

Germany: Left Party, Greens cancel appearances by historian Norman Finkelstein

By Stefan Steinberg
27 February 2010

On short notice, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (RLS), which has close links to the German Left Party, has canceled a meeting that was to feature the American academic and expert on Israeli politics and history, Norman Finkelstein. The meeting was due to take place February 26th at the Berlin headquarters of the foundation.

Professor Finkelstein, an American Jewish scholar, is known for his trenchant criticism of Israeli policy. The son of Holocaust survivors, Finkelstein is one of a growing number of Jewish scholars who have made valuable contributions to the study of Israeli history. He has been the target of relentless opposition from right-wing and pro-Israeli forces.

In particular, Finkelstein has been singled out for his opposition to using the charge of antisemitism as a means of suppressing criticism of Israel's violations of human rights and international law.

The 55-year-old political science professor is best known for his 2000 book, *The Holocaust Industry*, which argues that the Holocaust has been exploited for ends—support for the Israeli state and calls for reparations—that have nothing to do with historical truth or the exposure of the Nazis' genocidal policies.

Finkelstein has also written critically of Daniel Goldhagen's book, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, which argued that the Holocaust was the outcome of the inherent antisemitism of the German people as a whole.

In 2007, Finkelstein was denied tenure at Chicago's DePaul University, where he had been lecturing for six years, despite support from his department, his students and the faculty of the university, following pressure from opponents of his views, first and foremost, prominent Zionists.

One year later, in 2008, Finkelstein was denied entry

when he attempted to visit Israel. He was banned from entering Israel for a period of 10 years, allegedly for "security reasons."

Finkelstein was due to speak at two meetings in Berlin on the current situation in the Middle East. The title of both meetings, which were advertised at the end of January, was "Israel, Palestine and the Goldstone Report on the Gaza War" (The Goldstone report was commissioned by the United Nations and concluded that Israel was guilty of war crimes in its assault on Gaza during the winter of 2008-2009).

The first meeting was planned at the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation on the afternoon of February 26, the second on the evening of the same day at the Trinitatis Church in Berlin.

Finkelstein had been invited to speak at the second meeting by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, a think tank of the German Green Party named after the famous German author, who was a founding member of the Green Party. One of the co-sponsors of the meetings in Berlin was the group Jewish Voices for a Just Settlement in the Middle East.

The first organization to announce that it had canceled Finkelstein's appearance was the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Just a few days ago, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation also announced it was withdrawing its offer of facilities for Finkelstein to speak.

One member of the RLS executive, Heinz Vietze, justified his organization's cancellation of the meeting by arguing that the foundation "had underestimated the political explosiveness" of a lecture by Finkelstein.

Another representative of the RLS, Erhard Crome, was more explicit. Crome had supported Finkelstein's right to speak in Berlin. In a contribution published in the newspaper *Junge Welt*, Crome explained that the

meeting was canceled after the organizers learned that pro-Israel Left Party supporters were planning to lobby the meeting in protest. In the face of this internal opposition, the RLS immediately canceled the meeting.

These actions by organizations affiliated with the Greens and the Left Party represent blatant and cowardly acts of political censorship. By canceling the meetings, both the Green Party and the Left Party have made clear their opposition to any discussion of the policies of the Israeli government and the consequences of its invasion of Gaza.

There is a long record of political support for the Israeli state by the Greens, particularly from the period when it shared power at the federal level in a coalition with the Social Democratic Party.

Left Party support for the Israeli state is more recent, but leading members of the party have made clear their determination to back Israel and provide apologetics for its crimes.

In January 2009, the chairman of the Left Party in Berlin, Klaus Lederer, spoke at a demonstration in support of the Israeli assault on Gaza. Echoing Israel's propaganda in support of an indiscriminate attack on defenseless Palestinian civilians, Lederer declared at the time, "Nothing, absolutely nothing justifies the firing of shells and rockets on populated areas of the [Israeli] civilian population... For me, that is the starting point of any discussion in our country...." He was referring to scattered shelling attacks carried out by the Palestinian Hamas organisation.

Lederer made no mention in his speech of the destruction of densely populated areas in the Gaza Strip by Israeli troops, planes and armor.

The pro-Israel course of the Left party is sanctioned by its top leadership. It was the chairman of the Left Party parliamentary faction, Gregor Gysi, who set in motion the party's new course in the spring of 2008, when he made a speech calling for a reorientation of the party's political line with regard to Israel. Gysi rejected the term "imperialistic" in characterizing Israeli policy, and called upon the "left" to acknowledge the right of existence of the state of Israel.

Now the principal think tank of the Left Party has acted to censor a leading critic of Israeli policy.

Unconditional support for Israeli policy is a cornerstone of German foreign policy. The Left Party's

"reorientation of political line" with regard to Israel, including its censoring of Professor Finkelstein, is a clear signal by the party leadership that it is prepared to accept and defend all of the military and security priorities of the German Foreign Ministry.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>