



קבוצת ראות
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TREND DETECTOR NO. 16:

BDS IS COMING HOME



TRACKING DEVELOPMENTS IN
THE 'PROGRESSIVE FIELD'



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Introduction

While pro-Palestinian BDS (Boycotts, Sanctions, and Divestment) activism is often seen as a coordinated national campaign against the State of Israel, recent developments suggest a kind of trickle-down effect within the American body politic. If it was once said that “all politics are local,” battles over BDS have intensified at the municipal level this autumn across the United States. By moving from large national (or global) campaigns to the parochial level, the current emphasis of BDS advocacy advances Jewish-Zionist erasure in their own cities, towns, schools, and institutions, making American Jews feel unwelcome and unsafe in their own communities. This brief will discuss a series of three incidents that follow this pattern, auguring a troubling trend that has thus far been a blindspot in mapping BDS activism in the United States.

The move to the local level is significant because BDS is still gaining traction in the USA. In fact, the BDS movement has only recently surfaced in the general American consciousness – a poll from September 2019 (at the height of the Trump administration) noted that only about half of American had heard of BDS even “a little”. Yet while 47% of respondents (Republicans, Democrats, and Independents) opposed the movement, 48% of Democrats supported it “strongly or somewhat” compared to only 8% of Republicans. [Independents were more mixed, with 27% in support and 35% opposed.] Further, 77% of Democrats knowledgeable about BDS were inclined to see it as a South African-style pressure campaign, whereas 85% of Republicans sided with a definition as an “anti-Israel organization attempting to weaken Israel and to undermine its legitimacy,” where “some of its supporters are opponents of Israel’s very existence and may even be antisemitic.” [Again, Independents were somewhat more evenly split, with 42% preferring the South Africa comparison and 54% considering the movement anti-Israel.]¹

However, some of these changing levels of knowledge and interest at the national level – particularly within the Democratic party, including at the encouragement of the “squad” of progressive candidates who are on the record as supporting the BDS movement² – were bound to

¹ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/01/08/what-do-americans-think-of-the-bds-movement-aimed-at-israel/>

² For example, in a July 2019 vote in the House of Representatives condemning the Boycotts, Sanctions, and Divestment Movement, 17 members voted ‘nay’ including Representatives Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Betty McCollum, Jesus Garcia, and Bobby Rush with an additional 18 voting

become issues of debate amongst their constituencies at the communal level. Many have also pointed to the creation of a reverse pipeline as well – from progressive campus or local politics to national leadership.

I want to profile three cases in detail that bring home that message that BDS is “coming home” and its implications for the future:

BDS Resolution in the Los Angeles Teacher’s Union

Following Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021, United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), the 2nd largest teacher’s union in the USA that represents 33,000 individuals and where Jewish students comprise approximately 15% (90,000) of the pupils³, as well as a constituent-member of the umbrella organization American Federation of Teachers, proposed a resolution condemning the immediate activities by the State of Israel about evictions in Sheikh Jarrah and aerial bombings of Gaza, as well as larger concerns like ending U.S. foreign aid to Israel and supporting the BDS movement.⁴

Specifically noting the backing of BDS in national teacher and trade unions in Europe, the UTLA affirmed “as public school educators in the United States of America, we have a special responsibility to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people because of the 3.8 billion dollars annually that the US government gives to Israel, thus directly using our tax dollars to fund apartheid and war crimes.”⁵

Proponents tied the resolution to larger issues of intersectionality, suggesting “as educators...UTLA stands against racism, sexism, antisemitism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and oppression in all forms. We stand against both anti-Jewish hate and violence and anti-Arab hate

‘present,’ or abstaining from the vote altogether. <https://forward.com/fast-forward/428179/congress-bds-aoc-tlaib-omar/>

³ <https://www.dailynews.com/2021/07/13/lausd-school-board-adopts-resolution-denouncing-antisemitism/>

