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U.C. student workers' union votes to join BDS campaign against Israel

Monday, December 1, 2014 | by j. staff & jta

A union that represents University of California student workers and academic employees approved a resolution to join the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement against Israel.

The United Auto Workers Local 2865, which represents more than 13,000 teaching assistants, tutors and other student workers in the UC system, announced Wednesday that the measure was approved on Dec. 4 by a vote of 1,411 to 749.

The UAW local became the first major U.S. labor union to hold a membership vote on Israel and BDS.

The union also announced that during the vote, 1,136 members pledged to personally adhere to the academic boycott of Israel.

The measure calls on the University of California and UAW International to "divest from companies involved in Israeli occupation and apartheid" and calls on the U.S. government to end military aid to Israel.

Some 53 percent of voting members also pledged not to "take part in any research, conferences, events, exchange programs, or other activities that are sponsored by Israeli universities complicit in the occupation of Palestine and the settler-colonial policies of the state of Israel" until the Israeli universities "take steps to end complicity with dispossession, occupation, and apartheid."

"This vote was a first step in our commitment to solidarity with Palestinians under occupation and facing discriminatory laws, and we will continue to take steps to make that solidarity concrete as part of our involvement in anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles broadly," union member Kumars Salehi said.

UAW 2865 joins several labor unions in the United Kingdom and Ireland, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa, as well as several dockworker unions around the world, in supporting the BDS movement.

The undergraduate student governments of several UC schools, including at Berkeley, San Diego, Riverside, Irvine and Los Angeles, also have passed resolutions in support of divestment from Israel.

Informed Grads, a group of union members that opposes the resolution, said in a statement that it was extremely concerned with the outcome of the vote, which it says puts UAW 2865 in direct opposition to the International UAW, which opposes the BDS movement.

"This is incredibly damaging to our union," Jonathan Kummerfeld, a UC Berkeley computer science graduate student and Informed Grads member, said in a statement. "This resolution may end up with our union recommending boycotting fellow UAW members who work for companies that are targets of the BDS movement."

The pro-Israel advocacy organization StandWithUs, which is active on UC campuses, in a statement condemned UAW 2865 for backing the divestment measure. The group accused the union of holding Israel to a "double standard," in particular by rejecting a proposal to boycott major human rights violators including the governments of Qatar, Russia, and China.

The Detroit-based UAW replied to an interview request from J. by issuing a statement from UAW Region 5 Director Gary Jones. "The UAW International Union under then President Ron Gettelfinger joined more than 40 national labor leaders in issuing a position Statement of Opposition to Divestment from or Boycotts of Israel in 2007. That is and continues to be the International UAW position on the matter.

"Each Local within the UAW is entitled to operate independently as Local 2865 has done. We do note however that there was division within the local as reflected in its recent vote. That said it is important to note the Gettelfinger letter of 2007 remains the International UAW policy on this matter."

From information posted at <http://www.uaw2865.org/2014-bds-vote>:

Total votes cast: 2,168

Yes: 1,411 (65%); No: 749 (35%)

In addition, 1,136 members pledged to personally adhere to the academic boycott against Israeli academic institutions.

Breakdown for nearby campuses:

U.C. Berkeley: Ballots cast 721, Yes 506, No 214, Personal Pledge 397.

U.C. Davis: Ballots cast 203, Yes 167, No 36, Personal Pledge 127.

U.C. Santa Cruz: Ballots cast 121, Yes 82, No 37, Personal Pledge 73.

According to the UAW website, "The resolution ballot consists of two parts. The first part is a vote on whether our Local should join the BDS movement. The second is an option to make an anonymous, individual commitment to participate in the academic boycott. For the full text of the ballot, [see the sample ballot here](#)."

Following the release of the vote, several press releases and statements were received by J. via email. Here are those statements, unedited:

S.F.-based Jewish Community Relations Council, S.F.-based Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund, and Jewish Community Federation and Jewish Community Foundation of the East Bay (joint statement):

U.C. Grad Student Worker Union Vote Raises Concerns for Academic Freedom and for Jewish and Israeli Students on Campus

The Jewish Community Relations Council, the Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund and The Jewish Federation & The Jewish Community Foundation of the East Bay are very disappointed to learn that UAW 2865 (University of California Graduate Student Worker Union) has passed a resolution to join the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel. The BDS movement is anti-peace, working ultimately toward the end of Israel; it does not seek a peaceful resolution to the conflict with an Israeli state and a Palestinian state living side-by-side in peace, security and prosperity.

This endorsement of BDS stands in direct opposition to our nation's cherished value of academic freedom, attempting to block scholarly exchanges and collaboration solely based on national origin. We are gravely concerned about the chilling effect this will have not only for academic cooperation, but also directly on Jewish and Israeli students and supporters of Israel on campus, where they already face hostility toward expressions of solidarity with Israel. This could exacerbate an already tense and polarized environment while doing absolutely nothing to support peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

We are also troubled by the problematic process leading up to the vote in which students eligible to vote on the resolution were not given equal opportunity to hear from opposing voices to the resolution. For example, on many of the campuses, the union held informational speaker events presenting only arguments in favor of BDS and the resolution, with no opposing points of view represented. We will continue to monitor this situation, reach out to university administrators about our concerns and work toward ensuring fair and equal treatment for all students on campus.

