

Canadian Union Takes Important Step against Israeli Apartheid

by Adam Hanieh

At the annual convention of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Ontario, held 24-27 May 2006 in Ottawa, the union passed a resolution of historic importance. Resolution 50 -- adopted unanimously by the 900 delegates at the largest convention in the union's history -- expressed support for the global campaign against Israeli apartheid. The union stated that it would educate its members on the apartheid nature of the Israeli state and Canadian political and economic support for these practices. It also declared that CUPE Ontario would participate in the international campaign of boycott, divestment, and sanctions against Israel until the realization of Palestinian self-determination. Most importantly, the union highlighted the significance of the right of return of Palestinian refugees as a critical component of Palestinian self-determination.

Resolution 50 is a vital step for both Palestinian rights and the North American labor movement. CUPE Ontario is the largest public sector union in Ontario and represents over 200,000 workers in the most highly populated province of Canada. The resolution represents the most powerful statement in support of Palestinian rights ever made by a North American trade union.

Two days after Resolution 50 was adopted, another boycott resolution was passed by the largest union of university teachers in Britain, the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE). NATFHE, representing around 70,000 members, declared its active support of boycotts against Israeli academics and academic institutions that do not publicly take an explicit stand against Israeli apartheid and Israel's discriminatory educational system.

These two resolutions represent the latest in a snowballing movement to isolate Israeli apartheid in the manner of South African apartheid. A long list of institutions, city councils, religious organizations, political parties and

unions have endorsed the call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (see below for a selected list of these initiatives). Two weeks ago, the Green Party of the United States issued a powerful policy statement that supported "divestment from and boycott of the State of Israel until such time as the full individual and collective rights of the Palestinian people are realized." In February 2006, the Church of England's general synod -- including the Archbishop of Canterbury -- voted to disinvest church funds from companies profiting from the Israeli occupation. On 16 December 2005, the regional council of the Sør-Trøndelag in Norway passed a motion calling for a comprehensive boycott on Israeli goods, to be followed up with an awareness-raising campaign across the region. Sør-Trøndelag was the first Norwegian county to boycott South Africa and is now the first to boycott Israeli apartheid.

This growing movement has provoked a widespread crisis within the Zionist movement. The Israeli press is full of stories, editorial comments, and debates about the boycott, divestment, sanctions campaign. No other international solidarity effort has so dominated the Israeli debate.

Underlying most of this commentary is a deep fear that the identification of Israel with apartheid is reaching a critical mass within popular consciousness worldwide. The response of the Zionist movement has been strikingly incompetent and reflects their inability to deal with the charge of apartheid.

Take for instance the Canadian Jewish Congress's (CJC) "action alert" against the CUPE Ontario decision. The alert raises three questions that the CJC urges its supporters to raise with CUPE Ontario leaders:

Last summer, Israel withdrew its settlements from Gaza and the northern West Bank. A new Israeli government has just been elected on a platform of continuing this disengagement process. Why would CUPE Ontario call for a boycott that will punish Israelis just as these important steps are being taken?

The Palestinian election of a Hamas-dominated government that supports

terrorism and is committed to the destruction of Israel has led to an economic crisis; international aid has correctly been denied to this recognized terrorist organization. Concerned Canadians should be looking to offer humanitarian help to the Palestinians, not to punish Israelis. Why would CUPE Ontario fail to use its voice in a constructive way?

CUPE Ontario's resolution calls for the unlimited return of refugees to Israel. It is well recognized that this approach would spell the end of a Jewish state. Why is CUPE Ontario adopting this extreme position?

The most striking feature of the CJC alert is that it completely avoids any mention of the question of apartheid. The word itself does not appear at all in the entire statement. This is a most remarkable omission and can only be considered deliberate given that the main thrust of the CUPE Ontario decision (see below) is the comparison with South African apartheid. Indeed, the first item of the CUPE resolution is to conduct an "education campaign about the apartheid nature of the Israeli state." Only one conclusion can be drawn from this omission: the CJC is neither able nor willing to argue against the charge of Israeli apartheid.

