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## **Weaponising Antisemitism:**

**Review of Greg Philo, Mike Berry, Justin Schlosberg, Antony Lerman and David Miller, 2019 *Bad News for Labour: Antisemitism, the Party and Public Belief* (London: Pluto Press).**

**Henry Maitles, Emeritus Professor of Education, University of the West of Scotland**

Before I make my comments on the themes of this book – media representation and public belief; what could and should have been done about the charges of anti-Semitism; the impact and potential of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) and its examples – I want to make it clear that this is a thoroughly welcome volume which helps us understand and combat the charges of antisemitism and racism being leveled at the Left.

As a Jewish socialist academic and activist, let me also make it clear that rooting out antisemitism wherever we find it is an essential responsibility for the left. Antisemitism, like other forms of racism, is deadly not just for the minority community but for all of us. Not only is it morally unacceptable, but it makes it harder to develop unity and radical alternatives if these ideas take hold. We need to be clear, however, where the real threat comes from.

Recently in Britain, and particularly in the run up to the General Election of December, 2019 but also continuing, there has been an unrelenting attack on Jeremy Corbyn (the leader of the British Labour Party), the Labour Party and the radical left in general as being antisemitic. This book is about understanding that. It is almost beyond irony to see right wing Conservative MPs who are vehemently anti-immigration and have supported the non-implementation of the Dubbs proposal

which would have allowed 3,000 Syrian refugees who were unaccompanied minors to come to Britain, joining a demonstration of British Jews demanding that Corbyn deals with antisemitism in the Labour Party by purging the left. The very people who have targets for expelling immigrants, which has led to people who have lived here for up to 50 years being denied rights, are claiming they are the real friends of the Jews!

And, beyond parody to read the Daily Mail, which in 1934 had '*Hurrah for the Blackshirts*' (the virulently antisemitic British Union of Fascists) as its headline, now campaigning for the rooting out of antisemitism in the Labour Party! I observe that the accusations do not usually refer to antisemitic actions but usually to comments, often made on social media. Whilst some of the research into linking Corbyn and the left with antisemitism are of the '*you were on this facebook site and so was this antisemite*' and are indeed smears, other comments, as this book points out, should rightly be condemned, particularly those which are clearly antisemitic and other overt statements about Jews. Some of the messages that Jewish MPs have received are completely unacceptable. Further, we need to be condemnatory towards those conflating Zionist and Jew, or using Zionist when they mean Jew.

As the authors point out, it is naïve to think that these attacks on the left have no political agenda. The accusers seem to have some shared aims. Some in the media and on the right, including some Labour Party members, see it as a part of a general foulness of left politics and thus seek to undermine the left in general. Furthermore, there is an agenda to discredit those of us on the left who make legitimate criticisms of Israeli policy or Zionism as a political ideology by arguing that critique of such is overt or secret antisemitism.

But it is not only in the UK. At a conference entitled 'An End to Antisemitism' I recently attended in Vienna, a number of delegates and speakers were clear in arguing that the main danger to Jews was from the left and Palestinian activists, even claiming that human rights was the 'new language of antisemitism' and that UN resolutions condemning settlement building on occupied territories in the West Bank and Jerusalem were to be ignored as the UN was an Arab controlled institution! There was almost no acknowledgement that in many countries in Europe parties of the far right (infiltrated or led by neo-Nazis) have gained parliamentary and even government positions and march openly through the streets. The conference took place in Austria where the, at the time, coalition partner Freedom Party has a virulent anti-immigration policy and is led by someone who defends his youth in a neo-Nazi organization. In Germany, the AfD is now the official opposition in the Bundestag. And, in Hungary, the anti-immigrant Fidesz party won a large majority in April 2019 election, with the slogans 'No immigrants here' and with a hostile anti-Roma agenda. And Jobbik too (also virulently anti-immigrant) won 23 seats. In November 2017 a demonstration in Warsaw calling for an 'Islamic Holocaust' attracted some 50,000 participants. And of course there is the Front Nationale in the French Assembly and the far right Swedish Democrats did well in the 2019 elections. These Islamophobic and racist parties are the real threat to Jews. We need to understand the link between the islamophobia of the right and its impact on Jews, as the events in Charlottesville in USA last year showed. The open Nazis and their supporters marching through the city were clear that their targets were Muslims and Jews. The scenes of Jews in a synagogue being protected by the police from a mob are far too reminiscent of the 1930s. The rise in hate crime is taking place all over Europe and USA and affects Muslims, Roma and Jews. Indeed, all social survey attitudes show much stronger racist, islamophobic and

antisemitic views in the parties of the right than of the left. Those who hate Muslims, also hate Jews.

