
SUPPORT THE UNDERDOG: BOYCOTT ISRAELI GOODS

On 22nd July and 5th August, both Saturdays, a small group of us held a Boycott Israeli Goods protest. We set up a stall outside Milletts in Wrexham (by chance opposite Marks & Sparks), leafleted passers-by, and did our best to answer questions. Both protests took place during the most recent Israeli attack on the Lebanon.

The idea of a boycott came from a comparison drawn between Israeli policies towards the Palestinians and the apartheid system once operated by racist South Africa. Successive Israeli governments have extended illegal Jewish settlements on the occupied West Bank so that the Palestinians there are split up into poverty-stricken bantustans which can have no effective economic links with each other. This makes a viable Palestinian state an impossibility. Just as boycotting South Africa helped to bring down apartheid there, so boycotting Israel could be an effective non-violent way to end Zionist apartheid. It looks like it could be another long campaign.

Sue and myself were there both times. Genny and Maurice were also at the first one, Huw and Linda at the second. Although I'd been on demos before, this was the first time I'd parked myself behind a banner – BOYCOTT ISRAELI GOODS – and tried to deal with a series of unpredictable questions and reactions from the public.

Most people just wanted to get on with their shopping. The woman who remarked as she walked past, *"Let them fight it out amongst themselves"*, was probably speaking for quite a few others. But of those who did respond in some way, I'd say most were sympathetic. Some people had serious questions and genuine concerns. There was a handful of outright opponents.

Most people were supportive – It struck me only later that nobody expressed any kind of anti-semitism. One woman said she thought that the Israelis get away with so much because they still paint themselves as victims, whereas the reality is different: they've now got their own victims. But you could see she was choosing her words carefully to avoid any impression of racial prejudice.

Some were undecided – Some people seemed to think that Israelis and Palestinians were evenly matched. Another comment was, *"If only they'd stop provoking the Israelis, things wouldn't be so bad for them."* Which goes to show the effectiveness of media spin: how come it's only the Israelis who are allowed the right to retaliate? (And, since they often 'retaliate' on a massive scale on the slightest pretext, doesn't this suggest that they were just waiting for the pretext in order to carry out a pre-planned attack?)

One guy, who seemed well-disposed to the idea of a boycott but hesitated about helping us to run the stall, was concerned that a Hizbollah rocket might hit an Israeli school. I had to agree with him that it could possibly happen and that, if it did, it would be a war crime. But it wouldn't alter the fact that the Palestinians were suffering a historic injustice, that in the Arab world Hizbollah were their only real supporters and that the Palestinians couldn't dictate tactics to them.

Another common concern was that the Palestinian leadership didn't recognise the state of Israel. But, as I later checked out, that's not so. Last February Ismail Haniyeh, leader of Hamas, said, *"If Israel declares that it will give Palestinians a state and give them back all their rights, then we are ready to recognise them."* John Pilger quotes this statement in his book **Freedom Next Time** (Bantam, 2006, available from Wrexham public library) and claims it was widely ignored in the western media.

A few were against – Two elderly women stopped to read the banner and looked so appalled that you had to sympathise and wonder what associations it had called to mind. One came over and just said, *"You know nothing!"*

A young Israeli woman who happened to be in Wrexham asked me pointedly whether I'd ever been to Israel. I said no, but had she ever been to Gaza? She said, *"No, we're not allowed to go there."* (This is only partly correct: illegal Israeli settlers have been withdrawn, but Israeli soldiers and airmen attacked Gaza repeatedly during the Israeli invasion of the Lebanon, killing about 250 people – another fact under-reported in the western media.) I should have asked her if she'd ever been to the West Bank rather than the Gaza Strip, but some comebacks you only think of later.

There was also a Christian Zionist. An old lady came up to us and said, *"I really don't think you should be doing this. It says in the Bible..."* (Some Christian fundamentalists, a powerful pro-Bush lobby in the USA, believe that the Second Coming and what they call the Great Rapture can't happen until the Jews have re-occupied all the ancient land of Israel). But it was all a bit hectic at that point and by the time I had a reply ready, she'd gone.

A recent WPJF planning meeting decided to hold similar BIG actions once a month – also to explore ways of widening their scope.

**Don't buy
Israeli
apartheid**



BAD NEWS FROM ISRAEL

Even from the small sample of people we talked to in Wrexham town centre, it was fairly obvious that there's a pro-Israeli bias in the way the conflict is reported in the British media, and that to some extent this influences how people think about it.

Some good work has been done on this by the Glasgow Media Group in ***Bad News from Israel*** (Pluto 2004, paperback, £10.99). The first section, 80 pages or so, gives a very clear account of the much-disputed history of the rise of Israel and the subordination of the Palestinians. The authors, Greg Philo and Mike Berry, then look closely at how news about Israel/Palestine is presented on British television. They follow this up with some ground-breaking research that explores how the presentation of the news actually affects people's attitudes.

A frequent comment from participants in their group discussions was that they'd take more interest in the Israel/Palestine conflict if they understood it better - but they didn't really understand it, because TV coverage didn't tell them enough about the background. To give just a couple of examples:

Very few reports refer to the massive disparity between the firepower of the Israeli armed forces (the world's fourth or fifth most powerful army, supplied and heavily subsidised by the USA) and that of the Palestinian resistance. And Israeli casualties figure more prominently in news reports than do Palestinian casualties, even though the latter consistently outnumber the former by a wide margin, especially amongst civilians. It's natural for the non-expert to assume that the combatants are just two warring factions, about equally matched, or even that the state of Israel is in peril. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The media talk about 'the occupied territories' without explaining what this phrase means. With reference to the Gaza strip and the West Bank it refers to the *illegal military* occupation of Palestinian territory carried out by Israel since the 1967 war. Over the years this occupation has been marked by a brutal disregard for the social, economic and political rights of the Palestinian people, who include many refugees from what is now Israel. The creeping Israeli settlements within the occupied territories are also illegal under international law, part and parcel of the military occupation, and difficult to distinguish from old-fashioned colonialism.

John Pilger's documentary, ***Palestine Is Still the Issue***, first screened on ITV late one evening in September 2002, remains one of the few attempts to look honestly at the background. In ***Bad News from Israel*** some Glasgow students describe the influence on their thinking of watching this film and seeing for the first time the power and reach of the Jewish Israeli settlements:

"The all-Jewish roads, I'd not seen that before."

"It made it look much more like an invasion."

"I had absolutely no idea... I was gob-smacked... I saw them [previously] as small, embattled, and surrounded by hostile Palestinians - that's entirely thanks to watching the television news."



Israel and occupied Palestine

A later chapter in ***Bad News for Israel*** investigates the reasons why British TV news reporting is so consistently skewed towards the Israeli position. Part of the answer lies in the orchestrated howl of anguish that Pilger's documentary provoked from the Zionist lobby: thousands of emails to Carlton TV (some describing Pilger as "a demonic psychopath", "a purveyor of hate and evil", "an anti-Semite of the most dangerous kind"), telephone death threats to Pilger at his home, a repudiation of the film by Michael Green, the Jewish chairman of Carlton TV which had commissioned it in the first place - all of this culminating in an inquiry by the Independent Television Authority into the film's journalistic integrity.

Even so, the conclusion of this long ITA inquiry was that the film had been researched with great care and thoroughness. Accordingly all complaints against it were rejected.

Useful links

www.bigcampaign.com

www.palestinecampaign.org

www.palestinemonitor.org