

MERIA

UK ATTITUDES TOWARD THE MIDDLE EAST: THE BRITISH TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

By Ronnie Fraser*

The Trades Union Congress (TUC), the umbrella body for the British trade union movement, had always been opposed to any form of a boycott of Israel. Yet in 2009, the congress called for a boycott of goods and services originating in the Israeli West Bank settlements. Britain--more than any other country in the world--has promoted the Palestinian call for academic, trade union, media, medical, architectural, and cultural boycotts of Israel. The driving forces in Britain for the Boycotts, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel are the anti-Zionist activists on the far Left and the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign (PSC).

The 2009 decision by the Trade Union Congress (TUC) to campaign for a consumer boycott of goods from the Israeli settlements in the West Bank has been hailed by the British boycott movement as a watershed moment in Britain in the battle for the hearts and minds of the uncommitted in the Middle East conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Now, they say, with TUC support, the Palestinians can go on and win the battle to end the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land in a similar fashion to what happened in the 1980s when the campaign against South African apartheid was won with British trade union support. The reality, however, is that this claim is far from the truth.

The British trade unions in 2010 are no longer the political force in British politics that they once were, as their influence on Labour Party has gradually declined from its peak during the decade immediately after the Second World War. Passing resolutions is the easy part, as since 2000, all of the major unions have adopted at their annual conferences more than 20 resolutions critical of Israeli actions toward the Palestinians--none of which have had any real impact on the situation. Even the call in 2007 by the University and College Lecturers union (UCU) for an academic boycott--which was withdrawn for legal reasons--has had little

long term effect, as there has been no noticeable increase in discrimination against Jewish or Israeli academics than prior to their call.¹

As the umbrella body for British trade unions, the TUC does not possess the power to impose its resolutions on its member unions nor do the unions have any power to enforce a boycott themselves, especially as such a measure would be divisive among its membership. There is also the problem of how to enforce a boycott and convince consumers and the general population not to buy Israeli settlement goods. The TUC has called for consumer boycotts in the past--in the 1930s against the rise of the Nazis in Germany, and South Africa in the 1980s, though neither really succeeded in gaining mainstream consumer support.

The British trade union movement has had a long tradition of providing solidarity with any cause in the world where a trade union or working people find themselves under threat, and Palestine has been no exception. The TUC first declared its support for the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine in 1917,² and from the 1920s onwards, has been in regular contact with the Israeli trade union center, the Histadrut. The Left's support for Palestinian independence began during the 1960s and was complete by the time of the First Lebanon War in 1982. Thirty-five years

of often unquestioned support for Israel and the Histadrut ended that year, when the TUC passed its first-ever resolution critical of Israel, which also recognized the Palestinian people's right to self-determination.³ This was the key turning point for the UK trade union movement, which although it has maintained links with the Histadrut, from then on has passed many resolutions highly critical of Israeli actions, while at the same time only limited criticism of Palestinian activities. This in turn has led to outspoken criticism of Israel by the trade union movement, which has sometimes crossed the line into antisemitism. Many left-wing union members who support a boycott of Israel deny the existence of antisemitism from the Left or the Middle East, believing instead that in Britain, antisemitism only exists on the Right.

Until 2009, the TUC always resisted favoring one side over the other. Their 2009 Congress statement included a call for a boycott of goods and services originating in the Israeli settlements and a divestment campaign directed against companies "associated" with the occupation. It also supported the UN Goldstone report on the Israeli invasion of Gaza, a call for the end of arms sales to Israel, and was in favor of moves to suspend the EU-Israel preferential trade agreement and the EU agreement on a ban on the importing of goods from the settlements.⁴

The TUC's boycott decision has also to be seen in the light of what is happening in Britain today. The Reut Institute recently labeled London as one of six "hubs of delegitimization" in the world, where a network of anti-Zionist groups, hostile human rights organizations, and radical Islamists that use cultural, academic, legal, and financial weapons have come together to campaign against the delegitimization and demonization of the State of Israel.⁵ The result has been that Britain--more than any other country in the world--has promoted the Palestinian call for academic, trade union, media, medical, architectural, and cultural boycotts of Israel. The driving forces for the Boycotts, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel are the anti-Zionist activists on

the far Left and the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign (PSC).

The BDS campaign has, however, created an atmosphere in which Israelis--whether they are trade unionists, academics, or professionals--can easily be shunned, with possible negative implications for trade, cooperation, research funding, and invitations to conferences. Within the unions themselves, this has a direct effect on Jewish and non-Jewish union members who are opposed to boycotts by creating an atmosphere of discrimination against Jews and Israelis.

