

A slander on our movement: ISO rebuts SWP (US) charges of anti-Semitism

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“PART OF the deepening pattern of Jew-baiting and anti-Semitism in the middle-class left worldwide.”

You might think that such an ugly and provocative statement had to come from a right-wing, pro-Zionist publication, where the accusation of anti-Semitism is routinely used against all expressions of opposition to Israel's war on the Palestinian people.

But no. It is part of an article titled “Israel Boycotts and Divestment Serve as Cover for Anti-Semitism” in the April 6 edition of the *Militant*, the newspaper of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). In it, writer Paul Pederson attacks other socialists and their organizations (including the International Socialist Organization, and myself in particular) for participating in the growing international boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement against Israeli apartheid.

We face the same charge of anti-Semitism from the pro-Israel side in its campaign to try to intimidate and silence anti-Zionist activists. Considering that I recently spoke on a pro-Palestine panel alongside SWP member Dan Fein, the *Militant* seems an unlikely source for the argument. So it's fair enough to ask just which side these socialists are on.

The growth of the global BDS movement that is helping to shine a spotlight on Israel's barbaric and racist policies towards Palestinians is perhaps the most exciting and positive development pro-Palestine activists have seen in a long time.

In a struggle that has unfortunately been artificially separated from the broader antiwar movement and has faced a number of obstacles in building solidarity—not least of which is the incessant accusation of anti-Semitism—leftists and progressives everywhere should be welcoming this urgently needed step forward.

The call for BDS against Israel comes from Palestinians themselves. More than 170 Palestinian organizations, including unions and civil society groups, were part of the July 2005 call for activists around the world to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel similar to those applied to South Africa in the apartheid era. We appeal to you to pressure your respective states to impose embargoes and sanctions against Israel. We also invite conscientious Israelis to support this call, for the sake of justice and genuine peace.

In the wake of the Israeli assault on Gaza that began at the end of last year, the initiative gained new momentum. Students on campuses across Britain and the U.S., for example, have been organizing to put pressure on their administrations to divest from companies that profit from Israel's ongoing war on the Palestinian people. Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) at Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., won this demand, making Hampshire the first college in the U.S. to divest.

It seems like a no-brainer that these students should be applauded and their efforts seen as a source of inspiration for other students that we can actually win. Instead, the SWP has chosen to condemn

them as undercover anti-Semites.

In February, South African dockworkers in Durban refused to offload a ship carrying Israeli cargo and successfully blocked scab labor from doing so. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) issued a statement shortly afterward, encouraging “other workers and unions to follow suit and to do all that is necessary to ensure that they boycott all goods to and from Israel until Palestine is free.” And the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) stated that “the worker victory in Durban yesterday spurs COSATU members on to more determined action in order to isolate the apartheid state of Israel.”

This dockworkers’ action and the South African unionists’ comparison of Israel to South African apartheid are curiously missing from Pederson’s article. Does he make an exception here? Or does the SWP think that these dockworkers were “Jew-baiting”?

UNDERLYING PEDERSON’S criticism of the BDS movement is his contention that Israel is not really an apartheid state that should be compared to South Africa. He dismisses the idea that the daily suffering, humiliation and death endured by Palestinians should be compared to the apartheid system. “Applied to Israel,” he writes, “the term ‘apartheid’ is simply an epithet, rather than a scientific description of a social structure.”

Really?

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and famed opponent of apartheid, has an entirely different take on the matter. In an article titled “Apartheid in the Holy Land,” he wrote:

“I’ve been very deeply distressed in my visit to the Holy Land; it reminded me so much of what happened to us Black people in South Africa...Have our Jewish sisters and brothers forgotten their humiliation? Have they forgotten the collective punishment, the home demolitions, in their own history so soon?”

I’m going with Desmond Tutu’s firsthand experience on this one, rather than whatever Pederson means by “a scientific description” (incidentally, he never actually provides one). There is, in fact, quite an impressive list of people, including Jewish South African leftists Ronnie Kasrils and Max Ozinsky, who agree wholeheartedly that what exists in Israel is some form of apartheid.

