

New Zealand Herald covers up reasons for sacking anti-Zionist cartoonist

By John Braddock
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New Zealand's largest-circulation daily newspaper, the *New Zealand Herald*, last month broke a four-month silence over its sacking of cartoonist Malcolm Evans. Evans was dismissed in August following complaints from pro-Zionist lobbyists about his cartoons critical of Israel's repression of the Palestinians.

Evans had worked for the *Herald* for seven years, during which time he was the paper's chief political cartoonist. He was president of the New Zealand Cartoonists Association and twice named cartoonist of the year. Evans' sacking followed his refusal to accept an edict by the paper's editor-in-chief, Gavin Ellis, that he stop submitting items on Israel.

The *Herald* is controlled by one of the two conglomerates that dominate New Zealand's media—the Australian-based APN group. It publishes more than 100 newspapers across Australia and New Zealand and is Australasia's largest radio broadcaster, with investments in 12 metropolitan radio stations in Australia and 94 stations in New Zealand.

Following the sacking, protests supporting Evans were held outside the *Herald's* Auckland offices. The case was reported by a number of Middle-Eastern media outlets, while an extensive correspondence appeared on various Internet sites. In November, the New Zealand Press Council rejected a complaint from the Palestine Human Rights organisation over the sacking and supported the *Herald's* refusal to publish letters criticising its actions.

The newspaper's first major statement on the affair, published in early December, came after four months' stonewalling, purportedly because "legal advice" prevented it making any comment. The statement sought to further cover up the reasons for the sacking, claiming that Evans had written to the deputy editor "in

an unacceptably abusive manner" after a cartoon was rejected on grounds that it was "not original and not funny".

The statement asserted that Evans had "failed to acknowledge" the paper's policy not to publish symbols which had religious significance—such as the star of David and the crescent and star of Islam—to represent secular or government bodies. On a number of occasions, Ellis alleged, Evans had resubmitted contributions that had already been rejected.

Evans rejected the claims as "nonsense". He had written letters to Ellis and one to a deputy editor that was "curt but courteous", but none were abusive. "All of my letters were sober and thoughtful and addressed the issues as I saw them. I have never written an abusive letter to anybody," he said.

The *Herald's* belated response to the protests over Evans' sacking is not only dishonest as to the detail of the matter. It evades the key issues of democratic rights and political censorship. Evans' cartoons (which can be viewed at www.evanscartoons.com/dismissal.htm) sharply depicted the consequences of the Sharon government's brutal war against the Palestinians.

According to Evans, arguments with Ellis had been going on for a year, after the paper received letters from readers. Auckland rabbi Jeremy Lawrence was a prominent complainant, claiming the cartoons were "offensive" to the Jewish community and lacked "balance" in their portrayal of the Israeli-Palestine conflict.

Evans had consistently rejected pressure to change his approach to the subject and refused to stop submitting the cartoons. He accepted the editor's right to reject cartoons but not to dictate their content. "I was specifically told not to draw any more cartoons about Israel's policy in the territories," Evans said.

The cartoon that brought matters to a head was submitted in June, equating the situation in the West Bank with that of an apartheid regime. Evans had drawn the word “apartheid” as graffiti on a crumbling wall, replacing the second “a” with a Star of David. The cartoon simply depicted a political truth—the dispossession and confinement of an entire population pursued as a matter of official policy—in an appropriately graphic form.

Pro-Zionist spokesmen, including the Israeli ambassador to Australia and New Zealand, Gabby Levy, were quick to applaud the sacking. Geoff Levy, head of the Auckland Jewish Council, said Evans had “caused damage to Judaism and the Jews”. This line was repeated by others, such as Waikato University political science professor Dov Bing, who added that “freedom of the press” was not “absolute”. Both Bing and Levy urged further punitive action against Evans, claiming he had intended to “incite racial hatred”, which was illegal under New Zealand law.

Behind these comments is the fundamental lie that anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism. Zionism, the founding ideology of the Israeli state and the Sharon government, is a reactionary, racist doctrine that pits Jews against Arabs. Its basic proposition, that the Jewish people must live within an exclusive state—maintained and protected by the United States and other imperialist powers—is the reverse side of the coin of anti-Semitism. It is the basis of an ongoing war of suppression and genocide against the Palestinian people, often using methods similar to those used by the Nazis against Jews.

Indeed, there is deepening opposition among Jewish people to Sharon’s brutal policies. The Israeli government is pursuing, in an increasingly fascist and aggressive manner, the interests of a section of its own financial elite and the Bush administration. Among its litany of victims are the jobs, living standards and basic rights of the Israeli working class.

Anti-Semitism, like all forms of bigotry and discrimination, must be opposed unconditionally. But the policies of the Sharon government are increasingly a factor in igniting a renewal of anti-Semitic sentiment, and represent the greatest threat to Jewish people around the world.

Evans has firmly denied that there is any anti-Semitism behind his work, saying “to be called an

anti-Semite or a Nazi as I have been is just disgraceful in my view.” Evans said his cartoons were prompted by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict having escalated to “a ferocity not seen before” and quoted Nietzsche: “Beware when you fight demons, lest you become one.”

The Evans case is not isolated. Recent years have seen a concerted international campaign by the political and media establishment, notably in the US and Britain, to intimidate and silence all opposition to Israeli policy by slandering as anti-Semite any political organisation, commentator, academic or student group that criticises the Sharon regime. This stifling of debate and outright political censorship has intensified in the context of the US-led “war on terror”. Editorial cartoonists have been among the targets. In the US, syndicated cartoons such as Aaron McGruder’s *The Boondocks* have been deemed offensive or unpatriotic following the 2001 terrorist attacks and dropped by major papers.

Evans’ sacking is another indication of a rightward turn in domestic and international affairs by the New Zealand and Australian political and business elites. Concerted attempts are being made to wind back all basic democratic rights and stifle oppositional sentiment in every sphere of life. The television, radio and print media—increasingly run by a handful of powerful corporations pursuing a reactionary agenda—are vital components in this process.

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