

Jewish Support for United Church's BDS Debate

By Diana Ralph

The suspense was rising for weeks before the United Church of Canada's 40th General Council meeting in Kelowna, August 8-15. Nearly 400 delegates met to vote on 105 proposals including an eclectic array of social issues. But the biggest controversy by far raged over whether or not the United Church of Canada (UCC) would approve a policy of boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel.

As the 2009 UCC conference approached, the Canadian Jewish Congress (CJC) and B'nai Brith Canada launched a full-scale attack on the

UCC for even considering the BDS proposal. Frank Diamant, Executive Vice-President of B'nai Brith Canada, opined: "This is an obscene gesture by a religious group, and my hope is that Christians will turn their backs on this resolution."¹

"This puts the United Church in some very questionable company," said Eric Vernon, director of government affairs for the CJC. "The use of boycott, divestment and sanction has been a weapon used by Israel's enemies to destroy it. Those are elements of anti-Semitic behaviour in the contemporary world."² The Jewish Defence League threatened to disrupt the conference. Major newspapers also joined the attack. The Canwest-owned *Montreal Gazette* and the *National Post* both published editorials urging the UCC to defeat the resolutions.³

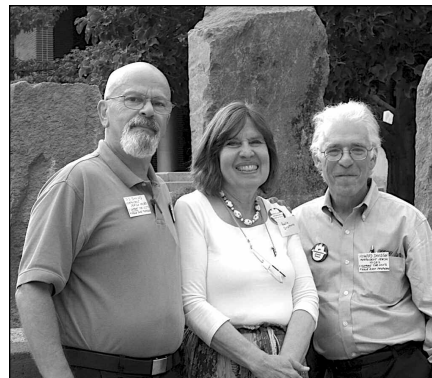
Worst of all, CJC CEO Bernie Farber, emphasizing the CJC's status as "faith partner" to the UCC (even though the CJC is not a religious organization), issued a thinly veiled threat: "Should these resolutions pass, there will be serious consequences to



Diana Ralph, IJV co-chair.

UCC-Jewish community relations."⁴ Farber went even farther, charging that, "Anybody that votes in favour of this, votes in favour of anti-Semitism."⁵

Farber shrewdly focused his attack on the background documentation appended to the motions, which he said "constitutes an inflammatory assault



Sid Shniad, IJV co-chair, Karin Brothers, Howard Davidson.

on Canadian Jews." He highlighted a few phrases such as "ethnic cleansing," "apartheid," and the allegation that some Canadian MPs "are affiliated with the State of Israel" and have accepted "sponsored trips to Israel, which might be called bribes." He characterized

these statements as anti-Semitic, "smirking insinuations about the loyalty of Jewish Canadians who hold dual citizenship or have affiliations with the Jewish state."⁶

In the face of this onslaught, the UCC staff scrambled to defend itself, doing everything it could to distance itself from the BDS proposals. Church spokesman Rev. Bruce Gregersen published an Op Ed piece acknowledging that "we know proposals such as these do cause pain and hurt to Jewish people in Canada" and emphasizing that "the formal

continued on following page

¹ Charles Lewis (July 29, 2009) "United Church plan attacked as anti-Semitic" *National Post*. <http://www.nationalpost.com/news/story.html?id=1838497>

² Charles Lewis (July 28, 2009) "United Church's Israel proposal worries Jewish groups", *National Post* <http://www.nationalpost.com/story.html?id=1837877>

³ "The United Church should reject anti-Israel motion" (July 30, 2009) *Montreal Gazette* <http://www.montrealgazette.com/opinion/United+Church+should+reject+anti+Israel+motion/1843472/story.html>; Colby Cosh (July 31, 2009) "Colby Cosh: Dishonesty, bad judgement at the United Church" *National Post* <http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/fullcomment/archive/2009/07/31/colby-cosh-dishonesty-bad-judgment-at-the-united-church.aspx>

⁴ Bernie M. Farber (July 29, 2009) "United against the Jewish State" *National Post* <http://www.nationalpost.com/story.html?id=1838598>

⁵ Wendy Cox (August 12, 2009) "The United Church resolution is anti-Semitic, CJC says" *Globe and Mail*. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/united-church-resolution-is-anti-semitic-cjc-says/article1245748/>

⁶ Bernie M. Farber (July 29, 2009) "United against the Jewish State" *National Post* <http://www.nationalpost.com/story.html?id=1838598>;

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policy of the United Church is strongly in support of the existence of the Jewish state of Israel.” He said that the proposals “are not meant to undermine the state of Israel, but rather calling on them to make moves toward peace.”⁷

In the lead-up to the conference, Independent Jewish Voices (IJV) repeatedly contacted the UCC leadership offering to conduct workshops and to contact commissioners. While politely appreciative, they asked us not to contact commissioners, and said that there were no rooms available for workshops. So we didn’t lobby in advance. (In retrospect, it appeared that the CJC heavily lobbied commissioners.)

