

Testimony of Ted Steinberg in Opposition to Amended Ohio H.B. 476
Ohio General Assembly
Senate
Committee on Government Oversight and Reform
December 6, 2016

I am the Adeline Barry Davee Distinguished Professor of History and Professor of Law at Case Western Reserve University, as well as a co-leader of the Cleveland chapter of Jewish Voice for Peace. I am writing to oppose the amended version of House Bill 476.

As a professional historian of the United States I can offer a historical perspective on the important role that boycotts have played in pursuit of a more open and just society. H.B. 476 represents a direct threat to the democratic impulse so central to the American political tradition.

This bill and others like it seem to me to be attempts to shape the debate on one of the most important moral issues of our time: the fate of Israel/Palestine. Behind this bill is the fear that the American people might actually learn something about the reality of the Israeli occupation and US complicity in it.

In 2005, after decades of failed efforts at peace, some 170 Palestinian organizations called on people of conscience to take action in order to compel Israel to end its occupation of Palestinian territories and obey international law. Jewish Voice for Peace, which I am proud to represent, is part of this growing protest movement, engaged in a thoroughly American form of dissent.

We should not forget that the United States as an independent nation might well not exist were it not for the courageous boycotts imposed by the Patriots in the face of the imperial intrusions of the British Empire. Famously, in response to what they took to be a fundamentally undemocratic set of taxes, the Sons of

Liberty in 1765 paved the way for freedom by leading the colonists in a boycott of British imports. The boycott of goods was the opening act of resistance in the American Revolution and it laid the groundwork for one of the most important documents ever written – the Declaration of Independence – and the eventual birth of the United States itself.

The recourse to boycotts in response to oppression is an essential thread in the story of American freedom. Left out of the political equation at first, African Americans resorted to boycotts to gain their liberty. As far back as the 1840s, free blacks in Massachusetts boycotted segregated schools in Boston. The city went on to become the first major US city to integrate its school system. Contrary to what many think, urban transportation boycotts did not begin in Montgomery, Alabama. They began long before, in the first decade of the twentieth century, in places such as Virginia where African Americans boycotted streetcars in just about every major city in the state. And the boycotts didn't end with Rosa Parks either. In the early 1960s, African Americans boycotted the A&P supermarket chain. At the time no blacks worked in the company's headquarters and there were no black cashiers. The supermarket eventually gave in and altered its employment practices. Every single American history textbook I know of covers the achievement of political freedom for African Americans, which likely never would have happened as it did had this persecuted minority not been able to engage in boycotts.

Likewise, in the mid-1960s, Mexican-Americans advanced the cause of civil rights and economic justice with a national boycott of California grapes. Led by César Chavez, a migrant farm worker, the boycott of non-union grapes highlighted the oppressive labor conditions faced by migrant labor and led all the major growers to sign contracts with the United Farm Workers union.

And since the current bill pertains to a topic of special concern to American Jews, let me also point out that when Hitler came to power in 1933, those opposed to his anti-Semitic screeds called for – yes – a boycott! Here in the United States, various Jewish groups including B'nai B'rith, the American Jewish Congress, and Jewish War Veterans, joined forces with the labor movement to launch a boycott of Nazi goods. One scholar of the anti-Nazi boycott has even speculated that if the boycott had been global in reach and imposed early enough that the horror of World War II might possibly have been avoided and Hitler perhaps even driven from power.

In sum, boycotts are not only a powerful and effective tool in the pursuit of social justice, they are central to a functioning democracy. This legislation, in other words, would make Tom Paine roll over in his grave.

One of the things I learned as a child in Hebrew school was that Judaism was founded on a commitment to social justice. What I see happening in Israel – extrajudicial killings, house demolitions, people incarcerated without being charged, children in prisons, differential application of law, disregard for international law, and all of this done with the military and diplomatic support of the United States – makes a mockery of what I was taught Judaism was supposed to be about. So, yes, I back boycotts in support of social justice and peace in this troubled region. I stand behind such boycotts because it's my right as an American to do so as evidenced throughout history. And, yes, I am opposed to this legislation, which seeks to reinforce the status quo in Israel – a place desperately in need of reform.

H.B. 476 is a misguided and damaging bill and I hope you will keep it from becoming law.

Thank you for considering my views.