

Comment from BRICUP on Michael Sommer's speech on receiving the Arno Lustiger Prize

Michael Sommer, the President of the *German Federation of Trade Unions*, and of the *International Trade Union Confederation*, has attacked his fellow European trade unionists for their criticisms of Israel. He is reported to have compared their campaign for the boycott of Israeli institutions, and the disinvestment from Israeli companies, to the Nazi boycott of Jewish shops in 1930's Germany.

There can be no excuse for giving so wilfully misleading an account on so grave an issue. For, on the contrary, the campaign to hold Israel responsible for its criminal behaviour towards the Palestinian people is motivated by the principles of anti-racism and justice. Those are the same principles that motivated anti-Nazis in the 1920s and 1930s, and which motivate those fighting neo-Nazism and Islamophobia today.

Antisemitism is targeted violence and discrimination against Jews *as Jews*. This has nothing to do with criticism of Israel. Israel is not criticised for its religious or ethnic make-up. It is criticised for its illegal occupation and colonisation of the West Bank, for the terrorisation of the 1.5 million Palestinians who are forced to live in the open prison that is the Gaza Strip, for the building of an Apartheid Wall that severs Palestinian agriculturalists from their land, for the systematic discrimination against Palestinian Arabs who are citizens of Israel, and for the attempt to extirpate the culture of the Palestinian nation. These are good and ample reasons.

Israel's policies are indeed supported by some fundamentalist, evangelical Christians in the West. Zionist policies are quite evidently not the prerogatives of any particular cultural, ethnic or religious group. Indeed not all those from a Jewish cultural heritage support the state of Israel, and not all supporters of the state agree with these policies. Opposition to the policies, or even hostility to Israel as a confessional/ethnic state, is opposition to a political process or a political project. It is not hostility to Jews. To describe this opposition as Antisemitism is to propound a falsehood, and, what is more, one that is commonly deployed knowingly and deliberately to divert discussion away from criticism of Israel.

Michael Sommer knows this, of course. His disgraceful accusation is disingenuous. As he accepted the award of the Arno-Lustiger Prize (once known as the 'I Love Israel Prize') from the 3rd German Israel Congress, he knew that he was repeating the slander directed against his fellow trade unionists by Israel's apologists. Because this topic was far from new to him.

It was Sommer who, in 2009 and in conjunction with the leader of the *Histadrut* (the trade union for Israelis that was designed to discriminate systematically against Palestinians), attacked the South African trade union confederation, COSATU, for criticising Israel, and for drawing attention to Israel's role in supporting the white minority, Apartheid regime in South Africa. It was Sommer who condemned his fellow trade unionists for their criticism of the barbaric attack on civilians in Gaza in 2008/9, the deliberate sniper targeting of children, and the dropping of white phosphorus on schools and hospitals that were part of Israel's 'Cast Lead' offensive.

Sommer now commends Israel's colonising entrepreneurs in the West Bank settlements for giving work to the Palestinians. Doubtless by the same logic he would have commended international investors in Apartheid South Africa for providing work for African labour. He turns a blind eye to the fact that Israel, through its ambassadors in European countries, is urging employers to act against those trade unionists who raise

criticisms of Israel or propose BDS (Boycott Divestment and Sanctions). He is thus the trade union President, who is in favour, by default, of political victimisation of his fellow trade unionists.

Can trade unionists avoid a deep sense of embarrassment, of shame even, that Michael Sommer, through the offices he holds, can claim to be speaking for the German, indeed the international trade union movement. In his outrageous pronouncements about Israel he is standing against the proud tradition of anti-fascism and struggle for social justice of the trade union movement world-wide.

Increasingly those with views akin to Sommer's appear as isolated dinosaurs. The tide has turned. Across the globe, trade unions and social movements are now fully aware of the issues at stake in Israel/Palestine, and what Israel stands for. That is why Israel's strategists, and its public relations experts in the 'Rebrand Israel' (Hasbara) operation, are so keen to mobilise their allies, such as Michael Sommer, and so keen to reward them with their prizes and their puff.

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