We want to acknowledge and applaud the efforts of Informed Grads, the graduate student group that led the statewide efforts to oppose this resolution in their union. More information on Informed Grads, and their work on this issue, is available on their website: <http://informedgrads.org>

**Anti-Defamation League
(issued by the Western Regional director):**

ADL Disappointed by UAW Divestment Resolution; Calls on International Union President to Speak Out

Berkeley, CA, December 11, 2014 ... The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) today expressed deep disappointment at the vote by the UC Student-Workers Union, UAW Local 2865, in favor of a resolution urging the University of California Regents to join the boycott, sanctions and divestment movement against Israel.

"The boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign does nothing to advance the cause of peace or justice," said Abraham H. Foxman, ADL National Director. "Its advocates deepen divisions between Israelis and Palestinians and make the possibility of reconciliation less likely, and it undermines and contradicts the spirit of solidarity that exists among the members of the labor movement in the United States and Israel."

In a letter to Dennis Williams, International President of the United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America, ADL reiterated its call on the union's national leadership to condemn BDS initiatives and to make clear the labor movement's opposition to such tactics.

Although more than 52,000 graduate students reportedly were eligible to vote, only 2,168 votes were cast. Of those, 65 percent supported the resolution. Informed Grads, the UC-wide student group opposing the resolution, has raised legitimate concerns about the referendum process.

The passage of this resolution will likely have no practical impact as the University of California has repeatedly stated that it does not support divestment from Israel, and is opposed to the academic boycott of Israeli institutions.

ADL previously wrote to Mr. Williams to urge him to publicly reject BDS initiatives, noting that a previous UAW president had signed onto a 2007 letter by labor leaders condemning anti-Israel boycotts.

ADL commended Informed Grads for their tremendous continuing campaign to educate the California university community about the shortcomings of BDS, and to mobilize graduate students to advocate and vote against this measure.

Amcha Initiative:

Santa Cruz, CA, Dec. 10, 2014 - Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, AMCHA Initiative co-founder and director, issued the following statement in response to today's announcement that UAW 2865, the union representing 13,000 graduate instructors on nine University of California (UC) campuses, has voted to join the international campaign for "Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions" (BDS) against Israel:

"An academic boycott is blatantly antithetical to the mission of a university. And the global movement for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel is antisemitic. On campus, it creates a hostile environment for many Jewish students who report feeling harassed and intimidated by their professors and isolated from their peers.

"We are particularly grateful that UC Provost Aimee Dorr has disseminated to all UC Chancellors the UC policies that prohibit graduate student instructors from using the university classroom to promote anti-Israel propaganda or an antisemitic boycott of Israel.

"We call on all UC administrators to ensure that these policies are strictly enforced, that UC classrooms are used for education and not political indoctrination, and that all students - including Jewish and pro-Israel students - have equal access to a safe and non-discriminatory learning environment."

In August, after UAW 2865 announced its intent to call for a BDS vote, AMCHA coordinated a letter (hyperlink to August letter) from twelve groups to Janet Napolitano and the UC Board of Regents urging them to prohibit the graduate students from promoting BDS in the classroom and on the campus square.

UC Provost Aimee Dorr, on behalf of Napolitano, affirmed (hyperlink Dorr's response) for the groups that the University's Policy on Course Content and other UC policies prohibit academic student employees (ASEs) from engaging in such actions. She also wrote (hyperlink Dorr email to Chancellors) to all

Chancellors notifying them of the UC policies which prohibit AEs from using their instructional positions to promote political propaganda or advocacy, including the promotion of a boycott of Israel.

Earlier this week, 22 education, civil rights and Jewish advocacy groups wrote to the UC Regents asking if the UC policies that prohibit UAW 2865 graduate student instructors from promoting BDS and anti-Israel, and often anti-Semitic, propaganda in the classroom also apply to UC faculty.

AMCHA Initiative is a non-profit organization, based in California, dedicated to investigating, documenting, educating about, and combating antisemitism at institutions of higher education in America. AMCHA Initiative's efforts are bolstered by a network of more than 5,000 members and supporters of the Jewish community -- including university alumni, parents and grandparents, rabbis, religious school principals and synagogue members -- who have joined together to speak in one voice to ensure the safety and well-being of Jewish students on college and university campuses across the country.

StandWithUs:

StandWithUs condemns UAW 2865 for joining the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement by voting in favor of divestment from companies doing business with Israel, boycotting Israeli academic institutions and calling for an end to US aid to Israel.

It is unfortunate that the UAW 2865 fell for the manipulative tactics of BDS. While it masquerades as a human rights movement that seeks a better life for Palestinians, BDS's true goal is the elimination of Israel and the end of Jewish self-determination. Indeed, at an event organized by the UAW 2865 BDS Caucus, one of the speakers explicitly stated that "bringing down Israel really will benefit everyone in the world".

