

**Extract of REPORT of**

**MP Prof. Gert Weisskirchen**

**Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office  
of the OSCE on Combating Antisemitism  
to the Permanent Council of the OSCE**

**Vienna, 01 November 2007**

**Boycott-Issue:**

**Meeting with Government Representatives and Round Table with  
Representatives of the Unions and NGOs in London**

**19.07.2007**

**Program**

- 08:30 Round Table with different NGOs
- 10:00 Meeting with David Hirsh, University of London, Founder of “Engage”
- 11:30 Meeting with Ambassador Ischinger
- 12:30 Meeting with MP Bill Rammell, Minister of State, Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills
- 13:15 Meeting with MP John Mann, Chair of the Parliamentary Committee against Antisemitism and MP Denis McShane
- 15:00 Meeting with Nick Sigler, Head of International Relations, UNISON

**Minutes of the visit to London by the Personal Representative of the OSCE  
Chairman-in-Office on Combating Antisemitism, Professor Gert Weisskirchen,  
on 19 July 2007**

By Yves Pallade, 26 July 2007

**Board of Deputies of British Jews**

Due to a delay of Gert Weisskirchen’s arrival at the Board of Deputies of British Jews, his assistant Yves Pallade was briefed in his stead by the Chief Executive of the Jewish Leadership Council Jeremy Newmark on behalf of all the Jewish organizations that were present at the meeting.

Jeremy began by explaining that a number of recommendations from the final report of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism, some of which were based on the evidence that Gert had given, had since been taken up by the British government.

Jeremy turned to the issue of anti-Israel boycotts, mentioning that attempts at boycotting Israel had been made by a whole range of organizations including the British Medical Association and the Royal Institute of British Architects, yet so far they had passed no formal decision on a boycott. With a view to the scheduled football match between the English and Israeli national teams in September there were even attempts at achieving a sporting boycott against Israel. The Lebanon War of last summer had obviously increased the impetus of the pro-boycott movement. The activists of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) were the prime movers behind the resolution of the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU), which had been preceded by a similar resolution of the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) that had since been nullified. After the UCU boycott resolution similar decisions had also been passed by the public service workers union (UNISON) and the transport workers union (T&G). Jeremy pointed out that UCU had just passed a call for a national debate on the boycott which in his view was just pretence. UCU was trying to act as if there was no boycott, yet its resolution called on each individual member to ask his or her own conscience as to whether to continue ties with Israel. It also called for a stop of EU funding to Israel. UCU wanted to hold debates in every single one of its branches around the country. It could be assumed that most of the speakers that were to be featured at such debates would be in favour of the boycott. UCU's general secretary Sally Hunt would then have to report back to the national executive of the union. Having already lost to the SWP people on her proposal to hold a referendum among the entire union membership, which would most likely have resulted in the rejection of the boycott, she now believed that she could only hold it sometime in late 2008. Given that she had already lost some power and that she could suffer a defeat at the UCU elections in April 2008, a referendum on the boycott issue would have to happen before then.

Jeremy expressed his concern that a boycott would hit not just Israelis but Jews too, as it was based on national and religious identity. While not every boycotter was necessarily antisemitic, the net effect of a boycott would be clearly so. A debate over whether to impose a boycott would also be problematic. The All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism had found that such debates on the Middle East generally tended to become a breeding ground for antisemitism. Jewish students were suffering the consequences on campus. There was a historical resonance of the Nazi boycott in every boycott narrative targeting Jews. A state of nervousness at the grass roots level within the Jewish community could clearly be felt. Every time an academic union had passed boycott motions in the past there had also been a spill-over of the debate to other unions. This had sparked a new anti-apartheid movement. Bigger unions such as T&G could use their financial leverage to promote the boycott on an international level. If a year-long debate over the pros and cons of a boycott was indeed to ensue, this would be very problematic for the Jewish community in Great Britain.

Jeremy emphasized that the Minister of State in the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, Bill Rammell, had been very helpful on this issue and had also visited Israel to promote academic cooperation. Promises had been made to promote R&D cooperation with the Jewish State. Jeremy suggested that Gert ask Rammell to outline this promise and also to ask what he as Personal Representative could do

regarding the boycott issue. Rammell was seen by Hunt as a confidant, so he could talk to her about his conversation with Gert. Jeremy also mentioned the State Secretary for Communities and Local Government Hazel Blears, who was actually dealing a lot with the boycott issue, as another positive example. Jeremy pointed out that the position of the Secretary for Innovation, Universities and Skills, John Denham on the boycott was as yet unclear and suggested that Gert could try to find out more about it. Denham might after all not be as supportive as Rammell. Jeremy furthermore said that Nick Sigler from UNISON whom Gert was going to meet had been very unhelpful, cautioning that he could be quite resentful to any outside interference.

