

Bipartisan attacks against anti-occupation divestment campaigns

In April, the student senate at Earlham College, a Quaker liberal arts institution in Indiana, approved a resolution by consensus recommending the college endowment divest from three U.S. companies (Motorola, Hewlett Packard and Caterpillar) which are directly supporting the Israeli occupation in violation of international law. The resolution (thus far ignored by the college's board of trustees) follows decisions by a number of Quaker-affiliated organizations -- as well as the Presbyterian Church USA, the United Church of Christ, and other nonprofit groups -- to divest from these companies.

The response was swift. Within weeks, the Indiana state legislature passed a bipartisan resolution condemning the boycott/divest/sanctions campaign as "anti-Jewish," accusing it of "promoting a climate of hatred, intimidation, intolerance, and violence against Jews." Despite the absurdity of the notion that the consensus of an elected body of students at a college rooted in a Christian pacifist tradition would promote "violence against Jews" or anybody else, the resolution received near-unanimous support from both Republicans and Democrats.

A similar resolution passed in the Tennessee legislature as well, also with virtually unanimous bipartisan support.

The tactic of boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) has been used for years to pressure U.S. companies to stop illegally profiting from foreign occupations, particularly in cases where the United States has blocked the United Nations from enforcing its resolutions calling for withdrawal of occupation forces in accordance with the U.N. Charter. Boycott and divestment campaigns in previous decades targeted companies supporting South Africa's occupation of Namibia and Indonesia's occupation of East Timor. A campaign is currently underway, particularly strong in Europe, in support of BDS against the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara.

In the case of the Israeli occupation, however, supporters of the Israeli occupation and the right-wing Israeli government have mounted a strong counter-attack.

For example, Hillary Clinton -- the front runner for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination -- has declared that the BDS movement was working to "malign and undermine Israel and the Jewish people." Similarly, the Democratic-controlled State Assembly in California passed a non-binding resolution declaring BDS advocacy "anti-Semitic activities" which should "not be tolerated" on state university campuses.

For decades, student activism in solidarity with oppressed peoples in the Global South has attracted a variety of supporters, ranging from Christian pacifists to proponents of armed revolution, and from liberal Democrats to Marxist-Leninists. Similarly, while the BDS movement has attracted some hardline pro-Palestinian elements which could reasonably be considered anti-Israel (and, in a few cases, even anti-Semitic), the vast majority are sincere and principled supporters of human rights and international law.

This tendency by Democratic politicians to malign BDS supporters as the movement's most extreme elements is politically damaging for the party, which depends heavily on young progressive student volunteers. For example, Obama's very narrow victory in Indiana in the 2008 election was made possible in part by the hundreds of students from Earlham and other colleges in the state going door-to-door. These statements and resolutions are giving a signal that supporters of BDS and other campaigns for corporate responsibility are no longer welcome in the party.

A number of prominent Democratic politicians first became politically engaged while in college, working on divestment campaigns targeting apartheid South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. Their contemporaries will be much less inclined to become involved with a party which attacks them and unfairly portrays their human rights activism as a form of bigotry. As a result, the Democrats are in jeopardy of losing many of the very kind of idealistic young people with strong organizing skills the party needs.

The anti-BDS fervor has gone beyond statements and nonbinding resolutions. This spring, the Illinois legislature passed a unanimous measure sponsored by Democratic leaders which requires divesting state pension funds from companies that invest in Iran or Sudan, but ironically also calls for divesting from companies that boycott Israel, Israeli settlements, or otherwise use economic means to oppose the occupation.

As a result, state pension fund shares in any publicly-traded company -- even one that invests in Israel -- now have to be sold if they had a policy of boycotting the illegal settlements in the occupied territories. These would include socially-conscious companies like Ben & Jerry's, which manufactures and sells its ice cream in Israel but refuses to buy products used in their manufacturing if produced in Israeli settlements.

Support for the settlements through discouraging BDS has also been included in federal legislation. A clause in the "fast track" bill to help insure passage of the controversial Trans-Pacific Partnership which became law in June forces the Obama administration to pressure potential U.S. trading partners to no longer boycott products made in illegal settlements or to discourage their companies from supporting the Israeli occupation.

There appears, then, to be a growing acceptance by politicians of both parties of the neoconservative view that the enforcement of international humanitarian law -- such as provisions that bar companies from supporting illegal occupations -- should be opposed (at least as it applies to the United States and its allies) and that those who support the universal applications of such principles should be attacked, marginalized and punished, such as by labeling proponents as anti-Semitic or by hurting their businesses.

This bipartisan willingness to defame and punish those advocating socially-responsible investment policies also may be based upon the belief that defending corporate profits for companies like Motorola, Hewlett Packard, and Caterpillar is a higher priority than defending human rights. It may be only a matter of time before groups like Students for a Free Tibet -- which calls for boycotts and related activities targeting the Beijing government and U.S. companies that support that occupation of Tibet -- will be labeled as anti-Chinese racists. One can imagine other scenarios in which those who advocate divestment and similar actions against carbon polluters, arms manufacturers, and others will also be targeted by politicians.

Some have cautioned against interpreting such statements and legislation too broadly, arguing that politicians who support anti-BDS measures do so only because it impacts Israel and that they are being forced by some kind of rich cabal of Jews behind the scenes. Such rationalizations, however, really are anti-Semitic. No one has ever lost an election for refusing to attack advocates of socially-responsible investment policies.

This is why even those who do not necessarily support the BDS campaign against Israel or the Israeli occupation should oppose such efforts. At root, these anti-BDS efforts are about defending corporate profits, regardless of the moral and legal implications.

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