And this is what makes this book so valuable. The first central question it tries to answer is whether there is a difference in the perception of the public and the facts regarding the extent of antisemitism within the Labour party. The first chapters in the book are reports on work done by the market research agency, Survation. Using strong substantiated traditional research methods of surveys and focus groups, the results show that the public believe that around 33% of the members of the Labour Party had been reported for antisemitism, whereas the real number is less than 1%. The disparity is huge and it then raises issues as to in whose interest this misconception has served. How and why with the large media we have, with resources to delve into everything, this disparity between reality and public conception can be explained? Ironically, the Community Security Trust, a watchdog for anti-Semitic incidents highlighted that the majority of reported anti-Semitic incidents came from those associated with the far right or far right ideas, whereas far left anti-Semitic incidents tended to relate to anti-Israel or anti-Zionist language, which the CST points out is not necessarily anti-Semitic. Yet the media in Britain was unrelenting in suggesting that antisemitism was wide and virulent within the Labour Party. Philo and Berry in chapters 1 and 2 take these questions up and put the events in an historical context – that of pro-Palestinian Corbyn leading the largest party in Europe and in with a serious chance of being PM.

The book also takes up the argument that it is extremely disturbing that the Jewish establishment all over Europe sees the left as the main danger. It is given legitimacy

by the IHRA statement, now adopted in principle by governments all over the world, if not enshrined in law. It gives 11 contemporary examples of antisemitism in public life, the media, schools, the workplace, and in the religious sphere. Ten are relatively uncontentious, but one *'Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor'* is highly problematic. For many years the left (both Jewish and non-Jewish) has argued that Zionism has been a disaster for the Jewish and non-Jewish peoples in Palestine/Israel and that the solution to the problems is a democratic secular Palestine for all Jews and Palestinians -- not a completely unreasonable demand when one considers movements towards democracy in South Africa and Northern Ireland, for example. However, we are now told that both these contentions are examples of race hate and might be prosecuted as such. This response, I think, is profoundly dangerous and needs to be contested. Firstly, it denies 130 years of Jewish history and debate over the merits of Zionism as a solution to anti-Semitism. Secondly, it legitimizes the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian Arabs from their homes in 1948, which has been highlighted by internationally respected Israeli historians with access to the files, such as Ilan Pape. Thirdly, it denies those Palestinians whose families have been in camps for 70 years now any right of return or justice. Fourthly, the alternative to a democratic state – the two state solution – has been made very difficult, if not impossible, by the illegal actions of the Israeli state through its settlement programme. There are now some 500,000 settlers in the West Bank, armed to the teeth and many determined to fulfill some biblical mission towards a greater Israel. Until there is some recognition of the rights of the Palestinian refugees, peace becomes problematic, as Trump's new plan for the area is finding out. To claim that those of us who argue for a potential democratic solution are antisemites and hate criminals will

ensure that real hate continues in the Middle East. The cycle of intifada being met by the snipers and the overwhelming fire power of the IDF (as I write this over 200 Palestinians lie dead and some 30,000 injured following the protests in Gaza, which started two years ago) and with even Israel embarrassed by snipers targeting unarmed protestors hundreds of metres away, will continue. The breaking of the deadlock will require justice for the Palestinian refugees, the espousal of which is now deemed to be race hate.

A key chapter in the book is entitled ‘What could have been Done and why it wasn’t , and will it end?’ It is so important for us as it is looking at both the lessons and the future. Its conclusion is that the Labour Party was completely unprepared for the assaults. The authors contend that they were like rabbits caught in the headlights. The debate was around whether to try to face it down and challenge it – a natural response from a party that prides itself on its antiracism – or to acquiesce and allow the charges to be seen as valid and then do ‘something’ about it – a bureaucratic approach that led to adoption of the IHRA and its examples, expel people like Ken Livingstone, Chris Williamson and Jacqui Walker and begin reviews, such as the mishandled Chakrabarti report of 2016.

