

Landmark decision on Palestine

British Trade Union Congress

In September the TUC made a momentous decision to actively campaign against Israel's treatment of Palestine. **Hugh Lanning** describes this moment and what it means for the future.

Palestinian flags waving in celebration at the British TUC in Liverpool. Even if some of them were upside down it was a sight some did not expect to see. The cause? Unions voting overwhelmingly for an effective consumer boycott against Israel.

Behind the scenes in smokeless rooms, battles raged all week. Real political and diplomatic pressure was applied to union delegations to withdraw or change positions. Although opponents argued that boycotts were ineffective and divisive, a lot of effort was put into preventing the TUC carrying a motion that mentioned boycott, disinvestment or sanction!

Why? Although the British TUC and unions are not as strong as before, the TUC passing a pro-boycott, pro-Palestine motion will be noticed around the world. Not least because for many years the TUC was close to, even collaborative with, British foreign policy over Israel. Talk was always of balance, fairness to both sides.

But Israel's bombing and invasion of Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009 changed this. It mobilised hundreds of thousands of people in Britain to take to the streets. They marched through snow and rain to demand an end to Israel's war on Gaza. The debate at the TUC followed resolutions passed in the union movement in Britain, supporting peace and justice for Palestine, and calling for concrete solidarity action.

GENERAL COUNCIL STATEMENT

As always, there was some compromise and confusion. The TUC

General Council Statement focuses on settlement goods, companies involved in the occupation of Palestine, the wall and sale of arms. For the first time it commits the TUC to working with the PSC (Palestine Solidarity Committee) to build a campaign.

This provides an opportunity for the PSC to sit with the TUC and plan a campaign that unions in the country can participate in. It gives a chance to debate Palestine with over 7 million members.

Just as important, it gives access to union communication, organisation and resources that can become a major stepping stone in building the mass solidarity campaign so desperately needed.

The TUC also condemned the statement by Histadrut, the Israeli labour federation, during the Gaza invasion. This will be raised with Histadrut, and a report given on future relationships.

TIME FOR ACTION

Many unions had debated Palestine at their own conferences. The message to the TUC congress from union after union was that now is the time for action. Following the Gaza invasion delegates argued, nothing has changed. The blockade of Gaza and Israel's occupation remains and the settlements, the wall and attacks on East Jerusalem continue.

Delegates believed resolutions were not enough. It was time for this generation of unionists to stand up for Palestine unlike in the past.

The TUC also passed

overwhelmingly a motion, bravely tabled by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU). This called for a broader consumer boycott of Israeli goods.

This means that the PSC can now have a twin track approach. Working with unions through the TUC, but also working directly with unions that support a mass boycott campaign.

RESOLUTIONS NEED ACTION

These resolutions provide an opportunity for all supporters of Palestine – inside and outside the union movement. But to make real change, action must follow.

We have to redouble our efforts to get our message across. We need to produce campaign materials and briefings to help unionists raise the issues in their branches, in many cases for the first time.

This will not happen automatically. Palestinians in Palestine cheered when they heard news of the TUC's resolutions. Our responsibility is to not break that faith. At a time when there is renewed talk of an Obama peace process, the need for pressure for a just deal for Palestine is greater than ever.

The TUC's decision is a landmark, but it is only a step – not the solution. It is down to us to translate the resolutions into action. LB

Hugh Lanning is chair of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. Copies of the Motion, General Council statement and policies passed at union conferences: <http://www.palestinecampaign.org>