⁴ The formal text read: “Further moved that the UTLA endorse the international campaign for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions against apartheid in Israel.” See full text of resolution here: <https://www.leftvoice.org/utla-chapter-chairs-pass-resolution-calling-for-end-of-us-aid-to-israel/>

⁵ Ibid.

and violence where-ever they occur.”⁶ According to reporting, the resolution was first proposed by regional members, rather than the main union leadership.⁷

The motion touched off a firestorm in Los Angeles between the local Jewish community and teacher’s union, pitting Jewish, Evangelical Christian, Muslim, and other members on all sides of the debate – with some members and chapters both supporting and threatening to leave the union, while others questioned the priorities in the midst of the pandemic. Left-wing critics claimed a concerted campaign by the Los Angeles Jewish Federation and other pro-Israel activists to “shut down” support,⁸ while some 870 members and 270 parents signed letters opposing the resolution before it came before an official vote in the UTLA House of Representatives on 22 September.⁹ Likely in response to that controversy, the 2nd largest USA teacher’s union to voted to postpone the vote – a decision not to decide – recognizing that it was “an extremely divisive issue that would seriously damage union unity at a time when we need solidarity...”¹⁰ However, hurt feelings remained on all sides of the issue with Jewish parents increasingly questioning what was being taught in the classroom and the comfort level of their children in public schools. (In the backdrop of this debate was the year-long controversy over California’s ethnic studies curriculum, which some critics considered anti-Israel and even antisemitic.¹¹) While the crisis was averted within America’s second largest teacher’s union, this did not prevent BDS resolutions being passed in both the San Francisco¹² and Seattle¹³ teachers unions last summer. Whether these motions will spread to other local municipalities is a trend to watch.

⁶ <https://www.dailynews.com/2021/07/10/1-a-teachers-union-to-consider-bds-resolution-that-has-divided-laUSD-community/>

⁷ Ibid. Moreover, according to the ADL, the issue was taken up by eight chapters, of which six brought it to a vote, and it passed in five of the balloting units. See <https://la.adl.org/news/1-a-teachers-union-to-consider-bds-resolution-that-has-divided-laUSD-community/>

⁸ <https://jewishcurrents.org/how-israel-advocates-shut-down-a-unions-motion-to-endorse-bds>

⁹ <https://la.adl.org/news/1-a-teachers-union-to-consider-bds-resolution-that-has-divided-laUSD-community/>

¹⁰ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/los-angeles-teachers-union-votes-to-indefinitely-postpone-motion-endorsing-bds/>

¹¹ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/california-ethnic-studies-curriculum-that-roiled-jewish-community-becomes-law/>

¹² <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/florida-jewish-journal/fl-jj-san-francisco-teachers-union-endorse-bds-movement-20210527-z43voimn5bdz7kpv75txkd2crm-story.html>

¹³ <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/seattle-teachers-union-endorses-bds-blasts-police-idf-collaboration-671630>

BDS Resolution – City Council of Burlington, Vermont

Burlington, Vermont, the largest city in the rural state with a population of 44,000 became the first city in the USA to propose a motion in support of the BDS movement.¹⁴ Calling its residents “diverse and forward thinking,”¹⁵ the municipality has long been known for its progressive politics, including the mayoralty of Senator Bernie Sanders earlier in his career. In August 2021, the city council drafted a motion it titled a “resolution calling for justice and a peaceful end to Palestine and Israel Conflict,” which condemned Israel for the “crime of apartheid,” amongst other issues and endorsed the BDS movement.¹⁶ The local community exploded in controversy: 18 organizations cosigned the resolution prior to the vote on 13 September, whilst the council received 2,000 emails supposedly mostly in opposition¹⁷ and Burlington’s Jewish mayor issued a statement opposing the resolution and the BDS movement.¹⁸ As crowds outside chanted slogans like “Not another nickel, not another dime! No more money for Israeli crimes!”¹⁹ the resolution was ultimately withdrawn by its sponsor by a vote of 6-5 over concerns about “one-sided[ness]” and possible antisemitism, referring the issue to the racial equity committee, with some councilmembers vowing to bring the motion back to the table in the future.²⁰ While other resolutions related to aspects of BDS have appeared in city councils in liberal municipalities like Berkeley, California, Portland, Oregon, and Cambridge, Massachusetts the Burlington resolution is an important test case for other local governments across the United States in the future.