Just as Ben Gurion did in the 1920s, the PSC recognized in 2003 the need to forge links with the Labour movement and claims that 19 of Britain's largest trade unions are affiliated to their organization. Several union leaders are patrons of the PSC, including Chair of the PSC Hugh Lanning.⁶ The PSC writes many of the motions submitted to union conferences, which use similar wording and rhetoric. The far Left and the PSC are not concerned that a boycott may not be effective, but only seek the publicity value of yet another union decision to boycott Israel. Nor are they troubled with reasoned criticism or debate of Israeli policy, as their main objective is the state's delegitimization. Their UK BDS campaign, which is part of the worldwide BDS movement, is driven by the London-based PSC and not by their Palestinian trade union and NGO partners in Ramallah.

The TUC, which prior to 2009, was opposed to any form of a boycott of Israel, has always tried to treat equally and fairly both the Histadrut and its Palestinian counterpart, the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU). All three organizations are members of the international trade union movement, and the TUC has always supported international efforts to build and maintain links between both the Histadrut and the PGFTU.⁷

While the British unions and the TUC have no problem in dealing with the Histadrut on purely trade union matters, such as globalization and labor issues, they disagree with the Israelis over political issues and their policies toward the Palestinians. On the one

hand, they strongly support a two-state solution, Israeli and Palestinian joint union initiatives; on the other, they are willing to promote a boycott of goods from the settlements in the West Bank--a decision that has gained the support of the PGFTU and the Palestinian Authority, which in May 2009 started to enforce its own boycott of settlement goods.⁸

PSC policy is to campaign for a one-state solution, a general boycott of Israeli goods, and a cultural and sports boycott of Israel--all of which use the analogy of trade union support for the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa.⁹ Although affiliating with the PSC does not commit the unions to unquestioned support for all PSC policies, they are all committed to some extent to promoting PSC policies and literature to their memberships.¹⁰ The unions will not at present call for a full boycott of Israel, unless they are sure they will not face legal challenges similar those that forced the UCU to drop its academic boycott campaign.¹¹ However, in order to negate any possible prosecution by promoting a consumer boycott of settlement goods, the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC), which supports a boycott, has said that some Israeli goods--such as kosher products, which are used in Jewish religious observance--should not be targeted.¹²

The result is that the unions are able to promote PSC policies that include boycott and divestment among their members, which is effectively a backdoor endorsement of the boycott strategy. Many senior union officials are aware of this arrangement, which allows them to work with the Histadrut and the PGFTU while at the same time supporting the PSC.¹³ As a consequence, many of Britain's leading unions have regular contact with their Palestinian trade union counterparts while only a small number have any real contact with the Israeli trade union movement, the Histadrut. Since 2008, the PSC rather than the TUC has organized visits for trade union leaders to the region that concentrate on the Palestinian areas and problems. The TUC, which used to make regular visits to the

region, has refused to go in recent years citing "safety concerns."

Although many unions are linked with the PSC, their two main supporters are Britain's largest unions, Unison and the UCU, both of which have supported the Palestinian trade union movement since the 1980s. Even though they are legally unable to implement one, the UCU are still trying to institute an academic boycott of Israel as well as turning their attention to BDS. Unison, which has been working on international projects for over 20 years, is currently training Palestinian trade union officials and has produced an education pack aimed at UK trade union members explaining why they think Palestine is a trade union issue. Both the UCU and Unison differ from most unions, as their work with the Palestinians has the full support of their leaders and is led by them rather than by the activists as in other unions.

Following on the 2009 decision, the TUC launched in April 2010 a joint campaign with the PSC, "Would You Buy Stolen Goods?" The campaign leads with the accusation that produce from the Israeli settlements, which are built on "stolen Palestinian land," is illegal under international law. The TUC has emphasized that "This is not a call for a general boycott of Israeli goods and services, which would hit ordinary Palestinian and Israeli workers. Nor should workers in Britain put their own jobs at risk by refusing to deal with goods from the settlements." Instead they call for what they refer to as targeted, consumer-led sanctions to send a clear message against the settlements.¹⁴ Are they that naive to believe consumers will always differentiate between Israeli, Israeli settlement, and Palestinian produce? Or will consumers conflate the words "Israeli goods" and "boycott" as in the 2009 campaign in Britain to dissuade companies from using Eden Springs water coolers in their shops and offices just because Eden is an Israeli company?¹⁵

