

Employing Economic Measures as Nonviolent Tools for Justice
In the Israeli-Palestinian Context
August 22, 2016

The U.S. Congress and 22 states across the U.S. are considering, or have passed, laws that penalize or criminalize the use of economic measures to oppose Israeli policies towards Palestinians that many find unjust and discriminatory. The targets of these proposed laws are organizations and agencies that endorse, in full or in part, the Palestinian call for the use of boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS). Such actions are anti-democratic, suppress legitimate criticism, and restrict our freedom to determine our own investment and selective purchasing practices. We affirm and defend the right of churches and organizations to witness using economic measures in the specific case of Israel-Palestine.

The BDS call, issued in 2005 by over 100 Palestinian civil society organizations, seeks to promote a nonviolent response to end Israel's 50-year military occupation of Palestinian territories and dismantle the separation barrier, much of which is built on Palestinian land; to recognize the full equality of Palestinian citizens of Israel; and to respect, protect, and promote the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties, according to UN resolution 194. U.S. churches, among many others, are clear in seeking an end to the occupation.

Churches and church-related organizations have employed such nonviolent tactics in many instances of injustice, both domestically and globally, over the decades. The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the boycott of products made by slave labor are some historical precedents. Some more recent examples include:

- ✓ Support for the Coalition of Immokalee Workers to seek fair wages for farmworkers who pick tomatoes used by major restaurant chains. The churches have affirmed boycotts of Taco Bell and Wendy's in support of the farmworkers.
- ✓ Support for United Farm Workers (UFW) who pick the cucumbers used by Mt. Olive Pickle Company, as well as those who pick grapes and lettuce, through consumer boycotts, until it, and other growers, agreed to pay a fair wage.
- ✓ Opposition to the use of racially offensive names and logos by professional sports teams through boycotts.
- ✓ Participation in the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility to promote socially responsible practices by various companies through shareholder activism.
- ✓ Divestment to oppose the policy of apartheid in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s.
- ✓ Corporate engagement with and/or divestment from fossil fuel companies in the context of the climate change debates.

Through the use of such nonviolent but impactful measures at the intersection of faith and finance, the churches have participated in making a difference, promoting justice, and effecting change. Indeed, when corporate social responsibility standards do not lead businesses to change their practices, then it is often only through the concerted economic pressure of civil society and public interest groups that positive political and social reforms occur.

The current effort to penalize or criminalize such use of economic leverage in the specific case of Israel-Palestine is therefore offensive and disturbing. It strikes us as an attempt to remove a responsible, powerful, and legal method of public witness as an option. To target economic measures in any way on one specific policy issue—Israel-Palestine—is selective and inconsistent. In fact, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld, without dissent, the right to boycott (1982).

As churches and church-related organizations, we may not endorse all aspects of the Palestinian civil society BDS movement; nor do we all have similar policies on the use of economic leverage in the context of Israel-Palestine. However, we all share a hope and desire for an end to occupation, and we continue to advocate for that. If we choose, through debate and reflection, to employ our economic leverage to advance that policy objective, as we do many others, we understand it as our right to do so. It is an assertion of our right as stewards of our financial resources to spend and invest as we choose, and to do so responsibly, according to our theological and moral conviction, expressed in our denominational or organizational policies.

We must be clear: such an assertion of this right is an effort to change unjust Israeli policy toward Palestinians, not to delegitimize the State of Israel, nor to marginalize or isolate our Jewish neighbors, or their enterprises. Our choices to purchase and invest responsibly, and to advocate with corporations or governments, including our own, are motivated by our firm commitments to justice and peace for all people, without discrimination or exclusion.

As churches and church-related organizations, we reject any efforts by the State to curtail these rights, and will continue to exercise them, as appropriate and in accordance with our faith and policies.

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Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Church of the Brethren, Office of Public Witness
Conference of Major Superiors of Men
Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ
Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns
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