Board of Deputies Chief Executive Jon Benjamin stressed the fact that Jewish students were continuing to face problems on campus.

Jeremy suggested that Gert should tell Rammell about the refusal of the UCU leadership to meet him. He went on to explain that Gordon Brown had condemned the boycott and that Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, Ed Balls, who was close to Brown and who was very supportive on this issue, had met with the Israeli Education Minister Juli Tamir.

UJS Campaigns Organiser Yair Zivan pointed out that the effect of Middle East debates on campus had been fairly consistent, highlighting the case of a mock checkpoint on one campus at which only Jewish students were stopped. Jewish students were sometimes also accused of being agents of Israel. Moreover, Jewish students and academics had been facing problems because they did not know the attitudes of their lecturers and British colleagues. Things had reached a stage where Jewish students had even asked the Union of Jewish Students whether they could take the risk to be active in a Jewish Societies on campus. There was a general pattern of "good Jews" being promoted by pro-boycott activists on campus. In one instance even someone from the Neturei Karta had been invited.

Jeremy explained that the Independent Jewish Voices initiative, which was very unrepresentative and hardly connected to the Jewish community, did not take a clear position on the boycott issue. Nonetheless it had been used by the pro-boycott activists at the UCU as a fig leaf.

Board of Deputies President Henry Grunwald suggested that Gert ask the British government to increase its links with Israel on all levels and to support those Palestinians who work together with Israelis.

Jeremy explained that universities are public bodies in contrast to the unions. Since the government was interacting with the university management, it could raise the boycott issue with them. In this context Jeremy also mentioned that the Race Relations Act displayed an anomaly in that it did not apply to student unions. The Board of Deputies would prefer an explicit mentioning of student unions by the Act because they receive funding from the universities which were after all publicly financed.

Board of Deputies Vice President Flo Kaufmann said that she would have a meeting with the executive of the European Jewish Congress in Geneva in a couple of months where she would also raise the boycott issue.

## **ENGAGE**

David Hirsh explained that ENGAGE had come out of the 2005 boycott by the AUT which it had managed to turn around. He then noted that Paul Bennett from the UCU had written a response to the report of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism. ENGAGE had in turn responded to this response. With regard to Bennett's refusal to meet with Gert, Hirsh noted that this particular UCU functionary had a certain history. He then offered that ENGAGE could write a letter to the press and get 200 UCU signatories explaining that there was a problem with antisemitism in this boycott and that the UCU executives had refused to meet with Gert.

Gert promised that he was going to send a letter to university leaders asking them to address the problem and to make a public statement that Israelis were welcome. If necessary he would also go public about the UCU at a later point, yet ENGAGE could directly go public about this.

Hirsh explained that Sally Hunt was not the bad guy behind all this, but that she was incapable. Bennett on the other hand was much more problematic than her. As to the Independent Jewish Voices initiative (IJV) he remarked that it was trying to assure the British intelligentsia that there was not problem with antisemitism. Yet IJV it was itself split on the boycott issue. UNISON and T&G had said that they supported a boycott but that they themselves did not implement one. Hirsh urged Gert to make them understand that this issue was not something of minor importance. After all UNISON could at some point set up a proper office for the anti-Israel campaign.

Hirsh mentioned the case of Eric Lee, who was running a website that was an important resource on worldwide labour issues. Lee, who is an Israeli American, had received funding from UNISON for his project, but when it had become public that he opposed the boycott, he had not only been smeared as a Zionist by the boycotters but had suddenly been asked questions on the Middle East by a member of UNISON's executive whom he believed was an SWP member. After Eric had replied that he was a left-wing Zionist and that he had supported the war against Hezbollah, UNISON stopped funding his project.

Hirsh also made clear that there was a difference between criticism of Israel on the one hand and demonisation and boycotting on the other. The boycott was turning the debate back on Britain's Jews. It was creating a toxic atmosphere on campus. Anyone raising the issue of antisemitism was smeared as dishonest. The argument of ENGAGE was that this was not about Israel but about British campuses. Focus should rest on the effects and not on the motivations of the boycott. The apartheid analogy that was drawn by the boycotters was not an honest one as it constituted a shortcut to the boycott. The liberal media were hosting a debate between boycotters and anti-Zionists on the one hand and anti-boycotters and Zionists on the other, treating it as a legitimate discussion. Yet what was missing in the discussion was the centre ground.

David Seymour added that although The Guardian had hosted the ENOUGH campaign against Israeli occupation, when push came to shove it would come out against the boycott. He also stressed the fact that the SWP was supporting Hamas. 20 years ago they had tried to ban Jewish Societies from campus but had failed because the leadership of the National Union of Students had been against this. The SWP was a real cadre party.