Even though relations between the Histadrut and the PGFTU have improved since the August 2008 signing of the landmark cooperation agreement¹⁶ between the two, the

British boycott movement felt confident enough of its position and union support in 2009 to intervene and apply pressure successfully on the PGFTU to issue a public call to boycott the Histadrut and settlement products.¹⁷ Since the TUC and many of the unions support a two-state solution, they will need to be persuaded to distance themselves publically from PSC demands for a full-scale boycott of Israeli goods and the delegitimization of the state of Israel; otherwise, there cannot be peace and reconciliation on the ground, and any initiatives between the Histadrut and the PGFTU are doomed to fail.

The attempt at in early June 2010 by the “Gaza flotilla” to break the Israeli blockade on Gaza has resulted in further criticism of Israel by several UK unions and the TUC.¹⁸ Unite, one of Britain’s largest unions, called for a complete boycott of Israeli goods and services,¹⁹ while the UCU approved a call to sever ties with the Histadrut.²⁰ The UCU and its fellow boycotters are not interested in hearing the arguments that the Histadrut is a well-established and longstanding member of the international labor movement or that BDS is contrary to solidarity, which is the *raison d’être* of every trade union around the world. All they see is that the Histadrut has been--and still is--a close ally of the Israeli government; they do, however, admit that the good working relationship between the Histadrut and the PGFTU creates a problem for their call to sever ties with the Histadrut. Even if additional unions--both in the UK and elsewhere--can be persuaded to support this boycott call, they will face anger and opposition to their proposals from many different trade unions throughout the world, including the American and German unions who strongly oppose BDS and its counterproductive results.

Those British union leaders who support BDS and the call to sever ties with the Histadrut are being unduly influenced by left-wing union activists, the political elite, and certain sections of the media rather than by direct pressure from their own union members. Union policies are usually determined by

annual conferences. However, union activists are using these conferences to promote their own political agendas, which in the case of the UCU and Unite is BDS. The reality is that the overwhelming majority of the six million union members in the UK are not interested in BDS nor do they attend PSC events.

The TUC Congress, expected to meet in September 2010, is due to discuss and vote on a report on future relations with the Histadrut. While the report may not recommend severing ties with the Histadrut, the activists who attend the TUC Congress may have other ideas. Severing ties with the Histadrut would be a very big step for the TUC, as the British Labour movement has had links with the Histadrut since 1920.

The international trade union movement, which has always been involved in political and social issues both at home and abroad, is the only democratically organized movement in the world whose principal concern has always been conditions of employment and the workplace. Since all these activities involve basic human rights, extensive cooperation exists between the trade union movement and human rights NGOs on joint international development projects, such as human rights, poverty reduction, and industrial development. In Britain, the TUC and the unions work closely on international development projects around the world with British NGOs such as Oxfam, Christian Aid, and War on Want, which was founded by the labour movement. However, the unions often pursue their own paths and as yet are not working on joint projects with the NGOs in the Palestinian territories. Cooperation between the groups is at present mainly limited to political campaigning or publicity for events that are often critical of Israel.²¹

At present there are two groups, TUFU (the Trade Union Friends of Israel)²² and TULIP (Trade Unions Linking Israel and Palestine),²³ working in Britain to present Israel’s case to the trade union movement, both of which are doing a good job bearing in mind the labour movement’s links with the PSC. The Histadrut is integral to any fight against delegitimization of the State of Israel, and the call to sever ties

with the Histadrut will hasten the Histadrut's involvement with the British unions in order to confront criticism of Israeli actions and explain why boycotts are counterproductive, harm the chances of peace and reconciliation, and are not the best way to support the Palestinians. There is also no reason the Histadrut cannot go some way to repeating its successes of the 1950s and 1960s, when it had a succession of permanent representatives based in London who successfully built links with the unions. Similarly, the Histadrut along with the Israeli Teachers Union must reinforce their international relationships with the international trade union movement before it is too late.

By focusing their efforts on boycotting goods and services from the Israeli settlements in the West Bank rather than the State of Israel, the boycotters believe they will be able to circumvent any possible legal challenges and charges of antisemitism. They also point to PGFTU support for a boycott of the settlements, even though it could directly affect the livelihoods of the 25,000 Palestinians who work there.