Today’s anti-Israel BDS movement is very proudly modeled on the international campaign against South African apartheid, which played a crucial role in bringing down the system of racial separation.

But Pederson is content to ignore these voices and concentrates instead on his straw-man argument that misrepresents the comparisons activists are making between Israel and South Africa. “The attempt to paint [Israel and South Africa] as the same simply obfuscates the real social and class relations in Israel and the tasks facing the toilers there to chart a revolutionary course forward,” he writes.

Now, I’ve been to a number of meetings in New York City recently on the topic of Israeli apartheid, and at every single one of them, the differences between the two racist states are always analyzed and discussed. Pederson is simply being dishonest.

I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone argue that South Africa and Israel are exactly the same—of course they are not. But the similarities are simply more overwhelming than the differences, and

they certainly merit a discussion.

What would Pederson call a state whose indigenous inhabitants have been shoved into refugee camps on their own land, with the bogus promise of eventual “nationhood,” only to be controlled, harassed and brutalized by an occupying force?

How does he explain the monstrous wall that tears through historical Palestine, separating Palestinians from their land, resources, livelihood and families?

How does he explain a state that has “Jewish-only” roads and settlements, is filled with checkpoints and trigger-happy soldiers, and issues ID cards that indicate whether or not someone is Jewish?

What “scientific description” would he use for a state that has a law proclaiming the right of Jews everywhere around the world to live in what is now Israel, but that explicitly denies that same right to Palestinians who were born in the Arab villages that Israel is now built upon?

If he’s going to claim that Israel isn’t an apartheid state, then he needs to have some good answers to these questions, beyond twisting the arguments of Palestinian solidarity activists.

There are some important differences between the particular forms of apartheid in today’s Israel compared to yesterday’s South Africa.

The white South African regime, for example, sought to exploit Black labor while forcing Black South Africans to live separately, in “homelands,” infamously known as bantustans, or townships on the outskirts of cities and towns.

The goal of the Israeli state, however, is to exclude Palestinians from playing any active role in the economy. In fact, the concept of “Jewish land, Jewish labor, Jewish produce” was instrumental in the Zionist colonization of Palestine and was implemented through Histadrut, Israel’s twisted version of a trade union. In an excellent article on ElectronicIntifada.net titled “Histadrut: Israel’s racist ‘trade union,’” author Tony Greenstein explains “that Histadrut, an organization of the settler Jewish working class, was the key Zionist organization responsible for the formation of the Israeli state.”

FRANKLY, I don’t think Pederson actually understands “the real social and class relations in Israel” that he feels so confident in schooling the rest of us about. His attempt to apply Marxism to the historical oddity that is the state of Israel is clumsy in the extreme.

Pederson’s charge of anti-Semitism rests on the idea that working-class Israelis and Palestinians have a common interest in overthrowing the Israeli capitalist class—therefore, boycotts and divestment only alienate the Israeli working class, who we should be trying to win away from Zionism.

This may sound like a Marxist argument, but it isn’t. In fact, by this logic, it’s unclear why anyone should have supported the divestment movement against South African apartheid. Wouldn’t sanctions against apartheid have alienated the white South African working class? Pederson’s claims about Israel sound a lot like Ronald Reagan’s explanation for opposing sanctions on South Africa—he called his policy “constructive engagement.”

Moshe Machover and Akiva Orr, former members of the now-defunct Israeli Socialist Organization, provide us with a much better approach to understanding the peculiarities of the Israeli state in their 1969 article, “The class character of Israel”:

The experience of classical capitalist countries has often demonstrated that internal class conflicts and interests dominate external conflicts and interests. However, this theory fails to hold in certain specific cases. For example, in a colonized country under the direct rule of a foreign power, the dynamics of the colonized society cannot be deduced simply from the internal conflicts of that society, since the conflict with the colonizing power is dominant.

