



Unlike large commercial retailers, locally owned food cooperatives are highly responsive to local constituencies, notably the membership who are the co-op's official owners. But the very things that make a membership-owned co-op an important part of a community (an open ear to member concerns and a commitment to political causes of local interest) also make them vulnerable to BDS advocates claiming that co-op principles require them to take part in a boycott of Israeli goods.

A Tale of Two Co-ops

COOPS

"...modern cooperatives, particularly food cooperatives, that have failed to abide by [the] essential principle of political neutrality have been harmed by the divisiveness that such issues cause among members and shoppers, including: an unwelcoming atmosphere for all, reduction in shoppers and sales, member resignations and return of capital, staff layoffs, disrupted operations, distraction from priorities."

Davis Food Co-op,

March 15, 2010 Resolution rejecting a boycott of Israeli products

Two recent examples illustrate how things can go very right and very wrong when a boycott gets onto the agenda of a local co-op community.

In early 2010, members of the **Davis Food Co-op** in Davis, California presented a petition asking that a boycott of Israeli foods carried by the co-op be put to a member vote. While petitioners claimed to have the required number of signatures, the organization's by-laws also required that the co-op's board of directors first approve a vote by determining if the proposed question is legal and serves a "proper purpose."

In the case of the Israel boycott question, the Davis board took their responsibility seriously, asking members on both sides of the issue (as well as uncommitted members) to provide input. They also sought outside legal advice as well as input from non-members in both the Pro-Israel and BDS communities, and from other co-ops that had faced similar situations.

Davis' decision regarding the legality of BDS was straightforward, acknowledging the ambiguity of whether or not US anti-boycott law was applicable in the case of a local co-op boycott (see page 10). But their determination that the boycott did not meet the test of being "proper" represents one of the most insightful statements ever written on the subject of BDS.



While their complete resolution rejecting the boycott runs several pages, the key points they made included statements pointing out that:

- A boycott would require the organization to accept as truth statements made by BDS advocates that could, at best, be characterized as opinion or selective presentations of fact.
- A boycott would require the organization to hand administration and discretion over the running of parts of the organization to a third party (BDS) that had no fiduciary or any other responsibility to the co-op or its members.
- A boycott would conflict with general principles of the international co-op movement (called the Rochdale Principles) which emphasize “political (and religious) neutrality and the dangers of meddling in political (and religious) affairs,” as well as calling for cooperation with other co-ops (including ones in Israel).

The resolution also noted that cooperatives “that have failed to abide by this essential principle of political neutrality have been harmed by the divisiveness that such issues cause among members.”

What is most remarkable about the Davis decision was that it was not based on any particular reading of rights and wrongs in the Middle East conflict, but rather analyzed the significance of a boycott decision solely with regard to its impact on the co-op itself. As such, the Davis resolution rejecting a boycott as not serving a proper purpose stands as an example not simply to other co-ops, but to any civic organization flirting with boycott, divestment and sanctions.

To see what happens to an organization that fails to heed these warnings, one need look no further than the **Olympia Co-op** in Olympia, Washington which passed a boycott measure months after the Davis decision.



Unlike Davis (and unlike other co-ops where boycott proposals before and since were rejected after public debates), input from members with differing perspectives and opinions was deliberately avoided in the Olympia decision-making process.

At Olympia, a written boycott policy states that boycott decisions are to be made based on a consensus of the store’s staff (not by a member vote, and not by the organization’s board). Yet when such a staff consensus failed to emerge, the board exercised a conflict-resolution clause in the organization’s bylaws that allowed it to intervene in staff disputes. While it became a subject of debate whether this represented a bending vs. breaking of the rules, what is not in dispute is the fact that the decision to boycott was made solely by the board in the presence of a group of 50 BDS activists, with no room made to allow dissenting voices into the conversation.

The results of this decision were predictable. After the boycott was decided,

members woke up to discover from the international press that their co-op had joined the global BDS movement and that the store where they had shopped for years was now being hailed as unquestionable accepting the truth of accusations against “Apartheid Israel.”

The conflict continues to be played out with some members resigning in disgust and accusations of racism, anti-Semitism, indifference to human rights abuses and bad faith pouring out in forums throughout the organization.

While it is unclear whether Olympia will join other organizations that have recognized their mistake and reversed direction on boycotts, the organization (like all civic institutions) could have truly benefited from the wisdom generated a few hundred miles south at Davis.