

BRICUP NEWSLETTER

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A meeting for BRICUP supporters.

An important date for your diary! On Saturday, November 29th, 2008, BRICUP will be organizing a meeting that will take place at the University of London's School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) in Bloomsbury. The speakers will include Gideon Levy, the Haaretz journalist who has done much to expose the complicity of Israeli Universities in the occupation; the Israeli historian Ilan Pappé formerly of Haifa University and now at the University of Exeter; and Samia al Botmeh, Director of the Center for Developmental Studies at Birzeit University, Palestine. The meeting will address crucial issues of the denial of human rights, including academic freedom and the right to education, to the Palestinian people; the operation of Israeli policies; and the complicity of Israeli civil society including its universities in these policies. The meeting will be open to the public but will be followed by a discussion meeting specifically for BRICUP supporters. As further information becomes available, it will be posted on the BRICUP website at www.bricup.org.uk and also in the November edition of this Newsletter. Do come: this meeting offers a quite unusual opportunity to gain information on the underpinnings of Israel's illegal occupation

BRICUP's response to the petition by 407 Israeli Academics.

In the August 2008 edition of this newsletter (#7) the PACBI column considered and commented on a petition by 407 Israeli academics requesting a reduction in the difficulties that Palestinian teachers and their students face in pursuing their academic activities. We promised to return to this story.

The Israeli academics' petition reads:-

"We, past and present members of academic staff of Israeli universities, express great concern regarding the ongoing deterioration of the system of higher education in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. We protest against the policy of our government which is causing restrictions of freedom of movement, study and instruction, and we call upon the government to allow students and lecturers free access to all the campuses in the Territories, and to allow lecturers and students who hold foreign passports to teach and study without being threatened with withdrawal of residence visas. To leave the situation as it is will cause serious harm to freedom of movement, study and instruction – harm to the foundation of academic freedom, to which we are committed."

The agreed BRICUP statement on the petition reads:-

BRICUP notes with interest that 407 Israeli academics signed the petition. Small though this number is (9000 were asked to sign) we must welcome the willingness of those 407 to protest the restrictions of academic freedom in Palestine; they have broken the silence that has hitherto characterised Israeli academia. In doing so they have responded to the call by Palestinian and international academics to protest against violations of the fundamental Palestinian right to academic freedom.

BRICUP also notes, though with regret, that the petition is silent about the illegal and brutal occupation of Palestinian territory by Israel, the massive land confiscations, and the illegal Apartheid Wall. This is the mechanism by which Israel denies not just academic freedom to Palestinian academics, but any freedoms to the Palestinian population at large. Israeli Universities have been complicit in this process: academics have kept silent, with many serving in

the reserve units which have enforced this illegal policy. As argued by PACBI in its statement of July 26th and in the BRICUP Newsletter number 7, an end to the occupation is fundamental to academic freedom. Academic freedom is inseparable from any other civil right, all of which are denied to the whole population of Palestine.

Academics in other countries must continue the boycott of Israeli Universities in order to apply increasing pressure on Israeli academics to distance themselves from the policies of their Government. We urge the signatories of this petition to recruit more of their colleagues to an overt condemnation of the illegal actions of the Israeli Government.

Comment: The BRICUP statement makes it clear that we agree absolutely with PACBI that the petition utterly fails to recognise the root cause of the problem, faced not just by Palestinian academics, but by all Palestinians: this is, as PACBI stated, “the illegal, four-decades-old military occupation of Palestinian land”. As a result, the Israeli academics’ petition also fails to recognise that there is no solution to be found in tinkering with details of Israel’s multifold repressive policies and regulations. The only possible solution to the infringements of academic freedom, as of other human rights, is the end of the Occupation itself .

The complicity of Israeli academic institutions in the occupation is undoubted. The fact that only 4.5% of those to whom the petition was sent agreed to sign it is indeed disappointing, showing the distance that Israeli academe, collectively, still has to travel. But 407 is not zero; moreover we know that some of those signing the petition would go further than the restricted wording of the petition, indeed some would go very much further. We will be writing to them all to encourage them to mobilize their colleagues behind a stronger statement.

David Pegg

BRICUP issued the following press statement on October 16th 2008.

