

University of Toronto OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

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June 20, 2007

Ms Sally Hunt, General Secretary  
University and College Union

Dear Ms Hunt:

I write as President of the University of Toronto to express my profound disagreement with the British University and College Union's recent decision to begin formal consideration of an academic boycott of Israeli universities. I do so directly to you, rather than through the medium of a public release or similar statement, in an effort to engage directly with you and your members on this important matter.

The University of Toronto does not condone academic boycotts of any kind. This position was clearly articulated as recently as 2005 in response to the then Association of University Lecturers' calls for an academic boycott of Israeli universities. This has been our consistent position going back more than twenty years when there were widespread calls for academic boycotts of South Africa.

Academic boycotts are antithetical to the university's most fundamental values. We believe that universities can best protect and enhance human rights by steadfastly guarding and promoting academic freedom and freedom of expression.

Many critics of BUCU's proposed boycott have questioned your Union's motives and priorities. We offer no opinion on those matters. Instead, we strenuously object in principle to any boycotts as broad-brush politicization of academic discourse.

We specifically object to the scapegoating of any country's academics by those whose quarrel is with the policies of that country's government. In our view, history suggests that academics have often been rigorous critics of their own government's policies and strong champions for human rights. If your goals are to support the Palestinians, we are at a loss to understand how isolating and alienating Israeli academics will advance that cause. On the contrary, Israeli academics continue to be among the most vociferous defenders of Palestinian rights and the most prominent critics of their country's domestic and foreign policies.

I am certainly not blind to the criticisms that can be made of many governments and social institutions, including our own. However, professors and university teachers world-wide are reading about your proposed boycott and asking themselves: After our Israeli colleagues, who is next?

Indeed, academic boycotts targeting scholars in any nation start the global academic enterprise down a dangerously slippery slope of politicization. At the bottom of that slope is a world with diminished discourse among scholars, their students, and their societies. To the extent that such discourse is diminished, so also is our prospect, as scholars, for peacefully advancing the human enterprise in all its dimensions.

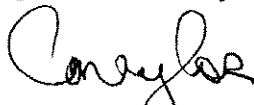
Let me therefore emphasize that, in the years ahead, the University of Toronto will be deepening, not diminishing, its institutional ties to Israeli universities and to other post-secondary and advanced research institutions around the world. I am confident that individual scholars at our university will continue to collaborate actively with international colleagues on the basis of shared academic interests alone.

I note finally the opinion you expressed on June 8, 2007. You said: *"Personally I believe that any decision to boycott another country's academic institutions should only be taken if the majority of UCU members support it. This remains my position"*.

With respect, I vigorously disagree. While I acknowledge the fact that votes of the Union's membership determine certain of its negotiating and advocacy positions, the principles of academic freedom must not be vitiated at the ballot box. I submit that these principles should instead be enshrined in the constitution of any organization, such as BUCU, that represents academics.

This is why I strongly urge BUCU's members to reject this ill-advised boycott. I urge your executive to affirm instead your Union's opposition in principle to academic boycotts and other actions that interfere with the free exchange of ideas throughout the academic community.

Yours sincerely,



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David Naylor  
President