

Editorial

Complicity against Palestine

Wael Natheef was unable to attend the London Session of the Russell Tribunal on Palestine when it met in November. Although he had been invited to come and give testimony in person, he did not receive his visa in time to travel. As a trade unionist, he wanted to give evidence on the conditions of Palestinian workers and unemployed people in the Jordan Valley. He speaks with the authority of the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions.

In the event, Mr Natheef sent a written submission together with a video recording. This was played in its entirety to the jury and public attending the Session. In a wide-ranging presentation (available online at russelltribunalonpalestine.com), he highlighted some of the working conditions endured by Palestinians. For example, minimum wage legislation does not apply to the 7,000 Palestinians working in agricultural settlements in the Jordan River Rift Valley. Of these, 35 per cent are women, while another five per cent are aged less than 17 years. Nor do these people have proper health and safety protection when climbing palm trees, working inside very hot green houses, or using pesticides. Mr Natheef also testified how, recently, the Israeli Exporting Company, Grisko, has started to label produce from occupied Palestinian territories as coming from 'Israel, West Bank Settlement'. Do not such prima-facie infringements contravene a number of European Union directives and association agreements between the EU and Israel? If so, what action is the European Union taking to uphold European law in these areas?

Of course, Israeli abuse of the rights of Palestinians goes much deeper than workplace practices in the agricultural settlements. Indeed, the first session of the Russell Tribunal on Palestine, held in Barcelona in March 2010, called on the European Union and its Member States to fulfil their obligations forthwith by rectifying breaches of international and internal European Union law with respect to the protection of human rights of Palestinians. The complicity of the European Union and its Member States in Israel's illegal actions with respect to the Palestinians were the remit of the Barcelona session.

The second session of the Tribunal, held at the Law Society in London, addressed international corporate complicity in Israel's violations of international human rights law, international humanitarian law, and war crimes. Over two days, it heard comprehensive testimony on a range of

businesses trading in one way or another with Israel's illegal settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Who profits from this trade? A comprehensive answer to this question is provided by Dr Dalit Baum, project co-ordinator of 'Who Profits from the Occupation'. We reprint her written submission to the London Session. Close questioning of the witness by the jury elicited additional insights. Videos of these exchanges are available online. Dr Baum's work, using open sources, has proved so successful in exposing who profits from the occupation that the Israeli government has seen fit to try to introduce a law banning it.

The London Session heard extensive testimony of corporate complicity, which is summed up in an initial statement of the Jury, reproduced below. Full documentation of the Session, including the Findings, is available online. In addition, Alice Walker, the celebrated writer, shares her thoughts on the Tribunal, and why she sees it as a circle.

Certainly, the proceedings in London exerted a firm grip on the public who attended. The main hall of the Law Society was full for two whole days of detailed testimony. The Tribunal heads south for its next session in South Africa, which will consider the applicability of the crime of apartheid to Israel.

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Blow the whistle

The contrast with the usually constipated Chilcot Inquiry couldn't be clearer. Hitherto, Sir John and his wise persons have failed to ask questions arising from key documents such as the Downing Street Memo of July 2002. As readers of *The Spokesman* will know, with respect to purported weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the Memo noted that in Washington 'the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy' (see *Spokesman 105*). The Downing Street Memo and other highly pertinent papers were leaked in May 2005, during Tony Blair's final General Election campaign, and published in the *Sunday Times*. They have resonated ever since, but Chilcot's panel has, so far, been forbidden from mentioning them. Will they break this injunction, and bring us all a little relief, when Mr Blair returns for questioning?

Who leaked the Downing Street Memo and related documents charting Britain's road to joining the US war on Iraq? What kind of investigation into the leak was there? Was any one ever brought to book?