This is not to say that there was any easy way to deal with this. Advice – for what it was worth – given to the Labour Party in Scotland was to use the Jewish members to deny and tackle these accusations. It was not helped, as the book shows, when Jewish Corbyn supporters, such as Momentum’s Jon Lansman, was reported in the *Evening Standard* as claiming that ‘Labour has a major problem with antisemitism’. However, what is clear is that the kow-towing to the claims was the worst that could be done.

As the authors point out in the book, the Labour leadership were desperate to avoid any kind of split and would adopt the full IHRA definition, avoid disciplining Margaret Hodge for verbally abusing Corbyn and expel lifelong antiracists to avoid one. Further, the circle around Corbyn felt that it was better to take a bureaucratic solution rather than a political one. As the authors point out, it is hugely problematic to attempt to deal with a political attack through bureaucratic maneuvering.

But, of course, this strategy could not and did not work. And, by adopting the IHRA definition, there are a much larger number of ‘antisemites’ in the Labour Party; those who oppose Zionism, who believe in a democratic secular Palestine, who support BDS, who defend Palestinian self-defence, who challenge the settlements and settlement policy. It is disappointing, but not unsurprising, that in the Labour Party leadership election, carrying on as I write, all the candidates are bending over backwards to accept the IHRA examples and the 10 point plan developed by the Board of Deputies of British Jews. This of course will leave thousands of Labour Party members open to charges of antisemitism, to be threatened with expulsion, to be called racists if they oppose overwhelming, disproportionate, illegal actions carried out against the Palestinians.

And there is another irony that the authors of the book under review could not have foreseen. In March 2020, leaked to the media in April 2020, was a 581 page report into political maneuvering inside the bureaucracy of the Labour Party. Amongst its findings was that there was a deep mistrust and indeed loathing of Corbyn and his supporters and that actions were taken that would lead to his discrediting.

Unbelievably, that included not dealing with antisemitism charges timeously so that it would appear that Corbyn and the left in the labour party were dragging their feet on



the issue. Corbyn and his supporters wanted the antisemitism charges dealt with speedily, yet opponents inside the Labour Party were slowing it down. The new leader, Sir Keir Starmer, disappointingly spent more time trying to work out how the leak happened than looking at the substantive finding.

So, what is the way forward? In this, the book is weaker, primarily as it concentrates on events in the Labour Party. I think five things stand out for us. First, we need to oppose the spread of racist ideas in society and fascist organization, using united front activity to develop this opposition. Secondly, to support struggles in the Arab world, not only because those events of the Arab Spring of 2010–13 and the activities underway now showed the possibilities of challenging and defeating dictatorships and developing fairer, more just, democratic societies, but also because they all raised support for the Palestinians. They showed the world that the Palestinians had the support of the Arab masses, while their governments were complicit with the Israeli regime. Thirdly, we need more demonstrations and rallies, involving Palestinian activists, Jews who oppose the violations of Palestinian human rights and as broad a coalition of trade unions (TUs) and political parties as can be made, in support of Palestinian defiance and against Israeli oppression. We have to show the Palestinians and our governments that there are people who oppose the discrimination towards and murder of Palestinians. Fourthly, Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) – despite the fact that Zionists make the case for this to be race hate – is crucial. BDS has the potential to isolate the regime, as did the campaigns in South Africa in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. However, it is not just the individual boycott of goods, but rather a call to stop sending weapons used to kill Palestinians to the Israeli government and to stop our pension and other funds being invested in industries that

benefit Israel. Finally, and this takes us back to where I started, the defence of the Left against calls of antisemitism is central as the attack on the Left is to deter people from supporting Palestinian defiance of Israel, the call for a democratic state in the region and BDS. If the pro-Israelis win the argument that BDS is antisemitic, TU support will become very much harder, and BDS is not viable without TU support. The power to implement BDS is with the TU movement internationally. For example, the weapons are made by TU members, transported by TU members and maintained by tools made by TU members. Often, it is the pensions of TU members that are invested in these industries. These essential campaigns are what can build the conditions for peace with justice in the region.