BRICUP denounces supporters of Israel’s attempt to suppress free speech

The British Committee for Universities of Palestine (BRICUP) today denounced the effort by unnamed members of the University and College Union (UCU) to prevent free debate of Israel’s actions in the union. The legal challenge to the UCU, said BRICUP, demonstrates the desperation and the hypocrisy of those of those who wish to defend Israel’s illegal occupation of Palestine. The attack on UCU is aimed at defending the Israeli universities and colleges that are complicit in that occupation. This challenge to motion 25, which was passed overwhelmingly at UCU Congress in 2007, shows that it is not academic freedom that is the concern of four UCU members who conceal their identity but desperation to prevent any and all criticism being leveled at Israeli policy.

It is not the first time that law firm Mishcon de Reya has sent threatening letters to a trade union to attempt to deflect them from democratically debated and agreed actions. Following conference decisions by the Association of University Teachers in 2005, the union received no fewer than four legal challenges.

Motion 25 falls far short of the motion that, in BRICUP opinion, would be appropriate to the circumstances. It does not call for a boycott by UCU members of those Israeli universities and colleges which fail to dissociate themselves from the occupation. That is the policy that BRICUP believes might succeed in causing the Israeli academic community to question its Government’s actions.

“Motion 25 only asked members to reflect on the moral and political implications of continuing links with Israeli educational institutions and to discuss the occupation with any of their individual academic and scholarly collaborators in Israel.” said Prof. Jonathan Rosenhead of BRICUP. “We maintain that critical reflection is the duty of all

academics. We are amazed that anyone should seek to make free thought illegitimate.

The motion also called for an investigation of the operation of one particular college (Ariel) which is illegally situated on occupied land, and is designed to further entrench the illegal occupation of the territory. Professor Jonathan Rosenhead said, "It is a looking glass world where those seeking to end an illegal act should find themselves in the dock"

Professor Haim Bresheeth, an Israeli born academic working at the University of East London commented, "Opposition to this motion can be interpreted as little else than a determination to support an illegal occupation, and to prevent any debate or discussion of Israeli policy in the occupied territories, or of Israel's human rights record in those territories."

There is a further, and equally shocking, aspect of this legal challenge. Dr Sue Blackwell a member of the UCU national executive said, "I am horrified that members of my trade union should seek to use the courts to overturn a democratically decided policy of our own union rather than to argue their case through the democratic forums of the union and win or lose it on its merits. I welcome such a debate. Sadly this is not the first time that UCU and its predecessor unions have experienced such legal threats. I look forward to the real issues being debated so that the public can see what bullies these people are"

BRICUP believes that all members of the UCU must have the freedom of a trade union to debate issues of concern. This applies to every member: those who support motion 25 and those who wish to overturn it; those who defend Israel and those who condemn it.

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The PACBI column

Why the PGFTU Controversy is Irrelevant to UCU Policy vs. Israel Boycott

Recently, several articles in the Zionist media have dwelt on a statement allegedly made by a Palestinian trade union bureaucrat. An employee – not an elected union official - of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) reportedly told the Jewish Chronicle that his union was in favour of a boycott "only of companies directly involved in building settlements and the apartheid wall." Accordingly, some argued, the UCU should rescind its "pro academic boycott" policy.

This argument is patently flawed at several levels, from its tendentious premises to its illogical conclusion.

PGFTU, like any other trade union federation, makes policy decisions and then chooses tactics that sometimes may seem at odds with some of those policies. Still, we take the standing written policy as the union policy, rather than relying on innuendo, gossip, or some odd statement made by some union employee who is not even a member of the union's elected decision-making body. The official PGFTU policy, to date, endorses the 2005 Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Call, which is supported by an overwhelming majority in Palestinian civil society. This appeal, which calls for comprehensive boycotts against Israel in all fields, was hand signed by the PGFTU's own Secretary General – a fact that no official in PGFTU has ever disputed.

The PGFTU's endorsement of the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Call has not been challenged, reversed or nullified and therefore remains official policy. It cannot, therefore, be logically or legally "superseded" by a reported discussion that took place between UCU representatives and some PGFTU officials to the contrary. Furthermore, PGFTU is a member of the BDS national committee (the BNC), which

is the Palestinian coordinating body for all boycott-related activism.

Another important point is that focusing on tactics that aim to redress a partial list of Israeli injustices cannot, *per se*, imply rejection of comprehensively addressing all forms of Israel's colonial and apartheid oppression against the indigenous people of Palestine. The UN itself often focuses on such partial lists if the whole list is deemed too ambitious or unattainable to hope for in the short run; but can that be construed as a shift in UN policy towards accepting the other injustices it had decided not to address at the moment?