¹⁴ While statistics vary, there may be upwards of 20,000 Jews who live in Vermont and the city of Burlington probably boasts the largest Jewish population in the state between its year-round residents, the college student population as the seat of the University of Vermont, and ski/summer tourists, including the 375-family membership of Congregation Ohavei Tzedek, the largest synagogue in the state.<https://www.jewishexponent.com/2016/09/28/jewish-life-in-vermont-part-i/>

¹⁵ <https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/>

¹⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/57jpk38>

¹⁷ <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/bds-in-burlington-beyond-the-resolution/>

¹⁸ <https://www.burlingtonvt.gov/Press/mayor-miro-weinberger-statement-on-upcoming-city-council-resolution>

¹⁹ <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/bds-in-burlington-beyond-the-resolution/>

²⁰ <https://www.jta.org/2021/09/13/united-states/burlington-bds-resolution-to-be-withdrawn-as-sponsor-cites-concerns-about-antisemitism>

BDS activism in the Boston Mayoral Race

While there is somewhat less known about this incident, BDS activists targeted philanthropist and former AIPAC-director Jay Ruderman and his co-signatories for a letter of support issued on behalf of then contestant (now recently elected) mayor of Boston Michelle Wu, which suggested that she “embodies the best of Jewish values,” without otherwise mentioning Jewish concerns or Israel.²¹ BDS Boston tweeted about Ruderman and fellow donor Seth Klarman’s campaign contributions and expressions of endorsement, claiming that they were buying influence and policy positions in “the latest iteration of a sinister pattern: Zionist leaders throw support and resources behind more progressive candidates in a given race, in an effort to keep those candidates from taking pro-Palestine positions consistent with their progressive values, once elected.”²² This position was amplified across social media and other news aggregators in the Boston area. Ruderman challenged that the BDS mobilization against him and his co-signatories was “a systematic effort to dampen Jewish involvement in the political process...a letter that had nothing to do with Israel, but saying we’re Jews who live and work in the city of Boston and we believe in her and support her.”²³ Mayor Wu herself did not comment, although is on the record against the BDS movement. Whether the BDS movement will continue to weigh in on local elections and what kind of chilling effect it could have upon Jewish constituencies in the future remains to be seen.

While establishment Jewish organizations as well as local institutions rose to the challenge of these BDS campaigns with both a public presence and working behind the scenes with community members, these incidents point to a persistent blindspot when it comes to preparing for the future of pro-Palestinian activism. While some national organizations – such as the ADL²⁴ and AJC²⁵ – have belatedly launched information campaigns about BDS, few have grappled with

²¹ <https://jewishjournal.org/2021/10/28/boston-philanthropist-and-activist-attacked-by-bds-movement-for-endorsing-wu/>

²² <https://twitter.com/BDSBoston/status/1450470114860703763>. A local news aggregator Patch also amplified these claims: <https://patch.com/massachusetts/boston/boston-city-councilor-wus-israeli-american-council-connection>

²³ <https://jewishjournal.org/2021/10/28/boston-philanthropist-and-activist-attacked-by-bds-movement-for-endorsing-wu/>

²⁴ <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/bds-the-global-campaign-to-delegitimize-israel>

²⁵ <https://www.ajc.org/issues/bds>

the challenges (with the exception of its impact on individual college campuses often located in college towns with Jewish communities) this campaign might bring to the municipal level and the vulnerability of local Jewish organizations, institutions, and communities to BDS challenges. It is clear that if this trend continues, Jewish communities will be “squeezed” between local and national politics in a way that will continue to promote Jewish erasure within the progressive movement and a feeling of insecurity within their own surroundings. One hopes more attention will be paid to these new areas of BDS activism in the future.