The three points raised by the CJC confirm this conclusion. While the CJC praises Israeli "disengagement," this so-called concession is widely accepted as the final step in the construction of an apartheid solution. Apartheid-era South Africa placed the black population into territorially disconnected areas called Bantustans. Bantustans appeared to give blacks control over their own municipal affairs while denying them self-determination and any real or effective control of their lives. Movement in and out of the Bantustans was controlled by permits and pass cards. Economic control remained in the hands of the white apartheid state. This is precisely the situation that "disengagement" is meant to formalize in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

All informed commentators agree that Olmert's disengagement plan is aimed at leaving the major settlement blocs in the West Bank intact. Olmert himself touts this as the major plank of his plan. The aim is to win

international acceptance for Palestinian Bantustans -- the Palestinian population crowded into isolated and divided cantons separated by settlements, Israeli-only roads and military checkpoints. This is not a new strategy; it has been the clear intention of Israeli leaders since the occupation of these areas in 1967.

The current situation in the Gaza Strip is a powerful illustration of this apartheid reality. Israel completely controls the economy and borders of this tiny area that constitutes the most densely populated place on earth. Israeli missiles can be dropped on Gaza day and night, with the population starved from all work, outside supplies, and possibility of travel. This is what "disengagement" portends for the West Bank.

Precisely because Israel controls all flows of funds, people, and goods into the isolated Palestinian Bantustans, the CJC is able to champion the severing of aid to the Palestinian Authority. In the last month, this has led to deaths of at least four hospitalized Palestinians who were unable to obtain dialysis treatment due to Israeli control of what goes in and out of Palestinian areas. A few weeks ago, Palestinian prison guards were forced to appeal to relatives of inmates to provide food because there was not enough to feed prisoners. Enforced mass starvation of a civilian population is quite simply a war crime. An important statement signed two weeks ago by every major Palestinian organization in Canada put it this way: Palestinian right to life should not be conditional on acquiescence to Israeli apartheid.

Finally, the third CJC talking point reveals the crux of the debate. The CJC states that the right of return of Palestinian refugees "would spell the end of a Jewish state." Israeli apartheid is founded upon the notion of an exclusively Jewish state that denies equal rights to everyone else. In 1948, 80% of the indigenous Palestinian population were driven from their homes and land and became refugees. The Israeli state guarantees any person of a Jewish background, anywhere in the world, the right to become a citizen of Israel, yet the indigenous population is refused their right to return. The

right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and land is not simply a legal question (although it is guaranteed under international law). Most significantly, it points to the fact that we should oppose any state that operates on the basis of one religious or ethnic exclusivity. The central goal of the anti-apartheid struggle is a state in which anyone can live, regardless of their religious or ethnic background. This unquestionably means the right of return of Palestinian refugees to their homes and lands from which they were expelled in 1948.

Jonathan Cook, an outstanding journalist for the British newspaper The Guardian, recently discussed how Olmert's disengagement plan confirms the basic premise of the current anti-apartheid struggle:

Olmert outlined to Israel's Haaretz newspaper the most serious issue facing Israel. It was, he said, the problem of how, when the Palestinians were on the eve of becoming a majority in the region, to prevent them from launching a struggle similar to the one against apartheid waged by black South Africans. Olmert's concern was that, if the Palestinian majority renounced violence and began to fight for one-man-one-vote, Israel would be faced by "a much cleaner struggle, a much more popular struggle -- and ultimately a much more powerful one". Palestinian peaceful resistance, therefore, had to be pre-empted by Israel.

The logic of Olmert's solution, as he explained it then, sounds very much like the reasoning behind disengagement and now convergence: "[The] formula for the parameters of a unilateral solution are: to maximise the number of Jews; to minimise the number of Palestinians". Or, as he put it last week, "division of the land, with the goal of ensuring a Jewish majority, is Zionism's lifeline".

Both the CUPE Ontario and NATFHE resolutions are big steps forward in the struggle against Israeli apartheid. They confirm that recognition of Israel as an apartheid state is now approaching a stage of popular acceptance. This

victory was not achieved overnight but is the culmination of the work of many activists worldwide who have persevered with the ongoing tasks of leafleting, postering, teach-ins, demonstrations, and many other activities. Most of all, it is testament to the unbelievable endurance of the Palestinian people on the ground in Palestine and in refugee camps throughout the region. Our challenge is to continue to deepen the confidence among wider layers of the population in Canada and elsewhere in arguing for and becoming active in the struggle against Israeli apartheid. The resolutions of the last week have made this task much easier.

Full Text of the Canadian Union of Public Employees Ontario Resolution:

CUPE ONTARIO WILL:

1. With Palestine solidarity and human rights organizations, develop an education campaign about the apartheid nature of the Israeli state and the political and economic support of Canada for these practices.
2. Support the international campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions until Israel meets its obligation to recognize the Palestinian people's inalienable right to self-determination and fully complies with the precepts of international law including the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.
3. Call on CUPE National to commit to research into Canadian involvement in the occupation and call on the CLC to join us in lobbying against the apartheid-like practices of the Israeli state and call for the immediate dismantling of the wall.

