycott of Israel, in 2003, we had lost the vote by about 2/3 to 1/3. This time I expected the vote to be much closer, for three reasons: firstly, the situation of the Palestinians now is even worse than two years ago; secondly, we now had a clear call for boycott from almost 60 Palestinian organisations including our sister trade union; and thirdly, we were now armed with facts and figures about three particular Israeli universities demonstrating their complicity in the illegal occupation of Palestine.

One of the leaflets we distributed at the Council was an appeal to delegates from Ilan Pappé, an Israeli Jew, “to be part of a historical movement and moment that may bring an end to more than a century of colonization, occupation and dispossession of the people in Palestine.” Pappé has been victimized by his employer, the University of Haifa, ever since he came to the defence of a student called Teddy Katz whose thesis documented a massacre of over 200 men, women and children at a village called Tantura by the Haganah in 1948. So the motion calling for a boycott of Haifa was fundamentally about academic freedom.

The motion on Haifa was proposed by Shereen Benjamin, a Jewish colleague of mine, who began her speech by explaining that she supported the right of Israel to exist, but nonetheless believed that there was no alternative to supporting the boycott resolutions. The Jewish supporters of the boycott, who often have to deal with untold pressure from

their own families and communities and who have my unreserved admiration, have been conveniently ignored by those who want to portray us all as “anti-Semitic”.

Shereen also proposed the motion on the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, holding up photographs from the “Electronic Intifada” website which clearly show the bulldozers sent in by the University to evict Arab families from their land in order to expand their student dormitory accommodation.

I myself proposed the motion on Bar-Ilan University, arguing that it is violating the Fourth Geneva Convention through its links to a college in an illegal settlement called Ariel in the occupied West Bank. A four-lane highway has been built on stolen Palestinian land which is very convenient for staff and students at the College of Judea and Samaria travelling across the “Green Line” every day; this road is prohibited for use by the local Palestinian people on whose land it is built.

Unfortunately, no time was allowed for debate from the floor. This was no conspiracy, as has been claimed, but simply due to the Chair’s unexpected ruling that we were running out of time and had to move straight to the vote.

Council first had to decide whether to refer each motion to the Executive, as they wanted us to do. The motion on the Hebrew University came first: it was referred by just 3 votes. However, we then went on to reject reference on the Haifa and Bar-Ilan motions and instead to pass them outright.

I had always predicted that if we passed any of the boycott motions, “all hell would break loose”, and indeed it did. We were immediately condemned by everyone - from the Provost of Kings

Photo 5a

On Sunday, November 21 2004, at 7:15AM, bulldozers and armed security guards hired by Hebrew University Properties, Ltd. arrived at the home of Al-Helou family in Jerusalem to announce that their land will be confiscated for the expansion of the university dormitories. The buildings in the back are existing dorm buildings.

College London - to the Israeli Foreign Minister.

The Anti-Defamation League in the USA threatened a counter-boycott of British universities! And of course, we were all denounced as anti-semites. *The Mail on Sunday* and the *London Evening Standard* published personal attacks on me implying that I blamed Jews for 9/11 and accusing me of “peddling the oldest form of hatred.”

The University of Haifa threatened to sue the AUT for defamation simply for putting the text of the motion we had passed on our website! I do not believe

we defamed Haifa: every word of the motion was true and I stand by it. We were also threatened with legal action under the Race Relations Act.

This, too, is nonsense: to boycott an institution for its actions is a very different matter from discriminating against an individual on the basis of their race, religion or nationality.

Meanwhile, the anti-boycott brigade within the AUT had found a rule, which said that if 25 members of Council signed a request for a special meeting, it had to take place within 35 days. In all my years as a member of AUT, special

meetings of Council have only been called for purposes like considering a new pay offer, and never in order to overturn a vote that has just taken place. But of course, this was different because Israel was involved. So a Special Council was duly called, and we had no time to prepare for it properly. I believe that if we had had a chance to organise meetings to inform our members properly about the issues, we could have defended the boycott policy.

One of many scandalous tactics was flying in Sari Nusseibeh, the President of Al-Quds University, to sign an agreement with his counterpart from the Hebrew University at the Royal Society in London, one week before Special Council.

