

INSIDE LABOUR

Israel-Palestine: Workers should support resistance by oppressed groups everywhere

By Terry Bell

20 October 2023

Get back to basics. It is a cry regularly heard within a globally weakening trade union movement. And this is usually spelled out as dealing with localised bureaucracy and corruption within the nation-state.

But the true basis of trade unionism is internationalism, summed up in the demand for worker unity. And this past week should have given us all cause to reflect on what that unity should mean and how it has been distorted.

With some honourable exceptions, the horror visited on Gaza has caused a muddled response from much of the global trade union movement. Which is scarcely surprising, since the labour movement as a whole has been subsumed by the established system and has fallen prey to the intellectual virus of nationalism which is, effectively a cult of group superiority.

A classic example exists in Britain today where the leader of the largely union-backed Labour Party, Sir Keir Starmer, defines himself as a Zionist. So labour, in line with much of global society, tends to adopt polarised support for either “Palestine” or “Israel”. Clarity and context are clearly lacking.”

The confusion has also been encouraged over decades by much generally sloppy and, often, consciously propagandistic journalism. This, at one level, is reporting that, for example, refers to the hostility in the Israel/Plestine as being between “Jews and Arabs”: a total misnomer. Because there are “Arab” members of the Jewish faith and Jews who oppose the Zionist project of a “Jewish state” of Israel.

The monotheistic (one god) belief of Judaism spread from what is still generally referred to as the “Middle East” to Europe, Asia and Africa. So there are Jews of European, Asian, African and Arabian origin. Just as there are Christians, Muslims and those of other faiths or none in almost every corner of the globe.

This situation has existed for millennia in a world where, with some exceptions, chiefs, barons kings and other minorities ruled over largely oppressed majorities. The advent of the modern, industrial age highlighted these distinctions of a minority of rulers dictating the lives of the vast majority of the ruled.

Out of this awareness that the fundamental division in society — the root of oppression and exploitation — was class distinction based on economic power, grew the trade union and socialist movements. They demanded equal rights for all of humanity, summed up in the much quoted slogan penned in 1844: “Workers of all countries, unite!”

Here is the keystone, the true foundation of trade unionism. And it means that workers should support resistance by oppressed groups everywhere, but without

illusions that the nationalism of the oppressed is any less dangerous than that of the oppressor.

The role unions should play is to continually argue for the democratic humanism of internationalism. The alternative is to provide sustenance for the intellectual virus of nationalism, that can so readily mutate into even genocidal fascism.

However, religion provides perhaps the most fertile ground for the virus to spread since support can be claimed from a force — a deity — greater than humanity. This amounts to the use and abuse of religions which, in almost all cases are the antithesis of religiofascist groups claiming their name.

We, in South Africa, experienced a particularly nasty form of ethno (race based) fascism in apartheid which, at the same time claimed a blessing from a Calvinist God. Jews, Roma and other “unter menschen” in Europe suffered mass murder under the largely secular Aryan variant of the disease, a horror that gave impetus to Zionist nationalism.

The Zionist state, especially with the arrival in government of ministers such as Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir cannot in any sense deny the fascist label. The mutation is complete and it has nothing to do with Judaism. The same applies to the various Jihadist groups from Hamas to Al Qaeda and Isis and their claims to represent Islam and the Muslim faith.

Oppressed people in what was the British colonial creation of Palestine have every right to fight back and their resistance deserves support. But, especially for organised labour, it is essential not only to understand the history of that tortured region, but also to have a clear vision for both the near and distant future.

That near future with regard to the current bloodshed in what the Israeli newspaper, Ha'aretz referred to as the “prison” for 2 million people in Gaza, should be for a democratic secular state from the Jordan to the sea. The distant vision should uphold the idea of a future world without borders.

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