IJV submitted a strong brief to the UCC supporting the proposals arising from an earlier UCC conference in Toronto. It emphasized that this is a conflict between injustice and justice, and that as Jews we support justice and international law. We made it clear that in the context of Israel’s overwhelming power and unquestioning support it enjoys from the U.S., Canada and other Western powers, it is essential for civil society to support the Palestinian call for BDS.

In the run-up to the UCC conference, Sid Shniad, IJV co-chair, and Omar Barghouti, the founder of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, published an Op Ed on July 30 that was carried by alternative electronic media, calling on the UCC to “ignore the thinly-veiled smear campaign and to join this global movement in the pursuit of sustainable peace based on freedom, equality and universal justice.”⁸ But none of the mainstream press published it. However, there was a bit of a breakthrough when the *Globe & Mail* did publish Sid’s letter to the editor and those of others who were supportive of BDS.

Three IJV Steering Committee members, Howard Davidson, Sid Shniad, and I, registered for the UCC conference as observers. We staffed a well-stocked information table, and offered twice-daily discussion sessions on the Middle East resolutions. The UCC would not allow us to distribute materials to commissioners or to publicize these sessions. So at break and meal times, we carried posters announcing that “IJV supports the Middle East Resolutions” and invited commissioners to our discussion sessions. Just about everyone knew that IJV was there. Initially, some commissioners confused us with the

CJC or the JDL (assuming that “Jewish” equals uncritically pro-Israel), but when they realized who we were, almost everyone welcomed us and told us how much they appreciated our “courage” in coming to support them.

The UCC leadership appeared tense over threats that the JDL and CJC would attack them, and therefore were careful not to appear to side with us. At one point, we encountered a UCC executive member who, glancing briefly at our signs, sternly told us, “You’ll have to leave.” But then he looked again and realizing we were from IJV, he fervently apologized, saying he had thought we were with the Jewish Defense League, and said repeatedly that we were welcome.

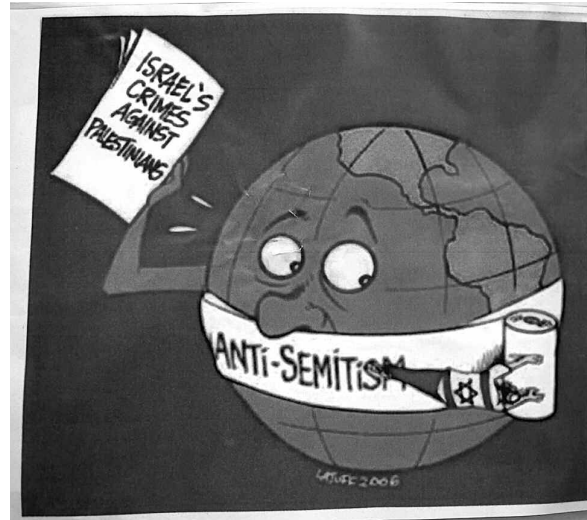
About 50 conference delegates came to our discussion sessions, where people asked questions like, “Is it anti-Semitic?”, “Wouldn’t it just hurt the little people?”, “Isn’t an academic boycott unfair to individual academics?”, and “How can we sell this in our home congregations?”

Several UCC supporters simplified and shortened the contradictory Middle East resolutions into one clear proposal, which was quietly distributed to key UCC commissioners. It emphasized affirming the 2007 World Council of Churches Amman Call which supports the Palestinian right to self-determination and the right of return. It affirms that any two-state solution “must be viable politically, geographically economically and socially.” It also calls for Jerusalem to be “open, accessible, inclusive and shared”, calls the Israeli settlements illegal, and insists that the “Separation Barrier” is “a grave breach of international law and must be removed.” In its first paragraph, the Amman Call says: “Enough is enough. No more words without deeds. It is time for action.”

In spite of the negative press coverage, we and other BDS supporters were guardedly confident, based on the warm welcome we had received. But we didn’t adequately anticipate the CJC’s aggressive tactics.

The CJC had been conspicuous by its absence until the day the resolutions were debated. But on Tuesday, August 11, CJC CEO Bernie Farber swept in with former CJC co-president Rabbi Reuven Bulka (who was replacing the local Kelowna rabbi who suddenly had become “unavailable”), and Michael Elterman, chairman of the Canada-Israel Committee for the Pacific Region. They were surrounded by media. We managed to get interviewed as well, and the CBC coverage especially helped to indicate that we offered an alternative to the CJC and its perspectives.

When UCC staffers told Farber that, like us, he couldn’t distribute handouts, he replied with an



Suppressing criticism of Israel (Latuff).