Israel is neither a classic capitalist country, nor is it a classic colony. Its economic, social, and political features are so unique that any attempt to analyze it through the application of theories or analogies evolved for different societies will be a caricature. An analysis must be based rather on the specific characteristics and specific history of Israeli society.

Pederson seems to base some of his case on the fact that there are Palestinians who live inside Israel, and they are considered Israeli citizens (though it is second-class citizenship). The BDS movement, he insists, might hurt them, too. This gives the impression that Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel are in the same boat.

But what Pederson doesn't understand is that Israel is not a state of its citizens. It is explicitly a Jewish state. This means that special rights and privileges are afforded to Jewish Israelis, while Palestinian citizens of Israel are subjected to racist policies in virtually every aspect of life.

THE REAL problem with Pederson's argument is that in his insistence that Israeli workers must not be alienated, he ends up alienating Palestinians instead. Just as socialists would not tailor our tactics so as to avoid offending the white working class under apartheid—or racist white workers in the Jim Crow South, for that matter—we shouldn't in the case of apartheid Israel either.

Pederson's rigid formulas extend to his position on the Palestinian national liberation movement.

He takes issue with me in particular over the idea that I would agree with anything said by Khaled Meshaal, a leader of Hamas, the organization that was democratically elected by Palestinians to a majority in the Palestinian Authority's legislative assembly.

Again, Pederson takes the low road by using a questionable quotation from the Hamas charter from 1988 to try to imply that I'm an anti-Semite—as if I ever said I agree with everything Hamas has ever written, and as if Hamas is the same organization today as it was in 1988.

Here's what Khaled Meshaal said in a 2006 interview, when asked if there was any truth to the claims we hear in the mainstream media that Hamas just wants to “kill the Jews”:

This is not correct. Killing Jews is not our aim. For centuries, we have lived in Palestine peacefully with Jews and Christians of all kinds.

We are fighting Israel because it occupies our land and oppresses our people. We are fighting Israel to finish this occupation. We want to live freely on our land just as other nations. We want to have our own country just like other people. But the Zionist movement came from all over the world to occupy our land. And the real owner of the land has been kicked out. This is the root of the problem.

I agree with that statement. And clearly, a large number of Palestinians do, too.

Perhaps most enraging about Pederson's article is that nowhere in it will you find even a recognition that Palestinians might be suffering more than Israelis! There is no excuse for this, especially in the aftermath of Israel's most recent onslaught on Gaza that killed over 1,400 Palestinians in 22 days,

leaving the already blockaded territory in ruins.

And, incidentally, Israel's Gaza assault had the support of 84 percent of Israeli Jews, according to opinion polls.

Of course, there are Israeli Jews who will become disgusted with Zionism and turn against it (Orr and Machover are clearly testament to this). But we can't ignore the fact that an overwhelming majority of Israelis support their government's violent and racist policies against Palestinians—because those policies allow Israel to continue existing on stolen land.

Marxists shouldn't ignore reality. The fact is that the Israeli working class materially benefits from the financial support the state receives from its patron, the U.S. government. (The ISO, by the way, has never argued that the "Israel lobby" controls the U.S. government, as Pederson's article disingenuously suggests—we have written many articles in our publications arguing the opposite).

As Machover and Orr explain:

Israel is not a country where foreign aid flows entirely into private pockets; it is a country where this aid subsidizes the whole of society. The Jewish worker in Israel does not get his share in cash, but he gets it in terms of new and relatively inexpensive housing, which could not have been constructed by raising capital locally; he gets it in industrial employment, which could not have been started or kept going without external subsidies; and he gets it in terms of a general standard of living which does not correspond to the output of that society.

That is the reality of the state of Israel. And that is why a movement for boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel can play such an important role. It can help to build international working class solidarity—which we caught a glimpse of, thanks to the brave dockworkers in Durban.

How's that for "charting a revolutionary course forward"?

Pederson and the SWP need to get a grip. Rather than using half-truths and lies to slander other socialists and pro-Palestine activists (when we finally have some real momentum going!), they should take up some of the real questions facing the movement. And then they should decide which side they're on: the oppressor or the oppressed?

P.S.

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