Statement on

A.8220-A (Lavine) and S.6086 (Gianaris); A.9036 (Weinstein) / S.6378-A (Martins)

Proposed Acts to amend the state finance law and the retirement and social security law, regarding economic sanctions for engaging in politically motivated boycotts

April 4, 2016

The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), a coalition of national organizations dedicated to protecting First Amendment rights, strongly opposes proposed legislation that would prohibit New York state agencies from engaging in business with, and would impose financial sanctions on, any person engaged in a boycott against Israel or other “American allies.”

Such a law would clearly conflict with First Amendment protection for freedom of expression and association.

It is beyond dispute that boycotts are a form of expression protected by the First Amendment. In NAACP v. Claiborne Hardware, 458 U.S. 886, 911-12 (1982), the Supreme Court held that a boycott of white merchants in Claiborne County, Mississippi, to protest racial discrimination “clearly involved constitutionally protected activity” in which First Amendment rights to “speech, assembly, association, and petition,” were exercised “to bring about political, social, and economic change.”

Furthermore, the Court has ruled in O’Hare Truck Svc. v. City of Northlake, 518 U.S. 712, 717 (1996), that the government is constitutionally prohibited from making political beliefs or affiliations a condition of receiving public contracts: “[I]f the government could deny a benefit to a person because of his constitutionally protected speech or associations, his exercise of those freedoms would in effect be penalized and inhibited. . . . Such interference with constitutional rights is impermissible.” (Citations omitted).

Boycotts can be highly effective in delivering a message, and as such they have a respected place as a form of political speech, from the colonial boycott of British goods to protest taxation without representation, to the boycott of buses in Montgomery,
Alabama, in support of Rosa Parks after she refused to sit in the back of the bus, to the boycott against South Africa to protest apartheid.

The proposal, if adopted, would clearly chill protected political expression. As the New York Civil Liberties Union points out, the “blacklist” would include “secular and faith-based groups that provide social services under state contract; trade unions; Jewish philanthropic groups; academic associations; and political advocacy organizations.”

If enacted, the bills would almost surely be found unconstitutional, because they violate one of the least ambiguous mandates in First Amendment law:

If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.


We strongly urge members of the New York State Legislature to demonstrate their commitment to fundamental constitutional rights by rejecting these proposals.

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1 The views expressed here are those of NCAC and do not necessarily represent the views of each of its members.