

Vancouver & District Labour Council



July 17, 2019

Vancouver Mayor and Council
Via Email

Dear Mayor and Council:

Subject: **Combatting Anti-Semitism in Vancouver**

We have become aware of the motion “Combatting Anti-Semitism in Vancouver” being brought forward to Vancouver City Council by Councillor Sarah Kirby-Yung. In general, we absolutely applaud the sentiment of this motion. We abhor anti-Semitism and all forms of racism, xenophobia, and discrimination. These have no place in our great city.

However, we do have grave concerns with one aspect of the motion as it has been presented. This is specifically the segment dealing with adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism. The problem with this definition of antisemitism is that it includes criticism of the state of Israel as a form of anti-Semitism.

While there is no doubt that those who hold an anti-Semitic ideology may well dislike the state of Israel it is at the same time objectively false and deeply dangerous to state that all criticism of Israel is therefore anti-Semitic.

It is indisputable that the military occupation of Palestinian territories by the state of Israel, which has been found to be in violation of international law by the International Court of Justice, has resulted in daily violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The occupation and violations of the rights of the Palestinian people, including Israeli settlement expansion and housing demolitions, are an obstacle to peace in Israel-Palestine.

Further, the “Nation State Bill” passed in Israel in July 2018 has institutionalized segregation, enshrined into law a tiered system of rights, and has denied Palestinians in Israel equal rights.

Today there are more than 7 million Palestinian refugees who have been forced from their lands since 1948. The right of return is enshrined in international law according to UN General Assembly Resolution 194 but continues to be denied by the state of Israel.

Finally, last year, during protests in Gaza, Israeli forces killed more than 210 Palestinians and wounded more than 18,000. Others who were shot by Israeli forces during this time included a member of Doctors Without Borders.

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More could be said, but this should be enough to illustrate that there are legitimate causes for those interested in the cause of justice and human rights to criticize the actions of the state of Israel. Such criticisms are rooted not in anti-Semitism but in a desire to promote human rights for all, including the Palestinian people.

To suggest that criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic is equitable to suggesting that criticism of the states of Saudi Arabia or Iran is Islamophobic. It is an unfair and dishonest attempt to silence criticism. Many Jewish organizations in Canada and around the world, such as Independent Jewish Voices, are also critical of the actions of the Israeli state. The BC Civil Liberties Association has also raised alarm at this definition, which they say interferes with freedom of expression.

We therefore ask City Council to amend this motion so that it represent a general policy against all forms of racism, including anti-Semitism but not including mention of the IHRA definition. Alternatively, it could be amended to remain specific to anti-Semitism but without that definition included.

Thank you for your consideration of this information and for your dedication to a Vancouver free of discrimination.

Yours truly,



Stephen von Sychowski
President

cc: VDLC Executive Board