⁷ Rev. David Giuliano (Aug. 4, 2009) “Standing up for Israel and Palestinians” *National Post* <http://www.nationalpost.com/todays-paper/story.html?id=1856667&p&p=2>

⁸ Omar Barghouti & Sid Shniad (July 30, 2009) “United for Freedom and Universal Justice”

arrogant taunt, saying, “Call the cops.” Intimidated by his bullying, the UCC leadership backed down and “compromised” by giving the CJC a table to display their materials, even though the deadline for claiming tables had passed four days before. A B’nai Brith visitor quietly took copies of everything on our IJV table, which he later passed onto the *National Post*, citing one contentious article out of context in an attempt to discredit our organization.

As the Church’s “faith partner,” Rabbi Bulka was invited to address the Commission. He condemned the BDS resolutions, declaring: “This is not a threat, but if you pass this resolution we will not be able to continue working together.” He complained that the various resolutions say that “Israel is at fault.” Claiming that Israel has “no peace partner,” he urged the Commission to “reformulate the resolutions to be balanced,” “think positive, not punitive,” and “eliminate hate.” This appeal overwhelmed the eloquent appeals to pass BDS that had been made by the Palestinian speaker and the UCC youth delegate.

While Rabbi Bulka glad-handed his supporters in the conference hall, Bernie Farber sat in the bleachers continuously texting and phoning on his cell phone. In retrospect, we suspect that he was mobilizing his supporters, contrary to UCC policy that observers are not allowed to communicate with commissioners during deliberations. Most of the commissioners who lined up to speak at the microphones strongly opposed the BDS resolutions, repeatedly using CJC themes in the course of their interventions.

Gradually those in favour of the BDS resolutions got to the microphones, but they were disorganized and on the defensive. The session passed a motion repudiating all the background material with a nearly unanimous vote. One delegate moved a motion to take no action on the issue at all. However, before a vote could be taken on this motion, another delegate rose to insist that members be given copies of the World Council of Churches’ Amman Call (since it was part of the resolution) and a copy of the letter that had been sent to the delegates to the United Church Conference from the World Council of Churches, imploring them to act on the crisis in Israel and Palestine. Reluctantly the Moderator agreed to have 50 copies of each document made for the 120 delegates who were participating in the session. The session was adjourned with a decision to continue two days later. We left feeling defeated and demoralized.

But over lunch, we joined supportive delegates to talk about ways to rescue the situation. As a result of a huge amount of work by delegates who were

concerned about the underlying issues and determined that the matter not be shoved under the rug, the “no action” motion was quickly defeated when it was brought back to the reconvened session two days later, and a new resolution was adopted which, while avoiding an outright call for the Church to support BDS nationally, included a strong endorsement for individual Church congregations to consider a range of resolute actions including economic boycott. The key elements of what was passed included:

The IJV brief emphasized that this is a conflict between injustice and justice, and that as Jews we support justice and international law.

- Support for the principles of the Amman Call,
- Direction to the General Secretary of the Church’s General Council to engage in consultation, dialogue and study about actions to end the illegal occupation of Palestinian territory, **including, but not limited to economic boycott**; to report back to the Church’s next convention on the

matter; and to provide continuing guidance to the Church on this matter until its next convention.

- The recommendation that the Church’s Conferences, Presbyteries, congregations and community ministries immediately undertake appropriate action toward ending the illegal occupation of Palestinian territory, and enter into conversation as to how to move the two peoples toward reconciliation **including, but not limited to economic boycott**.

The Aftermath

IJV has received more than 50 emails from UCC members, thanking and appreciating us for our intervention and inviting us to work with the Holy Land Task Group which will be coordinating follow-through on the resolution within the national UCC.

While the CJC chose to view the resolution as a victory and issued a press release applauding “the General Council of the United Church of Canada (UCC) for rejecting proposals that endorsed boycott of Israel,”⁹ B’nai Brith Canada condemned the resolutions that passed as an “Insult to Grassroots Canadian Jews.”¹⁰

While we experienced a great deal of confusion in the course of our stay in Kelowna, the three of us from IJV who participated in the events there view what happened at the United Church Conference as a major victory, a ringing endorsement of the importance of our intervening in similar situations to demonstrate that there are Jewish voices that stand in solidarity with those who take stands for justice. ♦

FROM YESTERDAY FOR TODAY: YIDDISH PROVERBS
Selected by Al Stein

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A half truth is a whole lie.

⁹ “CJC Commends United Church for rejecting boycott of Israel” CJC release August 13, 2009

<http://www.cjc.ca/template.php?action=news&story=1036>

¹⁰ “United Church of Canada Resolutions Insult to Grassroots Canadian Jews” B’nai Brith Press Release, Aug 13, 2009 <http://www.bnaibrith.ca/prdisplay.php?id=1536>