More to the point, the fact that PGFTU representatives may wish the Israel boycott to focus currently on illegal settlements, the colonial Wall, or any other manifestation of the occupation, cannot and does not, on its own, negate or indicate a departure from their commitment to BDS as a long-term strategy. Other members of the BNC also prefer to advocate some partial aspects of the boycott, but they all agree that a comprehensive boycott is the ultimate objective.

Even if the BNC were to focus only on the Israeli occupation and settlements, we would certainly still be advocating a boycott of all Israeli universities for their direct and indirect complicity in sustaining the occupation and colonization through research, academic support, lack of censure or condemnation of the occupation and therefore acquiescence to the persistent violation of international law and human rights it practices on a daily basis. Furthermore, we would still call for a boycott of the Hebrew University, for instance, not just Ariel College, as the former, too, sits - partially - on occupied Palestinian land in occupied East Jerusalem and has shifted Israeli population to live on occupied land in university dorms in East Jerusalem, in direct contravention of the Fourth Geneva Convention, a violation which is defined as a "war crime" in international law.

Aside from all the above, the PGFTU is but one of the Palestinian trade union federations. It is not

the most official or the most representative of Palestinian workers. The General Union of Palestinian Workers (GUPW) remains the official organ of the PLO, the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, as recognized by the whole world, including Israel (in the Oslo Accords). The GUPW officially represents all Palestinian workers everywhere, enjoying a far more sweeping mandate than that of the PGFTU. Why isn't the GUPW opinion asked in this crucial matter?

Last, but certainly not least, it would seem quite suspect and disingenuous of anyone to suggest that UCU policy on Palestine should be influenced by, not the counterpart of UCU, the Palestinian Federation of Unions of University Professors and Employees (PFUPE), but by the PGFTU! We would understand the TUC being more influenced by GUPW and PGTU, but why UCU? Is it being suggested that UCU decides who represents Palestinian academics?

BDS is supported by an overwhelming majority of the Palestinian people, including virtually all unions, mass movements, political parties, NGOs, and networks. Ignoring this bellowing voice of Palestinian civil society and setting policy based on unofficial statements is not only unwise; it is deceptive and underhanded.

PACBI

Irene Bruegel

BRICUP was very sad to hear of the death of Irene Bruegel on 6 October, at the early age of 62. Irene set up Jews for Justice for Palestinians in 2002, after a visit to Palestine, with her partner Richard Kuper. Irene served as secretary for JfJfP and deserves much credit and recognition for her work in presenting to the UK Jewish community the truth about Israel which often they would have preferred not to hear. Whatever abuse Irene received from supporters of Israel's occupation she was not deflected in her aims and devoted much of her intelligence and sheer hard work to

discomforting the Anglo-Jewish establishment and opening up a space for opposing Jewish voices. She refused however to be confined in an ethnically or religiously defined niche and was an enthusiastic part of the Palestinian rights coalition, speaking and writing to a wide variety of audiences.

Irene was active in a wide variety of causes throughout her life, defining herself as a socialist feminist. Both these words were equally important and equally significant in energising her to work against injustice for excluded communities, for women workers, for refugees and many others.

While as BRICUP we did not always agree with Irene we will miss both her energy and her keen criticism. We will also miss her public defence of our activities when BRICUP or its members were under attack for anti-semitism. We extend our condolences to Richard, to her children and to her family and friends. BRICUP members attended her cremation service, an event notable for the size and diversity of the congregation of those who wished to mark her death but also her life.

Mike Cushman

The following is one of our occasional pieces describing aspects of real life under the Israeli occupation. It was written by Carmela Armanious-Omary who also provided one such story for Newsletter # 2.

Think Positive, even under Military Occupation!

By January 2003, we had gotten used to traversing the Israeli military roadblock that cut off Birzeit University and the 35 surrounding Palestinian villages from the town of Ramallah. Ten months of the Surda roadblock, as we all called it, forced all 6,500 University employees and students to get used to sharing taxis to one side of the ditched road, which was intentionally destroyed by the Israeli occupation forces to make it impassable, walking about one kilometer, rain or shine, to the

other side, and taking another taxi to get to the University.

The Israeli soldiers who frequently manned the roadblock would hold students for hours, humiliating and provoking them. In one particularly cruel incident, Mutaz, a student at the University, was beaten harshly by soldiers, mostly on the head and chest. A professor passing by tried but failed to help him while an Israeli soldier stepped on Mutaz's head as he lay unconscious on the ground. The student suffered major injuries and had to undertake a serious operation to stop internal bleeding in his head.