Now, five years on, we have the mother and father of all leaks. Private

first class Bradley Manning, a 23-year-old US Army intelligence analyst, was arrested in June 2010 for allegedly leaking to the website Wikileaks a video of a US helicopter attack that killed at least eleven Iraqi civilians. Among the dead were two working Reuters reporters. Two children were also severely wounded. In addition to this ‘Collateral Murder’ video, Pfc. Manning is suspected of leaking the ‘Afghan War Diaries’ – tens of thousands of battlefield reports which explicitly describe civilian deaths and cover-ups, corrupt officials, collusion with warlords, and a failing US/NATO war effort. If he did, indeed, do so, Private Manning may have helped confirm the view of Obama’s former commanding officer, General Stanley McChrystal, who, in the same month, was sacked for exposing US disarray in Afghanistan to *Rolling Stone* magazine – see *Spokesman 109*.

Bradley Manning has been held in coercive solitary confinement for months, ever since his arrest. He is not permitted even to exercise in his cell.

Also held in solitary confinement, whilst on remand in Wandsworth Prison, was Julian Assange, who, since 28 November 2010, has been methodically publishing on the Wikileaks website, and via chosen newspapers in several countries, the first selections of tens of thousands of US diplomatic cables. The cables, which date from 1966 to the end of February 2010, contain communications between 274 US embassies in countries throughout the world and the US State Department. Of the total archive, 15,652 cables are classified as ‘secret’, whilst another 101,748 are ‘confidential’. The remainder are unclassified.

It will take some time to absorb fully what these communications tell us, particularly about the nuances of US foreign policy. Certainly, some expose behaviour and dispositions that might not, otherwise, have been properly appreciated. In this issue of *The Spokesman* we reprint one cable in particular, which concerns the US military base on the island of Diego Garcia, part of the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean. This fortress, and what goes on there, are longstanding concerns of the Russell Foundation (see *Spokesman 81*). The cable in question, dated 15 May 2009 and marked ‘NOFORN’ (not for release to foreign nationals), reports US Embassy conversations with British civil servants in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The FCO absorbed the old Colonial Office during the 1960s, around the time Britain was sundering the Chagos Peninsula from the rest of Mauritius, as the emerging Republic sought its independence. Colonial attitudes persist at least in some corners of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, on the evidence of this communication.

More generally, Noam Chomsky discusses with Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now!* broadcasting some of the cables from the US embassy in Israel, particularly with respect to Israel's onslaught on Gaza during the weeks before President Obama's inauguration in January 2009. Elsewhere, Paul Rogers considers what the US regards as strategic locations worldwide, ranging from laboratories producing antidotes to snake venom in Australia to cobalt mines in Congo.

This encyclopaedia of contemporary US government as it conducts itself around the world will, as they say, be poured over for years to come. Long may it continue to grow.

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The Medvedevs

Zhores and Roy Medvedev are old friends of the Russell Foundation. During the 1970s, we published a succession of titles by the twins, translated from the original Russian. They included *National Frontiers and International Scientific Co-operation*, Volume I of the *Medvedev Papers* by Zhores, and *Let History Judge*, Roy's landmark history of the origins and consequences of Stalinism. In 1976, the brothers introduced our edition of Khrushchev's *The Secret Speech*, published to mark the twentieth anniversary of its world-wide publication.

During the 1980s, the Medvedev brothers were stalwart supporters of the campaign for European Nuclear Disarmament. Zhores, living in exile in London with his wife, Rita, travelled to the END Conventions in Brussels and, later, to Paris, where he addressed a packed seminar which hung on his every word about the nuclear catastrophe at Chernobyl. From Moscow, Roy sent a vital message of support to the Convention in Berlin whilst it was meeting during the spring of 1983. This provided some counterweight to the broadside which had already been fired at the Berlin Convention by Yuri Zhukov, then President of the Soviet Peace Committee.

Whenever we wanted to understand what was happening in the Soviet Union, or what is now happening in Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and the other successor states, we would consult the Medvedevs. So it is with great pleasure that we salute their 85th birthdays, which Roy and Zhores celebrated on 14 November 2010. We are pleased to publish for the first time in English the initial instalment of Zhores' experiences as a soldier and student during the War. The second part will follow in *Spokesman 112*.

