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Civil society and civil disobedience: strategy and tactics of solidarity

It is an honour to have been asked to make a contribution to this international meeting and a pleasure to see that you have made room for so odd a creature as a philosopher-activist. I trust you did so in full awareness of the habits of direct, perhaps even undiplomatic, speech common to both vocations.

I certainly mean no disrespect in any of my observations, but I feel the situation confronting us calls for honesty and urgency. Indeed, I feel that we owe an answer to the question raised by several visitors from Palestine – that is: what are we going to do about it? Given my time constraints, I begin by detailing without argument what I take to be the plain facts of the current situation, and move from there to strategic implications.

First, as a result of the continued construction of the apartheid wall – itself a culmination of the process of dividing and colonizing the Occupied Territory through settlements, bypass roads checkpoints, and so on – the possibility of a meaningful Palestinian State, indeed of a functional Palestinian society even, is rapidly disappearing. Current negotiations promise no serious discussion of the crucial issues of occupation, focusing merely on how to achieve a “calm” within which the United States and Israel can continue the institutionalization of their respective occupations. It would, indeed, be optimistic even to expect Palestinians to achieve managerial control over the emerging network of Bantustans. More likely is that negotiations will break down and return to earlier levels of violence with the familiar results for both Israeli and Palestinian society.

I say that these are the only realistic outcomes because of the manifest power imbalance. Israel currently holds all the cards – economic, military and political – and enjoys the absolute support of the world’s dominant power. In such a situation, hoping for a diplomatic success by the Palestinian Authority is merely whistling in the dark. Nor should we hope for change in political direction from either the United States or Israel. Cosmetic gestures notwithstanding, both regimes are moving toward more hard-line positions regarding fundamental issues.

What of Europe or the United Nations? To be blunt, I see no prospect that either will develop the courage to confront the United States. For nearly four decades the States Members of the United Nations have declared their commitment to ending the occupation and to the right of return, but have left the de facto management of the situation up to the United States. If General Assembly resolutions 194 (III) and Security Council resolution 242 (1967) have not, all these long years, been implemented, I hardly expect an outpouring of action around ruling by the International Court of Justice.

So who might be left to implement international law, to change the political dynamics or to alter the power relations that hold the system of oppression in place? No doubt the Palestinian people will continue to resist in whatever ways they can, some strategic, some merely desperate. But the resistance of a minority population, facing an overwhelming military, economic and organizational imbalance and lacking any sort of serious unified strategic movement leadership will not be successful on its own.

Which leaves us with one answer: civil society, that is, the common people of the world. On the one hand, that is unfortunate. It is a shame that the future of Palestine should be left to that least respected of forces, placed as we are in the latter half of the last session of these meetings (and that, of course, is a far more significant place than we are accorded in most settings). On the other hand, this is for many of us a comforting, even inevitable answer. It was, after all, such common people who provided the necessary solidarity to help end apartheid in South Africa; and reflecting on the history of my own country, one recalls the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, the end of several wars, desegregation, the 40-hour work week and the end of child labour as not entirely inconsequential accomplishments of grass-roots movements.

If, as I believe, it is clear that grass-roots action is the only way to meaningfully support justice in Palestine, it is also clear that the centre of such action must be in the United States of America. The economic, military, and diplomatic support of the United States is essential to the maintenance of Israeli apartheid. Thus, it is primarily up to the people of the United States to change things; for in the end, what can the people of the rest of the world do? The opinions of their Governments are of limited relevance so long as they are dismissed by my country's officials. Can the people of the rest of the world force their Governments to risk direct confrontation – either economic or military – with the United States? This is not to say that there are not positive actions that can be taken by other Governments, at all levels.

I mention some of the most salient below, but the elephant in the room is United States policy, and we would all be wise to be clear about that.

So as I see it, two issues dwarf all others in importance for those of us who are not ourselves Palestinian or Israeli: what is the right course for a solidarity movement centred in the United States, and what is the best way for international institutions to support that movement?

Strategically, our movement should model itself on anti-apartheid solidarity with the South African people. All elements of that movement should be a part of our strategic goal: certainly economic and electoral pressure on Israel and the United States, but in addition the isolation of Israel in cultural, sporting, artistic and intellectual spheres given that the Israeli elite sees itself, as did the South African, as a part of the “enlightened West” rather than as citizens of its geographic region.⁹²

Current efforts to build in each of these directions are important, but in my view, such projects are in their infancy and we are in no position to launch any of them in a serious

way. What we are in a position to do is to find a single exemplary target around which to carry out a sort of prototype of activism to come.

A crucial need of the Palestinian solidarity movement is a degree of unity. This is not to say that every group needs to merge or to adopt the same politics, tactics or internal organizational forms - quite the contrary. It is to say, however, that we need to move away from our dysfunctional history of infighting, sectarianism and power struggles. We desperately need an overarching framework within which all of our work can fit, and we must find ways to build on and support each other's projects.

Such a framework in the United States seems to have come into existence for the first time with the formation of the US Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation (USC). The campaign is a coalition of existing local and national organizations and is by far the largest and most diverse grouping ever in the United States to work around Palestine. It now boasts over 250 member organizations around the country from a wide variety of political, ethnic, religious and tactical perspectives, all working to change United States Government and corporate policy within the framework of international law.