The British trade unions appear at present to be comfortable with their policy of boycotting settlement goods. They can point to support from the British government, which has issued guidelines about labeling goods from Israeli settlements²⁴ as well as a Foreign Office strategy aimed at "curbing settlement building,"²⁵ but they do appear to have reached a turning point. Their future attitudes toward Israel will be influenced, first, by any future UK-Palestinian and UK-Israel trade union cooperation, and second, by how the conflict is portrayed by the world media. The worry if the British labor movement continues to receive government support or there is further violence in the region, is that having taken the first step to boycott Israeli settlements goods, it will not take much for the unions to promote a boycott of all Israeli goods, sever links with the Histadrut, and then move to a *de facto* boycott of Israeli people.

In deciding to be part of the boycott campaign, the unions and their activists on the political Left have overlooked the reality that

the global BDS campaign directed at Israel since 2001 has failed: Israel's economy (as measured by GDP) has nearly doubled, and as a consequence of its booming economy, Israel was recently admitted to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Nor has the campaign for divestment been any more successful, as the European venture capital markets currently invest more in Israel than they do in any single European country.²⁶ The unions have bought into a failing BDS campaign, because they believe the human rights of the Palestinians are being violated. The truth, however, is that a one-sided anti-Israel narrative and propaganda exercise whose aim is to erode public support for Israel which the boycotters hope will eventually lead to the delegitimization of the State of Israel.

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**Some of the research for this essay was carried out by Yoni Cohen.*

NOTES

¹ For a history of the academic boycott campaign, see Ronnie Fraser, "The Academic Boycott of Israel: A Review of the Five-Year UK Campaign to Defeat It," *Post-Holocaust and Anti-Semitism*, No. 66 (March 2008),

<http://www.jcpa.org/JCPA/Templates/ShowPage.asp?DRIT=3&DBID=1&LNGID=1&TMID=111&FID=610&PID=0&IID=2051&TTL=The Academic Boycott of Israel: A Review of the Five->

[Year UK Campaign to Defeat It.](#)

² In August 1917, a special conference of the British Labour Party and the TUC approved their war aims memorandum, which contained a paragraph relating to Jewish rights. This statement, which was subsequently adopted in February 1918 at the London conference of the Socialist and Labour parties of the Allied countries, was the first official Labour declaration relating to rights of the Jews and a Jewish homeland in Palestine. See Schneier Levenberg, *The Jews and Palestine: A Study in Labour Zionism* (London: Poale Zion, 1945),

pp. 204-5.

³ Emergency motion submitted to the 1982 TUC Congress by the Fire Brigades Union. TUC Congress proceedings 1982, International Committee debate, pp. 615-17.

⁴ TUC General Council Statement on the Middle East, September 17, 2009, <http://www.tuc.org.uk/congress/tuc-16991-f0.cfm>.

⁵ Amir Mizroch, "Hubs of Delegitimation," *Jerusalem Post*, December 24, 2009.

⁶ See PSC trade union page for the list of unions affiliated to the PSC:

http://www.palestinecampaign.org/Index5b.asp?m_id=1&l1_id=7&l2_id=34.

⁷ One such effort took place in 2008, under the auspices of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the Histadrut, and the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU)--both of which are affiliated to the ITUC. A landmark agreement was signed to protect the rights of Palestinian workers employed by Israeli employers, and to base future relations on negotiations, dialogue, and joint initiatives to advance "fraternity and coexistence between the two peoples." The agreement draws on the terms of an initial 1995 agreement that could not be fully implemented in the intervening years and allows for the remittance of 50 percent of the

union dues of Palestinians legally employed by Israeli employers--an arrangement that exists nowhere else in the world. ITUC Press Release, August 6, 2008, <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article2334>.

⁸ Tani Goldstien, "Palestinian Minister: Boycott Only Against Settlement Products", *Ynetnews*, June 8, 2010, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3901780,00.html>.

Ali Waked, "PA Boycott Threatens Tradesmen with Jail Time," *Ynetnews*, May 18, 2010, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3891081,00.html>.

⁹ See the website of the PSC, <http://www.palestinecampaign.org>.

¹⁰ See PSC trade union page for the list of unions affiliated to the PSC,

http://www.palestinecampaign.org/Index5b.asp?m_id=1&l1_id=7&l2_id=34.