University on the never-never

‘There’s nothing to pay up front’ and ‘you don’t start to make repayments until you earn £21,000’. This was the desperate pitch made *ad infinitum* by Vince Cable and his Coalition colleagues as they scraped through the House of Commons vote to raise student tuition fees to somewhere between £6,000 and £9,000 per year from the current maximum of £3,290, beginning in 2012.

Many current students weren’t persuaded, and demonstrated in outspoken fashion, bringing Central London to a halt week after week as the vote approached, as Jeremy Corbyn describes below. Their solidarity with generations of students to come augurs well. Many of those on the demonstrations will graduate before the full impact of the higher fees kick in. They know that they are already buried in debt; before any increases, the current annual maintenance loan is £4,950 (higher in London) plus tuition fee loan of £3,290, making a total of £8,240, or just shy of £25,000 for a three-year degree course. Many students take paid employment whilst studying in order to top up these loans, whilst parents and others frequently contribute if they can afford to do so. When two graduates move in together, their combined debts might easily hit £50,000. Currently, each one will repay their student loans at a rate of 9 per cent once annual earnings exceed £15,000. Interest on the outstanding balance ranges from 1.5% to 4.4%, depending on when the loan was taken. The lower rate tracks base rate so, when the Bank of England increases it from its historically low level of 0.5%, the interest charged on many current and new student loans will rise.

Current students understand full well that doubling or trebling fees will lead to individual debts of £40,000 to £50,000, whilst students of medicine and other lengthier courses face even more.

Then there is the sudden abolition of the Educational Maintenance Allowance. ‘No new applications are being accepted for the scheme,’ according to the official Directgov website. School and college students are no longer able to apply for such support whilst studying for university entry. Nobody now denies that the EMA has broadened access to university, but it has been swept away as higher education becomes a marketplace.

Lord Browne, Peter Mandelson’s appointee and architect of the changes embraced by the Coalition Government, ‘will allow the invisible hand of the market to sweep through the sector’, according to the *Financial Times* (see box). Thus the state abdicates its responsibility for higher education,

making way for ‘private providers’ of questionable competence. In the United States, which provides the model, there is already discussion of the failure of for-profit colleges and universities:

‘As with the collapse of the sub-prime lending industry, the showdown between for-profit colleges and the government shows how the aspirations of the underserved, when combined with lax regulation, make the rich, richer and the poor, poorer. For-profit colleges provide high-cost degree programs that have little chance of leading to high-paying careers, and saddle the most vulnerable students with heavy debt ...’

Subprime Opportunity: The Unfulfilled Promise of For-Profit Colleges and Universities, by Mamie Lynch, Jennifer Engle, and José L. Cruz, Education Trust, 2010

Dynamite

‘... The proposals made by the former BP chief executive on Tuesday, are clear, concise, subtle and logically expressed. They are also dynamite ... Lord Browne wants to make students into consumers. He would expose the ivory towers to market forces by raising tuition fees, cutting subsidies, reducing central planning and making it easier for new institutions to enter the sector.

The review combines grand reforms that will allow the invisible hand of the market to sweep through the sector and smaller-scale interventions to ensure poor students and graduates are protected.

Certainly, no one will doubt that Lord Browne is serious about introducing market forces ... This scheme will create problems within the sector. Most insidiously, institutions that cater to poorer students will struggle to raise fees high enough to replace subsidy income. But cutting subsidies also makes it easier for entrants to join the sector – a stated aim of the Browne report. The proposal includes measures that would allow students who meet a basic aptitude threshold to use the loan scheme to buy education from any provider that meets set standards. The message is that students should be able to shop around. For this to happen, he proposes also to break up the central planning regime that decides how many places each university should provide each year. The current Gosplan-inspired regime would be replaced by a market ...’

Financial Times, 12 October 2010