David Hirsh drew attention to the fact that unionists regarded any outside interference as irrelevant. Yet the trade union barons had to be educated about antisemitism and

be made understood that this created real problems for them. He urged Gert to explain to them that the SWP would build from the boycott issue into other areas and would eventually destroy the unions from within. It was no coincidence that this was happening at a time when the unions were weak.

David Seymour mentioned that there was a history of Jewish antisemitism. To be accepted as a Jew on the left, one had to say that this entire debate was a legitimate one.

## **UNISON**

Gert asked for the reasons behind the boycott.

UNISON Head of International Relations Nick Sigler explained that everyone in the union could put forward a resolution on international issues. Motion 53 had in fact been a reiteration of UNISON's previously expressed position. UNISON was cooperating with the Histadrut and supported Israel's right to exist in secure borders. UNISON was also paying a lawyer to defend the rights of Palestinian workers who had not been paid by corrupt employers in Israel. UNISON intended to work with both sides, yet the bulk of its effort rested with the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions as they needed most help. The important part of the resolution was its call on the members. It did not ask for a boycott. Resolution 54, however, which did call for a boycott, had never been put onto the agenda. The national executive had ensured behind the scenes that it would not be discussed. There had even been a discussion with the Trade Union Friends of Israel (TUF) and the Israeli Embassy in which UNISON's leadership had made it clear that it would stand by everything it had done. It had said that the situation of the Palestinians was not acceptable, that they were being humiliated etc. One of the key tactics of the anti-apartheid movement had been boycotts. They had not ended apartheid but had raised the problem to public attention. Sigler emphasized that he was saying this as the son of a Holocaust survivor. He did not see this issue as having anything to do with antisemitism. There were of course antisemites in the unions who made use of it. Yet the issue was in fact a reflection of what was happening in the Middle East, namely the failure of the Histadrut to respond to the situation of the Palestinians. Unions had a strong record of fighting antisemitism and the political right. Antisemitism was not a massive problem, but it was slowly increasing. It was being complicated by the voices of senior leaders in the Jewish community who equated every attack on Israel with antisemitism. Sigler stressed that he was a proud Jew, the son of refugees from the Nazis, but that he was nonetheless severely critical of the Israeli government. He himself had been described as a self-hating Jew, yet precisely because of what had happened to the Jews they should realize that something not dissimilar was happening to the Palestinians, namely collective punishment. While he would not dispute the security and economic issues that Israel was facing, he stressed that what was happening to the Palestinians was indeed very bad.

Gert remarked that Sigler was an honest person but expressed his concern that this issue could open up a road which could lead to antisemitism. After all people in Israel as individuals would suffer from this. There was a problem in Sigler's argument. An atmosphere was developing on the ground in which Jewish students were being singled out. It would therefore be wise to think twice that the boycott could lead to unintended consequences.

Sigler conceded that a boycott could indeed always lead to something else. He then stressed that he could not speak on behalf of the UCU, yet the decision had been not to boycott Israeli institutions but rather to have a debate on this. However, it was quite certain that there would not be a boycott in the end although the Jewish media would portray it as a boycott.

Sigler's assistant Nick said that the situation in the Middle East was not the same as that under apartheid, but that radical groups were drawing this analogy. People would then immediately draw a connection to South Africa, as this was a short link and an easy message.

Sigler explained that the best way to engage the union membership was obviously not through debates but through action. This by itself did make the boycott neither right nor wrong. The problem was that the Jewish leadership in Britain equated every attack on Israel with antisemitism. The same was also happening in the U.S.. The Jewish leadership should rather denounce the activities of the Israeli government.

Gert countered that in no other country were people as critical of their own government as in Israel.

Sigler admitted that there was dissent and openness in Israeli society. He then stressed that he had been in the Zionist Youth Movement many years before where he had had a debate about whether its members could criticize Israel. The Jewish leadership had said that it was not their role to criticize Israel outside of the country.

Gert mentioned that the OSCE Berlin Declaration of 2004 showed a clear red line between antisemitism and criticism. Israel could not be mixed up with South Africa, as it was not an apartheid country.

Sigler interjected by arguing that there were some similarities between both cases. A client state in the West Bank would not be dissimilar to the Bantustans in apartheid South Africa. Since there were such similarities, there were also some similarities in the campaign against it.

Gert pointed to the fact that Israel was not intentionally oppressing the Palestinians.

Sigler noted the Israeli checkpoints explaining that he had never been subjugated in his life in such a way as he had when he had passed through one of them. A boycott would only become antisemitic if was declared because of the Jews. There was of course a pro-Palestine lobby that was antisemitic, but that was not the point.

Gert expressed his fear that having the boycott as an instrument working would lead to the idea that Israel was an apartheid state.

Sigler mentioned that UNISON was part of the ENOUGH campaign against Israeli occupation. He described the Independent Jewish Voices group as a left-of-centre initiative of concerned people.