

Boycott Apartheid Israel

Open Letter from US Trade Unionists - We must 'oppose U.S. military and economic aid for Israel.'

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Open Letter from U.S. Trade Unionists to AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka: Boycott Apartheid Israel; December 2009.

"Sanctions alone cannot eradicate apartheid; that task is ultimately left to the people of South Africa themselves. But economic pressure and political isolation of the South African government can hasten the day when justice and freedom reign in that troubled land." —Richard L. Trumka, June 23, 1987

"We call on other workers and unions to . . . do all that is necessary to ensure that they boycott all goods to and from Israel until Palestine is free." — Congress of South African Trade Unions, February 3, 2009

"We urge all international trade unions to heed the call of Palestinian civil society, including the trade union movement, by endorsing BDS. We further urge all trade unions and trade union federations to sever their links with the Histadrut, a Zionist organization that has always played a key role in perpetuating Israel's occupation, colonization and system of racial discrimination, and that has justified and applauded Israel's war crimes in Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009." — Palestinian Trade Union Movement Unanimously Confirms Support for BDS, November 25, 2009

Dear Brother Trumka:

As labor and anti-apartheid activists, we strongly disagree with your October 27 speech denouncing the movement for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel.

The BDS campaign was initiated in 2005 by Palestinian civil society — including its entire labor movement. Inspired by the international boycott that helped topple apartheid South Africa, it demands Palestinian self-determination, including an end to Israeli military occupation, the right of refugees to return to the land from which they have been ethnically cleansed since the Nakba of 1947-1948, and equal rights for all throughout historic Palestine.

Support for BDS has grown rapidly, especially since December 27, 2008, when Israel broke a truce with the democratically-elected Palestinian government and attacked Gaza. In the resulting massacre, Israel killed more than 1400 Palestinians, hundreds of them children; maimed and wounded thousands more; and utterly devastated Gaza's infrastructure, including the Gaza headquarters of the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions.

In the best tradition of labor solidarity, South African and Australian dockworkers responded by

refusing to handle Israeli cargo, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) “call[ed] on 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.”

Their action echoes the West Coast dock-workers who refused to handle cargo for Nazi Germany (1934) or fascist Italy (1935); those in Denmark and Sweden (1963), the San Francisco Bay Area (1984) and Liverpool (1988), who refused shipping for apartheid South Africa; those in Oakland who refused to load bombs for the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile (1978); and those at all twenty-nine West Coast ports who held a May Day strike against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (2008).

Since Gaza, the 2005 BDS call also been endorsed or reaffirmed by numerous other labor bodies around the world, including the trades union congresses of Ireland, Scotland and the UK; UNISON (UK); Transport and General Workers’ Union (UK); L’Union syndicale Solidaires Industrie (France); Canadian Union of Postal Workers; Canadian Union of Public Employees-Ontario; six Norwegian trade unions; and Intersindical Alternativa de Catallunya.

It is no accident that South African workers play a leading role in the BDS movement. They remember that Israel was apartheid South Africa’s closest ally. They agree with Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s observation that Israel’s treatment of Palestinians is “worse than apartheid.” They recognize that the Gaza massacre mirrors the infamous Sharpeville massacre of 1960, which gave birth to an international boycott against South African apartheid.

This rising tide of labor support for BDS has only been further vindicated by Israel’s rejection of the war crimes indictments issued against it by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the UN’s Goldstone Report and numerous other bodies — many of them Israeli.

The BDS campaign is particularly relevant to workers in the United States.

In the past ten years alone, U.S. military aid to Israel was \$17 billion; over the next decade, it will be another \$30 billion. As in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, U.S. aircraft, white phosphorous and bullets kill and maim on behalf of the occupiers, while both Democratic and Republican politicians condone the slaughter. Amidst deepening economic crisis, workers in this country pay a staggering human and financial price for U.S.-Israeli war and occupation throughout the region.

Despite all of this, however, many U.S. labor officials — often without the knowledge or consent of union members — have ignored Palestinian appeals for justice. Instead, they continue to collaborate with the Histadrut, the Zionist labor federation that not only supported Israel’s war on Gaza, but which has spearheaded — and whitewashed — racism, apartheid, dispossession and ethnic cleansing against the Palestinians since the 1920s.

They have invested billions of our union pension funds and retirement plans in State of Israel Bonds. They have actively encouraged the U.S. to provide the money and weapons that oppress Palestinian workers, and to ensure Israel’s role as watchdog for U.S. domination over the oil-rich Middle East.

The Jewish Labor Committee has exploited its carefully groomed “progressive” image by hurling false accusations of “anti-Semitism” against those who challenge racism in the U.S. labor movement, who support affirmative action for workers of color, who criticize notorious “AFL-CIA” support U.S. war and empire, and — above all — who oppose apartheid Israel.

Thus, it was the JLC that in July 2007 mobilized top AFL-CIO and Change to Win officials to condemn British union support for BDS. It is the JLC that seeks to deflect outrage over the Gaza massacres by launching Trade Unions Linking Israel and Palestine, whose stated purpose is to sabotage the BDS campaign, while demanding boycotts against Iran, which — unlike Israel — receives no U.S. aid and

has no “weapons of mass destruction.”

In the 1980s, as president of the United Mine Workers, you rightly argued that, “economic pressure and political isolation of the South African government can hasten the day when justice and freedom reign in that troubled land.” Two decades later, the cause of “justice and freedom” for Palestinians requires no less of you as president of the AFL-CIO. As trade unionists, we must immediately and completely:

1. Divest from State of Israel Bonds.
2. Support workers’ refusal to handle Israeli cargo.
3. Break ties with the racist Histadrut.
4. Oppose U.S. military and economic aid for Israel.

Initial Signers:

(List in formation — *For identification only)

Monadel Herzallah, President, Arab American Union Members Council, California

Larry Adams, Co-Convener, New York City Labor Against the War; Former President, NPMHU L. 300*

Michael Letwin, Co-Convener, New York City Labor Against the War; Former President, UAW L. 2325/ALAA*; Al-Awda NY; International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network/Labor

Brenda Stokely, Co-Convener, New York City Labor Against the War; Former President, AFSCME DC 1707*; Co-Chair, Million Worker March Movement

Sam Weinstein, Former President, UWUA L. 132*; International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network/Labor

Stanley Heller, AFT L. 1547*, Delegate, CT Central Labor Council*

Marty Goodman, Former Executive Board Member, TWU L.100*

Fred Mason, Maryland AFL-CIO*

Clayola Brown, A. Philip Randolph Institute, AFL-CIO*

Frank Rosen, General Vice President (retired), UE*

Steve Zeltzer, Producer, Labor Video Project

Anthony Arno, National Writers Union/UAW L.1981*

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International Endorsers:

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P.S.

* Issued by Labor for Palestine

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