BECAUSE:

- The Israeli Apartheid Wall has been condemned and determined illegal under international law;

- Over 170 Palestinian political parties, unions and other organizations including the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions issued a call in July 2005 for a global campaign of boycotts and divestment against Israel similar to those imposed against South African Apartheid;
- CUPE British Columbia has firmly and vocally condemned the occupation of Palestine and have initiated an education campaign about the apartheid-like practices of the Israeli state.

A Selected List of Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Initiatives Globally Since March 2005

29 May 2006: Members of Britain's largest college teachers' union agreed on a boycott of Israel over what members called "apartheid" policies toward Palestinians, saying union members will refuse to cooperate with Israeli academics who do not "disassociate themselves from such policies. "The 69,000-member National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) debated the proposal for the boycott at its annual conference in the northern English city of Blackpool." Two parts of the motion passed with a show of hands while a third went to a vote. Under the boycott, union members also will not submit articles to Israeli research papers.

27 May 2006: CUPE Ontario declares that it will "Support the international campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions until Israel meets its obligation to recognize the Palestinian people's inalienable right to self-determination and fully complies with the precepts of international law including the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194."

14 May 2006: Green Party of the United States calls for "divestment from and boycott of the State of Israel until such time as the full individual and collective rights of the Palestinian people are realized."

7 February 2006: The Church of England's general synod -- including the Archbishop of Canterbury -- voted to disinvest church funds from companies profiting from Israel's occupation of Palestine.

16 December 2005: The regional council of the Sør-Trøndelag in Norway passed a motion calling for a comprehensive boycott on Israeli goods, to be followed up with an awareness-raising campaign across the region. Sør-Trøndelag has a population of 270,000 out of Norway's 4.6 million. Trondheim, Norway's third largest city, forms part of the region and will participate in the boycott initiative. Sør-Trøndelag was the first Norwegian county to boycott South Africa. Upholding this good tradition, the County council, again the first in the country, has decided to boycott Israeli goods, by not buying Israeli goods and by organizing awareness-raising efforts.

8 December 2005: The Socialist Left Party, a member of the center-left Norwegian government launched a solidarity campaign for Palestine beginning in the New Year. The campaign focuses on a consumer boycott of Israeli products and will push for a ban on any arms trade between the Norwegian government and the Israeli regime.

28 November 2005: The city council of Arbizu, in the Basque country, declared they will: "call for boycott, will support and execute it. The boycott consists of a consumer boycott of Israeli products as well as a boycott of all the firms, Basque or not, which make business with Israel, and non-cooperation with Israeli initiatives on the field of culture, education and sports."

8 August 2005: The Presbyterian Church (USA) published its divestment list that singles out Caterpillar, ITT Industries, Motorola, and United Technologies as concrete measures towards economic pressure against Apartheid Israel and its accomplices.

27 July 2005: A resolution passed by the Anglican Consultative Council in Nottingham, England, urged Anglican churches around the world to divest from companies whose activities profit from the occupation of Palestine.

13 July 2005: The UN International Conference of Civil Society for Peace in the Middle East unanimously adopted the Palestinian call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions.

March 2005: The World Council of Churches urged its member churches give "serious consideration" to pulling investments out of Israel and endorsed the 2004 decision by the Presbyterian Church of the United States to seek "phased selective divestment" from Israel. "The Central Committee takes note of the current action by the Presbyterian Church (USA) which has initiated a process of phased, selective divestment from multinational corporations involved in the occupation. This action is commendable in both method and manner, uses criteria rooted in faith, and calls members to do the 'things that make for peace' (Luke 19:42)," the WCC said.

Send a Note of Support to CUPE Ontario:

There is a lot of pressure being waged, and certainly going to be waged, against the CUPE resolution from conservative forces in the media, in government, and even the labor movement. Please send a note of support to the Ontario head of CUPE, Sid Ryan, at sryan@cupe.on.ca. Alternatively send support through the CUPE Ontario fax number at: (416) 299-3480 or through the website at <http://www.cupe.on.ca/>.

To lend your support and become active in the Boycott Israeli Apartheid campaign, e-mail: endapartheid@riseup.net.

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