

## **Boycotting Israel**

**THIS SUMMER KEN LOACH** the radical film maker caused something of a stir by pulling his latest film, *Looking For Eric*, out of the Melbourne International Film Festival. In doing so he was supporting the left's international attempt to isolate Israel. Loach emailed festival organizer, Richard Moore, demanding that he reject Israeli government sponsorship of the event; Moore refused so Loach withdrew from the festival.

This boycott forms part of a coordinated effort on the part of pro-Palestinian campaigns throughout the world. Their argument is clear and unambiguous: Israel is illegally occupying Palestinian land, corralling its people behind concrete barriers and barbed wire fences; Israel sustains its occupation by denying Palestinians the opportunity to develop their own economic and political institutions. Israel is the oppressor and must at all costs be defeated by using all available means.

For Palestinian solidarity movements formed by socialists, communists, Muslims, and Islamists, around the world this means boycotting Israel. It means organizing within trade unions and other bodies to close down all contacts with Israeli institutions, with Israeli sportsmen and women, Israeli artists and academics. It also means attempting to build a consumer boycott of Israeli goods and services in an orchestrated campaign to undermine Israeli economic life by crippling its industry and foreign trade.

While not supporting suicide bombers or the indiscriminate firing of rockets into Israel by Palestinian resistance groups, the solidarity organizations claim to be able to "understand" why Palestinians, as oppressed people, are prepared to carry out terror attacks against Israeli civilians. However, this "understanding" stops at outright or open support for terror

attacks upon Israel; a division of labour is maintained between those engaged in fighting explicitly to destroy the state of Israel, and those solidarity organizations that seek to emphasize the suffering of the Palestinian people by calling for a boycott of all things Israeli.

This is a well-established technique on the left where support for one side in an armed struggle is couched in terms of medical aid, humanitarian assistance, and political solidarity for the oppressed, while broadly endorsing the objectives of the armed insurgency in question. In the Israel-Palestine struggle this means deploying a boycott of Israel in pursuit of a “single state solution”. The single-state of left-wing imagination is one in which the Israeli state is dismantled and replaced by a single state covering the whole territory of Israel-Palestine which would guarantee equal rights for all its citizens regardless of religion, race, or ethnicity. Or, as the common Palestinian solidarity slogan puts it: “From the Jordan to the Sea, Palestine Will Be Free!”

Try this slogan with “Israel” instead of “Palestine” and you will immediately see that it is not really a secular or progressive slogan at all; it is not aimed at uniting Palestinian Arabs and Jewish Israelis – it is a slogan calling for the destruction of the Jewish state, it is a slogan which implicitly proposes a Palestinian state dominated by Palestinian Muslims who, given a century of enmity and bloodshed, are unlikely to guarantee the physical well-being or the livelihood of the Jewish population in a territory newly liberated from Jewish control by armed Palestinian insurgents and their allies in the solidarity campaigns.

Indeed, the absurdity of the “one-state solution” being canvassed by the secular left and their Muslim associates throughout the world is the principal reason why most Jews in Israel and most Jews in the world support the continued existence of the state of Israel; they fear that without the Jewish state, Jews would be driven out of Israel-Palestine in a wave of ethnic cleansing facilitated by mass killings and terror carried out by revanchist Palestinian Arabs. It is perfectly true

that this might *not* happen – it is literally conceivable – or perhaps, even imaginable, that all would live happily together letting bygones be bygones, but most Jews quite sensibly do not want to trust their lives and the lives of their families and friends to a lah-lah-land dreamed up by those campaigning on behalf of Palestinians.

Despite this reality the broad socialist left (with few exceptions) persists in advocating its phantasmagoric “secular single state solution” by depicting Israel as a kind of apartheid state hell bent on oppressing and exploiting the Palestinians. Consequently, the old South Africa of white rule and Bantustans is conjured up in a handy parallel with contemporary Israel. South African apartheid was brought down (so those in the solidarity movement reason), by a combination of armed struggle, mass uprisings, and boycotts; it worked in South Africa, and it will work in Palestine. This is the strategy: mass uprisings, armed struggle, and boycotts will bring down the hated Zionist state.

There is, however, a flaw in the plan: Israel is nothing like South Africa. The apartheid regime was held together by an active alliance between Afrikaans-speaking farmers, small businessmen, and the white working class. This arrangement for decades won the acquiescence of the white English-speaking bourgeoisie settled in South Africa, and the bosses of big international firms, for as long as relative peace and stability reigned. As the mass mobilisations, ferocious violence, and the ANC’s credibility, grew the only thing that kept the English-speaking bourgeoisie and the international firms in bed with apartheid was fear of social revolution and communism. Once the Soviet Union and communism started to disintegrate the big bourgeoisie pulled the plug on apartheid; Mandela was released and the Rainbow Nation became, for a time at least, a good place to do business.

Israel, on the other, is a garrison state; it is a state established by the dispossession of some 700,000 Palestinians by armed Jewish settlers, who had themselves fled successive waves of persecution in

Russia and Europe between around 1905 and about 1945-7. The Jewish state exists to defend these settler-refugees and their descendants from anti-Semitism and from revanchist Arabs; that is its *raison d'être*. The ideology and practice of the Israeli state is built entirely upon the Zionist assumption that the Jews can no longer exist without a state.

Anti-Apartheid boycotts actively expressed and canvassed support for racial equality throughout the world. Boycotts did not bring white South Africa to its knees, but they made it abundantly clear that white South Africa had no future. Boycotting Israel on the other hand does one thing – it invites people throughout the world to boycott the Jewish state, and it invites them to boycott Jewish institutions, Jewish businesses, Jewish artists and Jewish intellectuals who either live in Israel, work in Israel, or endorse the continued existence of the Jewish state. Inescapably, the boycott campaign is a campaign aimed at boycotting Jews.

Of course, many campaigners are indignant at the charge of anti-Semitism. Consequently, Palestinian solidarity organizations are assiduous in their attempts to distance themselves from anti-Semitism by stressing that their opposition is not to Jews, but to Zionists. However, this is not a distinction that can be sustained with much credibility in a world in which much Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim opinion is informed by Holocaust denial, and is indeed explicitly and virulently anti-Jewish.

Therefore, the oppression of the Palestinians, the occupation of the West Bank, and the grievous isolation and dispossession of the population of Gaza, can only be brought to an end by a negotiated partition of Israel-Palestine between Arabs and Jews, with the security of *two* independent states guaranteed by the United States and the European Union. On the other hand the boycott endorsed by the Palestinian solidarity movement will promote more anti-Semitism and a sense of embattled isolation that can only help to cohere the Israeli masses behind the current policy of occupation and repression.