In its obsession with slandering Israel, the Joint Council of UAW 2865 violated the most basic standards of transparency and democracy by calling for a vote, advocating in favor of BDS, but refusing to grant opponents of BDS equal opportunities to present their case. It attacked academic freedom and damaged the interests of its own members, in order to push a narrow and destructive political agenda. It promoted discrimination on the basis of national origin by stigmatizing Israeli academics, while attempting to undermine US-Israeli academic collaborations which enrich our universities and make the world a better place. Most egregiously, the Joint Council openly held Israel to a double standard and took an official position against equal rights for the Jewish people. They rejected a proposal to boycott major human rights violators including the governments of Qatar, Russia, and China.

BDS deceives people into thinking that punishing only Israel is a step towards peace, when in fact they are being used to advance a fundamentally anti-peace, anti-human rights and anti-justice agenda. BDS gives Palestinian leaders a free pass for their racist violence and incitement against Jews and Israelis. Worst of all, BDS undermines efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, cooperation, coexistence, and negotiations, which are the best hope for peace and justice in the region. It actively perpetuates the kind of zero sum thinking that has made the Palestinian-Israeli conflict impossible to resolve.

We stand with Informed Grads, who educated many students about the true agenda of BDS and the deleterious consequences of the vote. We commend the many people who took principled positions against BDS and hope that students across the country will continue to expose and oppose its anti-peace, anti-justice, anti-human rights agenda.

American Jewish Committee Los Angeles:

Boycott Actions by UC Student-Workers Union Undermine Middle East Peace

December 10, 2014 - Los Angeles - AJC (American Jewish Committee) Los Angeles denounces the passage of the pro-Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions (BDS) resolution by the University of California Student-Workers Union (UAW Local 2865), which calls for the University of California and the UAW International to divest from companies doing business in Israel and for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions.

Acting in opposition to its own UAW Regional Leadership, which just last month reaffirmed its 2007 Statement in Opposition to Divestments from or Boycotts of Israel, the UAW Local 2865 resolution passed today hurts the chances for a sustainable Israeli-Palestinian peace by promoting a one-state solution.

"We deplore the vote of the UC Student-Workers Union in support of this resolution," said Dean Schramm, President of AJC's Los Angeles Region. "Singling out Israel bespeaks an insidious double standard. Where are the calls for divestment from autocratic states such as Syria, Sudan, or Iran, which routinely violate human rights?" Schramm asked.

Lee Bollinger, President of Columbia University, stated in a letter endorsed by over 400 college and university presidents and chancellors that such an academic boycott is "utterly antithetical to the fundamental values of the academy.... In seeking to quarantine Israeli Universities and scholars, [a vote in favor of a boycott] threatens every university committed to fostering scholarly and cultural exchanges that lead to enlightenment, empathy and a much needed international market of ideas."

"This misguided resolution is counterproductive to advancing peace between Israel and the Palestinians," said Rabbi Mark Diamond, Director of AJC's Los Angeles Region. "Boycott and divestment actions against Israel set back efforts toward a two-state solution."

AJC urges the UC Board of Regents and UC President Janet Napolitano, student leaders, and administration officials to speak out against this resolution and take meaningful action against it.

J. coverage from Dec. 4, 2014

Unionized University of California graduate students voted this week on a measure that would demand a boycott of Israeli academic institutions and divestment from companies doing business with Israel.

United Auto Workers Local 2865 - which represents some 13,000 graduate-level teaching assistants, tutors and other student workers in the U.C. system - held the vote on Thursday, Dec. 4, with results scheduled to be announced within a week.

According to U.C. Berkeley graduate student Jonathan Kummerfeld, an activist with Informed Grads, a group of union members opposed to the measure, voting stations at 10 U.C. schools were to close at 8 p.m. Dec. 4. Ballots will be shipped to Berkeley, stored temporarily in a locked office of the U.S. Postal Service, then counted on Wednesday, Dec. 10, Kummerfeld said.

The count could "possibly extend into Thursday depending on the number of votes," he noted.

Kummerfeld also expressed concern about voting irregularities. In an email to J. he said, "We are going to be checking every name during counting. Ballots are put inside two envelopes, with the person's name on the outer one, so it can be checked, then the inner one is put in a pile. Between now and next week, we mostly have to trust the elections committee. We are going to be allowed to sign on tape that seals the ballot boxes, so if they are opened and that tape is broken we should know."

The Joint Council of the UAW 2865 - a body of 83 elected officers that oversees the union - has recommended support of the BDS movement "against public institutions and corporations that profit from [Israeli] occupation and apartheid."

In contrast to U.C. student government resolutions supporting BDS, which have no financial impact as the U.C. system routinely dismisses them, a BDS resolution passed by UAW 2865 would seek to remove pension fund investments from "companies that profit off of the Israeli occupation," union leadership noted in a letter in July. - *j. staff*