

Speech for Bar Ilan conference

I have been involved in campaigning against the academic boycott for the last three years it is clear to me that although last years boycott attempt was overturned we did not win the boycott battle but we actually lost it, because the academic boycott campaigns in 2002 and 2003 politicised Universities worldwide which resulted in the issue of Israel and the Palestinians being discussed on campuses through out the world. The result of the 2005 AUT boycott campaign was that the issue has moved from the academic world into the public domain. The success of the academic boycott campaign is that everyone is now aware of it.

I would now like to talk about the Trade Unions in Britain and why they play an important role in the boycott activity?

Why are they so different to American and Israeli Unions?

It is because Britain's trade unions have a very long tradition of socialism and support for the policies of the left .The British Trades Union Congress the TUC is the oldest national, independent Trade Union organisation in the world holding its first Congress in 1868. The TUC has become the body responsible for looking after workers and Union interests in Great Britain.

The British Labour Party was established in 1900 as the political wing of the Trade Unions in order to protect workers rights and conditions through political action. From 1917 onwards, Britain's Trade Unions have supported the establishment of a Jewish State and the right of Jewish workers in all countries to have the same rights as others and that the Jewish people are allowed to return and settle in Palestine. From then on both the TUC and the Labour Party supported the establishment of a Jewish State and encouraged "Socialism in action", the Kibbutz movement in Palestine.

The TUC's relationship with the Histadrut goes back to the 1920's, Until the 1982 Lebanon war the Unions were very supportive of both Israel and the Histadrut. The

invasion of the Lebanon opened the door for what has what has since become the norm with many British unions; open criticism of Israeli actions with what appears to be limited criticism of Palestinian actions.

The boycott has been well supported in Britain for various reasons which include that academics are more organised in the UK than in America or Western Europe. Trade Union policy is decided at annual conferences by the activists who are mainly on the Left. Academics have always reflected the changing views of the Left. The difference between the activism of the Old Left and that of the New Left which started in the 1960's was that the activism of the Old Left had been directed at the workplace was replaced by the activism of the New Left concentrating on Social and political issues such as anti-colonialism and anti-Imperialism which emerged as part of the ideology of the New Left.

As a consequence Britain's two higher education trade unions the AUT and NATFHE are highly politicised and have pursued policies over the last 10-15 years which are anti-Israel and pro-Palestinian. It was because; I was opposed to these policies that I formed the Academic Friends of Israel in 2002. NATFHE, by the way, has had links with Bar Ilan University since the 1980's. Bar Ilan University appeared very high on Manfred Gerstenfeld's crime incitement factor. The AUT passed a resolution in 1983 critical of Israel which would not have looked out of place in 2002 if they had wished to reuse it. The education Unions are not alone as many of Britain's unions are or have been highly critical of Israel's actions.

I have attended the last two NATFHE conferences and in my view many delegates especially those on the Left are reluctant to accept that the demonisation of Israel and the use of double standards where Israel is concerned is anti-Semitic. With the merger of the two unions scheduled for this year I believe we have at least a year to prepare for future battles. However it may not come in the same form

Turning to last years AUT boycott attempt:

I could say we succeeded and by we I mean the Jewish community including myself because we had a well funded strategy and plan—all I can say is show me the money, because it certainly didn't come my way.

I believe that luck and being in the right place at the right time play a big part in life. Being in the right place has helped me once before with my exposure of Professor Wilkie who rejected a job application from an Israeli graduate.

This time we were lucky because we had Engage led by David Hirsch and Jon Pike to work with, for without them it would have been impossible for us on our own to overturn the AUT decision. This is the first lesson that I have learnt, that to overturn the boycott, no Jewish community or group can do it on its own as you need allies.

What also helped was the international cooperation that existed between us, SPME, and other groups in the United States proved that I was right in trying to build international links ever since the first AUT boycott attempt in 2003. For me it is a priority that all the major Jewish communities' world wide are encouraged form their own academic groups immediately in order to be ready for the next boycott attempt.

I also include Israel in this as we still don't have a group here. We all have many individual contacts but there is still a need for a group for us to link up with.

My role was to talk to people including the AUT and to find out what was going on, and also to run the PR campaign which I originally hoped would develop into "trial by the press". However the British press really was only interested during the run up to the AUT council meetings. The only way to get them to take notice was through the Israeli press and my thanks go to the Jerusalem Post who publishing

every story that I gave them. We received a lot of good PR, even though I am not a PR professional. The lesson I have learnt is that to run a successful campaign you need good PR.

Our groups are successful because they were in place well beforehand and had already built the connections. It is too late for communities to form their own group once the crisis has started and expect to be able to be successful. The lesson is be proactive and plan ahead.

The AUT boycott has been a defining moment for Anglo-Jewry. Some of our leaders still believe that battles of this nature should be dealt with by the UK alone and one should work behind the scenes and not rock the boat as it may cause more anti-Semitism. My view is that in 2005 International issues like boycott and divestment must be dealt with by an international coordinated response from the Jews in the Diaspora and Israel as this is the only way that issues such as this can be successfully dealt with in future.

I will give an example.

I was told by a member of the AUT international committee that what really had an effect on the AUT executive were the Nobel Prize winners and Rhodes Scholars letters. It was only at that point they realised that it was no longer a UK but an international issue and they had to do something about it. This is an example of the global cooperation I am talking about. There were other letters as well such the one from the National academy of Sciences, we in Britain however failed to get letters of support from such prestigious bodies. The petitions to the AUT however had little effect. What they did do however was to give the thousands of people all around the world who were against the boycott the opportunity to feel they are doing something. We must find a way of harnessing this support in future.

3 brief points:

1. We need to update regularly the list of joint projects between British and Israeli academics which involve one third of UK universities. This List needs to be extended to include cooperative projects between other countries and Israel.
2. I often have to refute motions that make inaccurate and false claims would like to have a contact at both the Israeli Education and Foreign Ministries who can check out these claims and obtain information for me.
3. I feel it is important that we all work together and prepare in good time for the 2007 EI world Congress. The AUT, NATFHE and the Israeli teachers' association are members. It is my understanding that the American education unions have a lot of influence within E I both financially and with regard to policy.

Finally some good new:

In Israel the response since last year has been led by the Universities which creates a problem for the British trade unions as the Universities are seen as the management a group they cannot deal with. The AUT and NATFHE both have policies that state they want to work with a union or a group that represents all Israeli academics from all Israeli universities. The AUT and NATFHE already have Palestinian partners so it was a priority to find an Israeli group they could work with. Yesterday John Pike and I had a long conversation here at the conference with Prof Zvi Cohen, chair of the coordination group for faculty associations for all 7 Israeli Universities and as a result we think we have found the Israeli partner for the AUT and Natfhe.