¹¹ On September 26, 2008, Solicitors Mishcon de Reya wrote to the University and College Union on behalf of a group of UCU members, to formally threaten legal action unless the boycott motion were abandoned. Also see Peter Kingston, "Lecturers Threaten to Sue Union over Israel Boycott," *The Guardian*, October 14, 2008, and Peter Kingston, "Universities Union Denies Israel Motion Overstepped Mark," *The Guardian*, October 15, 2008. In addition, the Stop the Boycott campaign obtained and published a legal opinion on of UCU motion 25, which was passed at the union's annual congress in Manchester on May 28, 2008. The legal advice stated that "it would be unlawful for the union to pass the motion." See <http://www.stoptheboycott.org/files/ucu%20opinion%20Final.PDF>.

¹² Marcus Dysch and Stephanie Brickman, "Scottish Union Boycott 'Will Breach Race Act,'" *Jewish Chronicle*, April 30, 2009.

¹³ The National Union of Teachers (NUT) passed a resolution at its 2008 conference that committed the NUT to working with the PSC and distributing PSC literature to its membership. The NUT is also currently working with the Histadrut on a joint

education program for Israeli and British teachers. See

<http://www.teachers.org.uk/resources/word/Conf-Resolutions08.doc>.

¹⁴ See TUC press release issued April 8, 2010, <http://www.tuc.org.uk/international/tuc-17817-f0.cfm> and briefing for trade unionists, <http://www.tuc.org.uk/extras/settlementsbriefing.pdf>. See also Jonny Paul, "Calls for Settlement Boycott in UK," *Jerusalem Post*, April 12, 2010. Unison has already indicated its support for this campaign, with its website stating that "the British government has recognised that the settlements are illegal and an obstacle to peace. Yet produce from Palestine's stolen land--fruits, herbs, beauty products, DIY tools--are being sold in our supermarkets and shops, helping to economically sustain the settlements and strengthening the occupation." See <http://www.unison.org.uk/international/pages/view.asp?did=10989>.

¹⁵ Jonny Paul, "Scottish Pro-Palestinian Group 'Fabricates' Story of Israeli Boycott," *Jerusalem Post*, December 13, 2008.

¹⁶ See <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article2334>.

¹⁷ At the beginning of November 2009, The Trade Union Friends of Israel (TUFI) took a delegation of senior trade unionists to Israel and the Palestinian territories. As part of this trip, the delegation spent a day in the West Bank city of Nablus and met with Shahir Sa'ad, the general secretary of the PGFTU. Following the meeting, Britain's boycott movement issued public calls to boycott the Histadrut. For full details see: <http://www.tuliponline.org/?p=1260>.

¹⁸ TUC condemns attack on Gaza aid flotilla, May 31, 2010, <http://www.tuc.org.uk/international/tuc-18003-f0.cfm>.

¹⁹ Jonny Paul, "UK's Largest Union Calls for Israel Boycott," *Jerusalem Post*, June 6, 2010.

²⁰ UCU 2010 Congress motion No. 31, Palestine Solidarity, BDS, and Histadrut, <http://www.ucu.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=4649>.

²¹ The UK wide speaker tour "Israel, the Palestinians, and Apartheid: The Case for Boycott and Sanctions," from December 4-9, 2009, included speakers from the UCU, War on Want, and South Africa and the Palestinian Territories. Their keynote speaker was a South African trade unionist, Bongani Masuku, who had been reported to the South African Human Rights Commission. That week, the commission released its findings, in which it unequivocally found that Masuku's statements had amounted to hate speech. He hurriedly left the UK and returned to South Africa shortly after the tour had started. See <http://www.waronwant.org/news/events/event/latest-events/16724-israel-the-palestinians-and-apartheid-the-case-for-sanctions-and-boycott> and <http://www.hurryupharry.org/2009/12/03/bric-up-tours-hate-speaker-around-british-universities>.

²² For more information about TUFI, see: <http://www.tufi.org.uk/index.html>.

²³ For more information about TULIP, see: <http://www.tuliponline.org/>.

²⁴ Herb Keinon, "UK Says West Bank Produce Must Be Marked 'Settlement' or 'Palestinian'," *Jerusalem Post*, December 10, 2009.

²⁵ Donald Macintyre, "Israelis Bristle at Attempt to Limit Exports," *Independent*, November 17, 2008.

²⁶ Jon Haber, "BDS by the Numbers," March 5, 2010, <http://www.solomoniam.com/blog/archive/2010/03/bds-by-the-numbers/>.

"Israel Admitted to the OECD," *Daily Telegraph*, May 11, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/7708673/Israel-admitted-to-the-OECD.html>. For information on Israel's "economic miracle," see: Dan Senor and Saul Singer, *Start up Nation* (New York: Twelve, Hachette Book Group, 2008).