Why couldn’t they sign it in Jerusalem? The real purpose was to get the head of a Palestinian university over to the UK to make a statement condemning the boycott. Since his return to the West Bank, Nusseibeh has been confronted with calls for his dismissal by outraged Palestinian trade unionists.

In these circumstances the outcome of Special Council was predictable: the boycott vote was overturned. However, as one of my colleagues put it, “The genie can’t be put back into the bottle now.” We have forced Israeli academics to examine their consciences. The publicity has been huge. I believe that the boycott campaign will now spread to other unions and resurface in the AUT, until the occupation is ended and Palestinian students and teachers can enjoy the same academic freedoms as their Israeli and British counterparts.

Sue Blackwell is a member of BRICUP: British Committee for Universities of Palestine. For more information see www.sue.be/pal

Britain accused of creating terror fears

By Home Affairs Correspondent

One of the longest-serving Law Lords accused the British and US governments of whipping up public fear of terrorism, and of being determined “to bend established international law to their will and to undermine its essential structures” on June 10.

Lord Steyn made the accusation while delivering his first public comments on the Lords’ ruling in the Belmarsh case.

He was forced to step down last year from the panel of judges hearing the challenge to the lawfulness of detention without trial for foreign terrorist suspects after the Government took exception to earlier remarks he had made on the subject. Last December, the Law Lords ruled by 8-1 that the detention without trial of foreign nationals in Belmarsh and Woodhill prisons and the Broadmoor high security hospital breached human rights laws.

His remarks came after a report from the Council of Europe’s committee for the prevention of torture concluded that the treatment of some detainees “could

be considered as amounting to inhuman and degrading treatment.”

Lord Steyn said, “Nobody doubts in any way the very real risk of international terrorism. But the Belmarsh decision came against the public fear whipped up by the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom since September 11 2001, and their determination to bend established international law to their will and to undermine its essential structures.”

The Attorney General, Lord Goldsmith, argued in the Belmarsh case that the unelected judges had no democratic mandate and should defer in the sphere of national security to politicians who had been elected by the people.

Lord Steyn said Lord Bingham’s judgment in the Belmarsh case, pointing out the “wholly democratic mandate” given to judges by Parliament in the Human Rights Act, had contained the “most eloquent and magisterial rebuke” to an attorney general since Lord Denning quoted the words of Thomas Fuller, “Be you ever so high, the law is above you.” **Sir Ian Blair Interview p9**

Amazon bought Qur’an vandalized

By A Correspondent

A Muslim woman who placed an order for the Qur’an through Amazon.com and found profanity and religious slurs written inside it has asked for an apology and an investigation by the online retailer.

Azza Basarudin, 30, said she received the Qur’an by mail on May 5, after ordering it through a used books division of Amazon.com that allows customers to order directly from third-party sellers approved by the company.

When she opened the Qur’an, Basarudin said she found profanity and the phrase “Death to all Muslims” written in thick black marker on the otherwise-blank first page. I dropped the

book because I didn’t know what to do,” American Muslim Public Affairs Council, Executive Director, Salaam Al-Marayati, has called for an apology and investigation from Amazon.com.

Spokeswoman for the Seattle-based book retailer, Patty Smith, said the Qur’an was purchased directly from Bellwether Books, a small book resale company in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, through the “Marketplace” section of Amazon’s website.

“This was not our inventory, it was nowhere in our order or fulfilment process,” she said. “It was a used book purchased through a third party”.

Richard Roberts, owner of Bellwether, said he doubts the book was defaced by his employees. The company

buys used books at bargain prices from individuals, other bookstores and libraries and then resells them through Amazon.com and other outlets.

He said before this incident, his six employees gave each book a cursory check before shipping and didn’t look inside the pages. Roberts said Bellwether has since instituted a more stringent quality control check. Bellwether is also suspended indefinitely from selling Qur’ans through Amazon.com, Smith said.

Bellwether apologized to Basarudin by e-mail and offered to replace the book. Amazon.com also apologized, reimbursed her for the Qur’an cost and mailed Basarudin a gift certificate, Smith said.

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