

FROM ROSA PARKS TO RICHARD BLUMENTHAL

What do Rosa Parks and US Senator Richard Blumenthal have in common? They both have taken a stand on the role of boycotts in a free society. How do they differ? She used a boycott to advance social justice; he aims to prevent boycotts for a cause he opposes.

More than 60 years ago, Rosa Parks made history in Montgomery, AL. Arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a city bus, she called for a boycott of the bus line, and nearly 100% of local African Americans supported it for the next two years.

The white power structure did not accept this development without a struggle. Martin Luther King's home was bombed. Eighty leaders of the boycott were indicted and threatened with jail. After 18 months, a federal district court held that segregated buses were unconstitutional, and 5 months later the Supreme Court agreed. But the city refused to desegregate the buses for another month, and the boycott only ended when the city complied with the court ruling.

Boycotts are not the preferred way for issues of justice to be raised in society, but when the institutions of government are distracted, or are even colluding with injustice, boycotts are a way for freedom of expression to level the playing field. In the era of segregation, individuals were powerless, but boycotts gave voice to their protests and made them strong. Workers too have used the boycott, in the form of the strike, to secure fair terms of employment.

South Africans struggled against great odds to defeat apartheid, but they also appealed to the whole world to support them through a boycott of South Africa until apartheid ended. American public opinion was slow to join in, and the US government even slower, but eventually, world public opinion forced democratic change.

Today, the Palestinian people have united in support of a non-violent campaign of Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS), focusing world-wide pressure on Israel to comply after more than a half-century with its obligations under international law: to end the occupation of Palestinian land, to treat Palestinian citizens of Israel with full equality under the law, and to recognize the right of refugees to return to their homes.

The BDS campaign has grown rapidly – faster than support rose against apartheid a generation ago. Once again US public awareness and official support lag behind. But public support has been growing, especially since the Israeli war against Gaza in summer, 2014.

But recently, AIPAC, the major pro-Israel lobby in the US, has been pressing state legislatures and Congress to pass anti-BDS laws. More than 20 state legislatures have had bills filed for that purpose. Sen. Blumenthal has sponsored a separate anti-BDS bill in Congress.

The anti-BDS state laws try to discourage companies and organizations from supporting BDS by depriving them of government contracts, grants, or investments. But boycotts, divestment and sanctions are constitutionally protected expression when directed against political policies, such as Israel's decades-old defiance of international law and Palestinian human rights. Sooner or later a reasonable court will declare these laws unconstitutional. All that AIPAC can hope for is to distract and delay public support for BDS to move Israel toward a just, negotiated peace.

AIPAC hopes that most people won't notice these laws, but that church groups, for example, that have voted to divest from companies profiting from the occupation may have second thoughts if they fear to lose government contracts or grants for their charitable programs.

Senator Blumenthal was Connecticut's Attorney General for years. He knows well that the state laws violate freedom of expression. Yet he has sponsored S.2531, a bill that would give federal support to state or local anti-BDS laws. But where state laws violate constitutional rights of expression, federal laws that "permit" such violations are also unconstitutional.

So, why has Senator Blumenthal sponsored the Senate bill? No doubt AIPAC pressed him hard as a Jewish senator to join their campaign, and he may honestly hold to the misguided view that loyalty to Israel trumps support for civil liberties in the US. But a rising number of Jewish Americans of all ages are fed up with Israel's stonewalling on a just peace with Palestinians. Polls show a majority of Americans, including Jews, is highly critical of the current Israeli government. As more of us come to see how quickly our legislators were ready to trade away our rights, Sen. Blumenthal and his fellow sponsors will have a lot to explain. Contact him at: Sen. Richard Blumenthal, 90 State House Square, 10th Floor, Hartford, CT 06103

4/24/2016 Contact Jewish Voice for Peace New Haven at: JVPNH.org

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