But there is another sort of unity that is crucial if this movement is to grow. There is a need for concrete projects to which a wide variety of organizations can contribute. It is all well and good for organizations to join a coalition, sign onto principles of unity, endorse a framework, and so on. Such paper unity comes and goes. What ties us together into a movement, leads to mutual trust and cooperative habits, builds enthusiasm and momentum and allows us to move from one success to the next stage is a shared campaign that is winnable, while at the same time serving as an entering wedge for future work.⁹³

For decades the Caterpillar Corporation has supplied bulldozers to the Israeli military for use in home demolitions, the construction of settlements and more recently of the apartheid wall. This corporate support for crimes against humanity has been criticized from the beginning, but it was not until early in the second intifada that the idea of a focused campaign against the Caterpillar Corporation's sales to the Israeli military was proposed.⁹⁴

There are several reasons for centring activist pressure on the Caterpillar Corporation. First, we must be realistic about our level of resources,⁹⁵ while recognizing that a concrete success will do more to increase those resources than anything. The Caterpillar Corporation provides a unifying immediate target.

Second, the demand that the Caterpillar Corporation end sales to the Israel Defense Forces is modest enough to generate nearly universal support among United States solidarity activists.

Third, the uses of Caterpillar Corporation equipment in the Occupied Territory are clearly illegal and graphically immoral, providing vivid images of collective punishment against civilians and the theft of land.

Fourth, the Caterpillar Corporation is largely a public company selling to private construction companies, so they are more vulnerable to pressure than a corporation whose work is primarily in the arms trade.

Fifth, the Caterpillar Corporation does only a small part of its business with the Israel Defense Forces, so it is possible for it to meet our demands without doing great harm to the corporation.

In particular, the Caterpillar Corporation sells far more equipment to the Arab world than it does to Israel, making for the possibility of highly effective targeted boycotts from that part of the world.

Sixth, a Caterpillar Corporation bulldozer was used to kill American solidarity activist Rachel Corrie. While it is important not to allow ourselves to play into racist assumptions that the lives of white people are more important than those of Palestinians, it would be foolish not take into account the power of Ms. Corrie's murder as a symbol to the American people.

Seventh, the Caterpillar Corporation has offices in every State of the United States, nearly every large and medium-sized city and most countries around the world. This greatly facilitates local activism, as there will always be targets nearby.

Finally, there is the additional fact that the overwhelming majority of solidarity groups in the United States have been convinced by these considerations to make the Caterpillar Corporation their activist focus. (Not to mention the fact that the Corporation has been singled out for criticism by numerous human rights organizations and targeted by European, Israeli and Palestinian activists). At this point, this momentum itself constitutes an independent reason to work on the Caterpillar Corporation.

To date, our work around the Corporation has involved hundreds of educational forums, protests, street theatre, bannering and leafleting, and civil disobedience around the United States, and also in Europe, a massive email campaign organized by Progressive Portal, some tentative investigation into lawsuits under domestic law, a national protest in early 2004, at the Corporation's home office in Peoria, Illinois, on the anniversary of Ms. Corrie's murder, several boycott initiatives and a shareholder's resolution that will be introduced for the second time on 13 April by Jewish Voice for Peace and others at the annual Caterpillar Corporation shareholders' meeting in Chicago, Illinois.

That meeting will form the occasion of a national day of action with protests in over 50 localities, including a large presence in Chicago. The week leading up to this event will see a media blitz, a lobbying campaign and a broad educational effort.

This brings us to the question of what groups in the rest of the world can do to support this effort. In my few remaining minutes, I will give a list, in rough order of difficulty:

1. Write and email to the Chief Executive Officer of the Caterpillar Corporation demanding an end to sales to the Israel Defense Forces.
2. Sign the petition at the website www.bootcat.org.
3. Distribute educational materials about the Caterpillar Corporation. (One can find materials and information on actions at www.catdestroyshomes.org and www.endtheoccupation.org).
4. Raise funds for the work of the United States campaign or member groups. Money can be directed to any aspect of the work, including educational aspects for those who cannot raise funds for more confrontational activities.
5. Demand that pension funds, Governments, universities or anyone else holding shares in the Caterpillar Corporation vote that stock in favour of the Jewish Voice for Peace resolution.
6. Demand that your institutions, corporations, local Governments, national Governments, boycott Caterpillar Corporation equipment in any and all construction projects.
7. Finally, organize a delegation, protest, bannering, street theatre or preferably non-violent civil disobedience at local Caterpillar Corporation offices on 13 April and beyond.

My friends and colleagues, this is the only realistic way to implement the ruling of the International Court of Justice on the wall. It is not that we need a movement in addition to, or in support of, high-level implementation of the ruling. Nothing but a movement will do more than offer unenforced resolutions. Grass-roots organizing in the United States has built a nationwide network over the past two years with fewer monetary resources, I would guess, than went into this conference. What I am suggesting is a bold reversal of work to date, one in which we see the work of Governments and international institutions as support for the movement of the people of the world for justice, exactly as we had in the case of South Africa.

I firmly believe that the people of the world can end Caterpillar Corporation sales to the Israel Defense Forces. Such a victory would be a small one, of course, not even ending home demolitions, much less the occupation. But at the same time, it can be that crucial entering wedge, that first stone that begins an avalanche. Once the Caterpillar Corporation takes responsibility for the illegal uses of its equipment, we will move on to a broader corporate campaign. At the same time, this success will provide a strong impetus to initiatives towards cultural, academic and political isolation, all accompanied of course by direct pressure on elected officials in the United States and Israel.

Every social movement looks to early moments that, in retrospect, were turning points – the Columbia University sit-ins for divestment, Stonewall, Selma and Birmingham, the

Indian salt marches, and so on. The Caterpillar Corporation can be such a moment in the campaign of solidarity with the people of Palestine.

Today the Caterpillar Corporation, tomorrow comprehensive sanctions, soon a free Palestine.