By Rob Dyas

The Boycott movement against Israeli apartheid continues to highlight Israeli crimes and put economic and political pressure on the apartheid regime. The Catalunya support group is busy preparing for a national conference on the 19th-21st October.

In June 1959 the anti-apartheid boycott movement was formed in London with the aim of putting economic and political pressure on the apartheid regime in South Africa. The movement’s grassroots activism, though resisted by successive US and UK governments, eventually translated into international economic sanctions that sounded the death knell of the apartheid government in South Africa.

Nelson Mandela, the figure head of the South African struggle, said in 2001 in a letter to the New York Times: “Apartheid is a crime against humanity. Israel has deprived millions of Palestinians of their liberty and property. It has perpetuated a system of gross racial discrimination and inequality. It has systematically incarcerated and tortured thousands of Palestinians contrary to the rules of international law and waged war against a civilian population, particularly children.”

Soon after this letter was written, in response to a call from Palestinian civil society, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement was born. The aims of the movement are to pressurise Israel into ending its occupation and colonisation of Arab lands occupied in June 1967 and dismantling of the wall, recognizing the fundamental rights of the Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel to full equality and respecting, protecting and promoting the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties as stipulated in UN resolution 194.

The movement incorporates a cultural and academic boycott as well as targeted campaigns against companies involved in Israel’s crimes such as Agrexco, Ahava, Veolia and Alstom.

- Agrexco is a partially state owned Israeli export company that exports 60-70% of the produce from illegal settlements in the West Bank. Exported Israeli goods can be identified by the barcode which begins with the numbers 729.
- Ahava is a cosmetics company that (like other Israeli companies such as Premier) uses stolen resources from the Dead Sea in the West Bank which are then processed in illegal settlements. Boycott groups in Scotland, Ireland and the England have had many successes in shutting down their outlets.
- Veolia is a French multinational corporation that helped build the Jerusalem Light Rail system that links illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank to Israel, thereby further entrenching the occupation. The campaign against Veolia has seen some high profile divestments from the company as well as them losing specific contracts amounting to somewhere in the region of £2.5 billion.

The BDS Catalunya Campaign

In Barcelona, the BDS Catalunya group have been tireless in promoting these international campaigns at local level. As well as this, a local campaign was recently launched against the intention of Barcelona FC to invite the Israeli army Sergeant Major, Gilad Shalit, as a guest of honour to the “classico” against Real Madrid on the 7th October. Shalit was captured while on active duty with the Israeli army and held for five years before being released unharmed in a prisoner swap deal for Palestinian prisoners. The international media and high profile politicians ensured his story was given inordinate amounts of coverage despite there being approximately 10,000 Palestinians held in Israeli jails (as at 2006).

Palestinian prisoners are routinely subjected to torture and many are held without trial or legal representation for indefinite periods. Approximately seven hundred Palestinian children are detained by Israel every year, most of those for throwing stones. Israel currently holds 4,660 Palestinians of which 210 are children and 20 are Members of Parliament.
While thousands of Palestinian political prisoners were being tortured in Israeli jails, Gilad Shalit, the sole Israeli prisoner being held by the Palestinians, was given honorary citizenship of Rome, Paris, Miami and more. Despite all this, the President of Barcelona has decided to perpetuate the whitewashing of Israeli crimes by inviting the famous Sergeant Major to enjoy Barcelona FC’s hospitality. The BDS Catalunya campaign against this injustice has already drawn the attention of the national press. There is also a petition that can be found at change.org. Should the invitation not be revoked there will also be a protest at the stadium on the day of the match.

Like the South African boycott movement, the BDS movement today is growing slowly but surely. Activists know from experience that this form of campaign allows for the dissemination of key information while at the same time having a real economic impact on the pariah state.

**National BDS Conference in Barcelona**

As well as its usual activities, BDS Catalunya is busy preparing for the national BDS conference on the 19th-21st October. Speakers include Ilan Pappe, author of the groundbreaking book The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine, and Mbuyiseni Ndlozi, Chairperson of the Post Graduate Association at Wits University in Johannesburg, South Africa, member of the South African Students Congress (SASCO) and a board member of BDS South Africa.

Preparations for the conference were given a boost in September when Barcelona welcomed the boat Estelle which will form part of the third Freedom Flotilla aiming to break the siege of Gaza. The Estelle was welcomed with various activities in the Forum Port including a free concert which included the likes of Che Sudaka and even a surprise appearance from Manu Chao.

*More information about the National BDS Conference can be found on the BDS Catalunya facebook group.*