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Interview with Raymond Deane
March 26, 2009

Retrieved on 22nd December 2021 from www.anarkismo.net
The following is an interview with Raymond Deane, an Irish composer, author and former chairperson of the Ireland Palestine Solidarity Campaign (IPSC). He has been a remarkably active member of the IPSC for years, he is also a very knowledgable person on the Middle East conflict and is a committed supporter of the Boycott Campaign in Ireland. His opinions in this interview on the campaign are given in a personal capacity.

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1. The recent brutal Israeli onslaught on Gaza generated a massive wave of public opinion which renewed the energy of the international solidarity movement... Ireland seems to be a key actor in the growing international solidarity movement against the Palestinian oppression, can you tell us in what concrete ways this solidarity has been expressed?

I'm not sure that Ireland is "a key actor" — it's flattering, but an exaggeration. However, Ireland SHOULD and COULD be a key actor if its government paid attention to public opinion (you and I know that governments only do that when it suits them). For historical reasons, the Palestinian cause is perhaps more widely supported here than elsewhere at a gut level. Were our government to reflect this more forcefully within the European Union and develop the courage to oppose the EU's support for Israel, I believe it would set an example that would

be followed by certain other EU countries (Cyprus, Greece, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, perhaps Spain, Portugal…). Thus the solidarity movement here has to TRY to turn Ireland into "a key actor", into a kind of "rotten apple" within the EU basket. To this extent solidarity with the Palestinians and opposition to the stance of our own government -and, in my view, opposition to the Lisbon Treaty and a common EU foreign policy determined ultimately by countries like Germany, France and the UK — go hand in hand.

2. Tell us in a nutshell what the "Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions" strategy is aiming for?

In a nutshell, one would have to say "the isolation of Israel". Personally, I'm sceptical about the potential such a campaign has for causing actual financial damage to the Zionist regime. Nonetheless, Israel prides itself on being part of "the family of nations" (the phrase is used in its Declaration of Independence), so the sense that it's excluded from that "family" (a dubious image, I believe!) would have immense symbolic power. Israel thrives on the sense that its crimes have no consequences for it: BDS attempts to show that, yes, they DO have consequences, even if only on a symbolic level. As for the "S" factor, I'm sceptical that we're going to get capitalist governments to impose sanctions on Israel, and I'm not even sure it's desirable; however, we can and must focus on the trading privileges from which Israel benefits within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement, and point out again and again that Israel violates the human rights clause of that Agreement. If nothing else, this clarifies that EU support for Israel violates its own regulations.

3. Some people, even in the left, would argue that this BDS approach could only work in the long term, therefore having little or no impact on the immediate reality… what is your own opinion on this issue? How effective can this campaign be?

Even if that were true, it would be no justification for not adopting it. In the case of South Africa, the campaign beavered away for many years before at last being reinforced when the big banks started withdrawing their backing from the regime. This mightn't happen with Israel, for a variety of reasons, but the point is that short-termism is a hopeless perspective.

4. Can you tell us some of the biggest successes of this campaign at an international level?

Perhaps after all Ireland has been a "key factor" here, because so far ICTU is the only national trade union congress to have advocated a BDS campaign. In general, the fact that individual unions worldwide are coming on board (COSATU in South Africa was exemplary here) is vitally important. The fact that civil society in Canada and the USA — two of Israel's most powerful backers — is gradually coming on board is encouraging, and ominous for Israel. Veolia's loss of a huge contract in Sweden recently was exciting: they are the company that run Dublin's Luas system, but also a system linking illegal Israeli settlements. Also in Sweden recently, a tennis match against Israel had to take place without spectators because of fear of demonstrations. Just as Israel must see that there are consequences to its actions, firms that profit from Israel must see that there are consequences, and those consequences must be extended to representatives of culture and sport, all of whom are regarded as "ambassadors" by Israel.

5. What are the main obstacles faced today by the campaign?

The main obstacle is the canard of antisemitism. In Germany — which, by the way, is the greatest stumbling-block alongside the USA to a just resolution of the Palestine issue — if even the possibility of boycott or sanctions is mentioned, there is immediately a chorus of "the last time Jews were boycotted here was when Hitler was in power", as if this was about boycotting Jews rather than a racist state. Even Naomi Klein, a Canadian Jew, got that treatment recently when she called for BDS. Af-

ter Gaza, this position is becoming more and more difficult to sustain, which is why those who adopt it are getting more and more desperately strident.

6. A lot of the people supporting the campaign would argue that the Israeli system has significant similarities to the Apartheid regime in South Africa, and would try to draw lessons from the solidarity movement for South Africa… do you think this comparison is relevant?

Yes, I do. Furthermore, a lot of those drawing such lessons are South African Jews who were involved in the original anti-Apartheid campaign.

7. Some people claim that a major difference between the South African Apartheid regime and the Israeli colonialist-settler regime, is that in the former case, the South African regime depended on the super-exploitation of the black masses while in the latter case, the Israelis would rather get rid of the Palestinians altogether… do you think this difference is valid or does it have any impact on the strategy?

The difference you mention is a real one, and shouldn't be fudged, but I see no reason why any of this should impact on strategy. The important thing is to COMPARE rather than IDENTIFY the two regimes, pointing out that Israel backed South African Apartheid to the bitter end, even when the USA and UK had dropped it. Apartheid, in essence, means devising separate legal systems for separate peoples, which is unacceptable within a democracy, even a "liberal democracy" (a term about which I'm sceptical). Israel goes further: there are two legal systems within "sovereign" Israel (contrary to Jimmy Carter's assertions), and a different system again within the Occupied Territories. It's imperative to stress that there is already a de facto single and brutally unequal state under Israeli sovereignty, thus denying Israel the privilege of washing its hands of what it gets up to in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

8. How do you think this campaign can be complementary to other forms of resistance and solidarity?

First of all, I believe that the overal campaign must be multi-faceted and not just an anti-Apartheid campaign, although this aspect is central. The campaign to make it impossible for Israeli war criminals to travel abroad, using the legal principle of universal jurisdiction, is itself a kind of boycott campaign, not unrelated to the shutting out of sporting and cultural figures who represent the Israeli state (this latter qualification is necessary — it's not a question of boycotting individuals who represent themselves). The campaigns against the Apartheid Wall, against house demolitions, against the siege of Gaza and against pro-Israeli propaganda in our media are all so closely linked — all being responses to the same anachronistic, atavistic settler-colonial project — that they cannot fail to be complementary. The only mistake would be to concentrate on one to the exclusion of others, and I don't think our campaign does that.