

Antisemitism Rears its Ugly Head in Soccer in Wales

Sport provides a unique opportunity to bring people with different opinions and life styles together. However, since the game of football, incorrectly termed soccer in the United States, emerged in its present form from the British elite schools in the mid 19th century it has been often been the occasion for rowdy and even sometimes violent behavior. In Britain, football "hooliganism" became notorious in the late 1970s into the 1980s before its image improved, and the game became prosperous.

The game has now become in Britain, and in other European countries, the occasion for the display of antisemitic and racist behavior. This was seen in games played in Vienna, Poznan in Poland, Heysel in Brussels in May 1985, and Liverpool and Manchester in England. In 2014 there were in Britain 71 reported incidents during games of antisemitism, racism, or xenophobia. The anti-discrimination group Kick It Out reported an increase in these incidents in 2015.

Now, as a result of activity by neo-Nazis and pro-Palestinian groups, the issue of discrimination against Jews became a double problem for political and sports figures in Cardiff, the capital of Wales since 1955, an urban area with a city population of about 450,000.

One was related to the European Football Championship qualifier between Wales and Israel played on Sunday September 6, 2015. It concerned a photographic exhibition called "Low football-Jewish-Arab football: diversity and coexistence through lower-league football," that was to be displayed ahead of the game at Cardiff's Central Library. The exhibition was created by two Israelis who visited a number of football grounds in Israel to record the interaction of Jews and

Christian and Muslim Arabs in games. Its photographs were intended to show how sport in Israel can overcome political differences. They concentrated on lower league, not top, players.

The display, sponsored by the Israeli Embassy in Britain, was visible for one day before it was taken down. The Cardiff City Council, controlled by the Labour Party, which made the decision, explained that following "a complaint" it had reviewed the material and the exhibit was withdrawn. Though it is difficult to understand how a number of Israeli football players could affect the internal and external policies of the government of Israel, the Council's decision was succumbing to the bigoted movement for boycott of Israel.

The Council, in its act of intolerance and appeasement, surrendered to pressure and hatred from anti-Israeli groups who were opposing the pictures of peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs in the Middle East. The specious excuse by the Council was that running the exhibition could lead visitors to suppose that the Council was displaying bias, and this was not the case. But in effect its capitulation to anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli intolerance meant it was censoring a display of efforts for reconciliation between Jewish and Arab Israelis.

The whole irony in the bias of the Labour Council is that all the top Israeli football teams are examples of inclusiveness and meritocracy. They include Arabs in their squads, about 20 per cent of the total which is exactly the proportion of Arab presence in the Israeli population. Arabs have been members of the Israeli national team for forty years.

The football club Cardiff City showed a different spirit by resisting calls to cancel a game on July 21, 2015 in the Netherlands with an Israeli team, Hapoel Ironi Kiryat Shmona in spite of anti-Israeli demonstrations organized by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and Stop the War Coalition. Again, there is a singular irony about this team in a town,

two miles from the Lebanon and eighteen miles from Syria. It is managed by a well known Arab player.

These groups used the now mandatory nonsense that Israel uses sport to whitewash its racism against Palestinians. Through an on line petition promoted by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and signed by more than 1,800 people, the Cardiff Championship Club had been urged by a group called Red Card Israeli Racism to boycott the game.

Cardiff City took the sensible decision that playing a game against an Israeli football team was not detrimental in any way to the welfare of the Palestinian people. Consciously or otherwise the Welsh football club realized, as the Cardiff Labour Council did not, that the continuing and unwarranted attacks on every activity of Israelis was fueled by antisemitism, not by a desire to help the Palestinians.

As usual as a result of the inflamed Palestinian rhetoric, totally disregarding the real makeup of Israeli football, and the role of Israeli Arabs in it, several hundreds demonstrated in Cardiff before and during the game. They may not been ashamed of their bigotry, but they must have been saddened that Israel held Wales to a scoreless draw.

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