Every Palestinian affected by the hundreds of such roadblocks erected throughout the occupied territory tried diverse coping mechanisms to deal with similarly traumatic and often dehumanizing experiences and persevere in what we were ultimately pursuing: our right to freedom of movement on our land, to reach our workplace, school, hospital, field, theater, etc. Today, 630 such roadblocks still exist in the West Bank.

Most of the time, Riham Barghouti, who was later appointed Director of the Public Relations Office at Birzeit University, Nuha Masri, who was the Director of the Human Resources Department, and I would walk together over the trench in order to share a taxi to Ramallah. We would be tired after a long workday, worried about how long we could carry on walking this Via Dolorosa to reach the University. To alleviate some of our anger and frustration we would try to think about positive effects of the roadblock! "What positive side could there be for such a misery?" one might ask. I started forming a list: "Walking is a good exercise; we get a chance to talk together while walking; all people are equal on this road: rich and poor, laborers and academics, farmers and students, everyone has to walk!" Nuha added, "Yes, by using taxis we benefit the taxi drivers, as well as protecting the environment because we are using less cars." Riham got into the exercise, "We can enjoy the landscape and the wild flowers on both sides of the road, and we meet many people we have not seen for a long time". Soon, a competition developed: naming more positive points.

It was not always possible for us to be positive, especially when we saw our students being held by Israeli soldiers. One day, as my colleague Riham and I were walking towards the Ramallah end of the trench, we saw three students detained under the heavy rain, on the side of the road. They were wet from head to toe. Three heavily-armed Israeli soldiers were sitting in a military jeep next to them. I spoke to the soldiers, in Hebrew, presenting myself as a University official, and asking why they were holding the students. None of the soldiers bothered to answer me. Riham spoke with the students and found out that they had been standing there for about two hours and that the soldiers had taken their identity cards, which, like the “passes” in apartheid South Africa, are required for moving on the roads of occupied Palestine. We were getting wet, as the rain continued pouring. Riham and I approached the soldiers again, demanding that they give the students their ID cards and let them go. One of the soldiers asked us to leave. We insisted that we will not leave without the students, even though it was still raining. Fifteen minutes later, the students were given their ID cards, and we all started running to the taxi that was waiting at the other end of the trench, not without a tickling feeling of triumph.

Many years later, my daughter fell in love with a fine young man who graduated from Birzeit University and worked as a reporter at an Arab satellite station. When I first met him, he said, “Hamati (my mother in law, in Arabic), do you remember when you and Riham insisted on getting my ID card from the Israeli soldiers on the road block, while I was held there for more than two hours with my friends under the rain?” The next day, even though the roadblock had been removed by then and the road to Birzeit paved, I called my colleagues, Nuha and Riham to remind them about our “list” and add one more positive item on roadblock experience.

Carmela Armanious-Omary
Birzeit University,
Occupied Palestine.

Support the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD).

In the last issue of this newsletter we featured Jeff Halper’s reflections on the breaking of the illegal Israeli blockade of the Gaza port by those two small ships. Jeff is the chair of ICAHD, which is a powerful voice for peaceful, non-violent action to solve the Palestine/Israel problem. What we did not realise at the time was that the EU had just refused to renew its grant. Please consult <http://www.icahd.org/eng/>. The preceding grant had been awarded in the EU Partnership for Peace Programme, (Grant reference EuropeAid / 126231/L/ACT/PS/12100.) and was approximately €400,000 over two-years. The EU authorities admitted that “the application fulfilled the criteria required for a favourable opinion” but rejected it for spurious reasons.

BRICUP recognises the excellent work done by ICAHD and suggests that interested readers of this newsletter might consider writing to their MEPs, protesting this decision and urging the EU to find a way to continue financial support for ICAHD.

David Pegg

Discounts on Middle East studies books

All books from Pluto Press in their ‘Useful Reading’ section are available at a 20% discount, with a percentage of each sale donated to BRICUP. Simply click on the title of the book and then add it to your Pluto shopping trolley. When you check out, enter the code PLUBRICUP to receive your discount. Pluto will also use the Newsletter to feature other books that can be ordered at a discount using the PLUBRICUP code.

Comments and suggestions concerning the Newsletter are welcome. Email to newsletter@bricup.org.uk