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Outrage over proposal to boycott Jewish-owned shops

Richard Owen, Rome

Jewish leaders in Rome today expressed outrage over a trades union proposal to "identify and boycott" Jewish-owned shops in the Italian capital amid fears of a resurgence of anti-Semitism linked to Israeli actions in Gaza.

Jewish leaders said the proposal, put forward by Giancarlo Desiderati, leader of the Flaica-Uniti-Cub union, which represents 8,000 shop assistants in Rome, was reminiscent of the anti-Semitic racial laws adopted 70 years ago by the Fascist dictatorship of Benito Mussolini in imitation of Nazi Germany, under which only "Aryan" shops were allowed to trade.

Asked if he was aware of the comparison, Mr Desiderati said: "We know we will have everyone against us, but we cannot pass over in silence what is happening in Gaza".

He said his union had already urged its members to boycott Israeli products, and boycotting Jewish-owned or Jewish-run stores was a logical next step.

He said he and his supporters were drawing up a list of Jewish shops, "though it might be better to publish a list of streets in which a majority of the shops are Jewish and ask people to avoid those streets when shopping".

He added: "For 50 years we have been concerned for the Jews because of what they suffered in the Holocaust, but now it is time to be concerned for the Palestinians, who are the Jews of today".

Mr Desiderati later denied such a list of Jewish shops existed or would be drawn up, saying that he condemned "all forms of anti-Semitism by Right or Left". His union did, however, support a boycott of Israeli goods because of Israel's use of "military means against a civilian population".

Piero Marazzo, head of the Lazio region, said that the idea of boycotting Jewish shops was "spine chilling". Riccardo Pacifici, head of the Jewish community in Rome said it was a "mad" idea which he did not believe had the backing of a majority in the union, let alone in Rome as a whole.

Gianni Alemanno, the right-wing Mayor of Rome, said he would visit Jewish owned shops in Rome together with Mr Pacifici as an act of solidarity.

Muslim leaders in Milan today said that they had apologised to Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi, the Archbishop of Milan, for an incident last weekend in which Muslim demonstrators burnt Israeli flags during a mass protest against Israeli actions in Gaza, which ended in unauthorised Islamic prayers in front of Milan Cathedral.

The protesters broke through a police cordon to reach the square. Asfa Mahmoud, head of the Islamic Cultural Centre in Milan, said that he and other Muslim spokesmen had asked for a meeting with the cardinal to "clarify" what had happened and express regret.

The Milan archdiocese said in a note that prayer was a "fundamental human right" but must not be used for political purposes. The Muslim prayers on the cathedral square had been "intrepreted by many" as an "affront to the Catholic faith at one of Milan's most symbolic Christian sites", the note said.

Ignazio La Russa, the Defence Minister, who is a leader of the right-wing Alleanza Nazionale, said that to counteract the use of the cathedral square as an "open air mosque", an open air Catholic mass should be held to "reclaim" it for Christianity.

Mr Alemanno and Giorgia Meloni, the Minister for Youth, who are both leading members of Alleanza Nazionale, came under fire from the Left today for attending a ceremony in a Rome suburb honouring three members of an ultra-right youth group gunned down by extreme leftwingers in 1978.

Ms Meloni said that she and Mr Alemanno were opposed to "all political violence". Three hundred far-right activists making the stiffed-armed Fascist salute later gathered at the site of the killing in the Tuscolano district to commemorate the three "martyrs of Via Acca Larentia".

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