



United Churches in Toronto to endorse boycott of Israel CUPE commended for controversial call for sanctions

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The Toronto division of the United Church of Canada will today endorse a controversial motion that calls for a boycott and sanctions against Israel.

In late May, the Ontario wing of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the country's largest union, unanimously agreed to support an international "campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel until that state recognizes the Palestinian right to self-determination."

That move came under heavy fire.

Both the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies, a Toronto-based human rights organization, and B'nai Brith Canada, a Jewish advocacy group, spoke out against CUPE's actions. Steven Schulman, the Ontario regional director of the Canadian Jewish Congress, called the vote "outrageous" and "shocking."

One Jewish member of CUPE called the motion "offensive."

At a news conference scheduled for this morning, the United Church's Toronto Conference will support the decision and lay out its own position on the issue.

"[We] want to give our support to CUPE's recent action to bring economic pressure to bear," said Frances Combs, co-chairwoman of a task group within the Toronto Conference aimed at ethical investment in the Middle East. "We want to commend CUPE for its action and also use this opportunity to make public the stand that the Toronto Conference is making."

In 2003, the Toronto Conference, which represents 300 churches as far north as Parry Sound, passed a resolution similar to CUPE's and is now pushing to implement it. According to Ms. Combs, it calls for a boycott of companies and goods connected with Israeli settlements in the West Bank. The group also plans to petition the federal government to specially label goods from the region.

For its part the national body of the United Church said Toronto Conference, one of 13 such regional divisions, is free to do as it pleases.

"Conferences have the right to proceed on their own policies," said Bruce Gregersen, a General Council Minister within the United Church. "What the Toronto Conference is doing is distinctly their own initiative and doesn't have

any affect or authority outside of Toronto Conference."

In August the national body will itself table a motion involving the situation in the Middle East. While the wording is not as pointed, it does make reference to divestment of companies in Israeli-occupied areas claimed by Palestinians.

Mr. Gregersen said the United Church has always been committed to working with both sides and was quick to point out the differences between the national and regional approaches.

"It's important to recognize what the [national] proposal does not do," he said. "It does not in any way seek to boycott or to address the question of the viability of Israel itself. The United Church is strongly committed to the security and existence of the state of Israel.

"It is a commitment on our part to work with both Jewish and Arab communities to promote peace and understanding and the end of hostilities," Mr. Gregersen said.

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