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Labor for Palestine: Challenging US Labor Zionism

Michael Letwin, with Suzanne Adely and Jaime Veve

Recent years have seen rapidly growing momentum behind the Palestinian call for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS), particularly in the wake of repeated Israeli attacks on Gaza since 2008–9 that have left thousands dead, maimed, and homeless. In February 2007, as part of this campaign, Palestinian trade union bodies appealed directly for support, including a request for international labor to cut ties with the Histadrut, the Zionist labor federation. Although these calls have received wide-ranging support from trade unionists in South Africa, the UK, Ireland, Canada, Norway, and elsewhere, Labor Zionism remains ubiquitous in the United States. This first dates to the Balfour Declaration in 1917 and establishment of the Histadrut in 1920. Such US Labor Zionism grew rapidly in the 1940s, as a combined result of the Nazi Holocaust, the Cold War, neocolonialism, and the USSR's pivotal support for establishment of the Israel state. Even then, however, it has never had significant working-class roots. Since the Nakba of 1947–49, Labor Zionism in the United States has been promoted by the Histadrut's US mouthpiece, the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC). Through such efforts, closely coordinated with Israeli officials, the JLC has organized trade union leaders' support for Zionism.

Notable challenges to this dominant Labor Zionism began in the late 1960s. These include positions taken by the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in 1967 and wildcat strikes against the United Auto Workers (UAW) leadership's support for Israel in 1973. Since September 11, 2001, Israel's wars and other apartheid policies have been challenged by New York City Labor Against the War (NYCLAW), Labor for Palestine, ILWU Local 10 dockworkers, UAW Local 2865 graduate students at the University of California, the United Electrical Workers, and others. Increasingly, such efforts have made common cause with racial justice and other movements, and—at the margins—have begun to crack Labor Zionism's seemingly impregnable hold in the United States. These recent developments run parallel to, and draw inspiration from, the American Studies Association's own endorsement of BDS on December 13, 2013.

Zionist Roots in US Labor

Through the 1930s Jewish workers in the United States were adamantly anti-Zionist.¹ Jewish Bundists viewed Zionism as a “sinister deviation from the true path . . . a mirage, compounded of religious romanticism and chauvinism,” and after the Nazis took power in 1933, “many Jews within American labor vehemently opposed Zionist efforts.”² For example, the JLC, founded in 1934 to oppose the rise of Nazism, noted that

the great bulk of Jewish labor in the United States are . . . of the opinion that the Jewish question must be solved in the countries in which Jews live and therefore must be solved as part of the more general question of re-adjusting the economic, political, social and cultural life of our country to the needs of a new day.³

In the 1940s, however, US labor leaders enlisted in the Histadrut’s well-orchestrated campaign for a Jewish state in Palestine,⁴ and finally won support of the previously anti-Zionist JLC.⁵ These efforts helped enable the impending Nakba (Catastrophe). Labor leaders established the National Trade Union Emergency Conference on Labor Palestine, which won over Jewish Bundists; silenced anti-Zionist holdouts;⁶ exploited rank-and-file workers’ sympathy for Holocaust victims;⁷ and helped convince Truman to support partition⁸ and lift the US arms embargo against the Zionist militias.⁹

The Zionism of these labor officials was closely linked to their support for US imperialism, anticommunism,¹⁰ and racism against workers of color in the United States.¹¹ This was consistent with Israel’s self-proclaimed role as “watchdog” for US imperial interests.¹² Meanwhile, nearly all of the US labor Left mirrored the USSR’s indispensable support for establishment of the Israeli state.¹³

In the subsequent decades, US trade union leaders across the political spectrum supported Israeli wars,¹⁴ charged “anti-Semitism” against those who criticized Israel’s close alliance with apartheid South Africa,¹⁵ and bought huge quantities of State of Israel Bonds,¹⁶ which paralleled overall US government economic and military support for the Israeli state.

Labor Anti-Zionism

The first postwar challenge to Labor Zionism in the United States came from the Detroit-based League of Revolutionary Black Workers in January 1969, which recognized Palestinian oppression as a reflection of the same system of racism and colonialism suffered by black South Africans, Vietnamese, Latin

Americans, and African Americans.¹⁷ On October 14, 1973, Detroit was the site of the first industrial action against US labor officials' support for Israel, when three thousand Arab autoworkers joined a wildcat strike to protest UAW Local 600's purchase (without membership approval) of \$300,000 in Israel Bonds. On November 28, 1973, Arab and other autoworkers struck to protest bestowal of B'nai B'rith's "Humanitarian Award" on International UAW president Leonard Woodcock.¹⁸

The next visible labor opposition to Zionism came in the wake of September 11, 2001. On April 18, 2002, Local 10 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), a largely African American union with a long social justice history, condemned Israel's attacks on the West Bank and "call[ed] for the halt of all military aid to the State of Israel."¹⁹ That same day, NYCLAW, a grassroots, interracial organization formed immediately after September 11, 2001,²⁰ linked its overall opposition to the pretextual US "War Against Terror" by calling for an end to US military aid to Israel, Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza, and support for the Palestinian right of return and Israeli military resisters.²¹ NYCLAW also spearheaded unity between two separate coalitions behind a march in DC on April 20, 2002, the first post-9/11 national antiwar protest, in which 150,000 marched with the largest Palestinian contingent in US history.²² Such efforts were accompanied by a small number of local labor resolutions criticizing Israel.²³ Ironically, this emerging labor solidarity with Palestine was blunted by formation of U.S. Labor Against the War in January 2003, whose leadership was dominated by full-time union staffers who argued that criticism of Israel would jeopardize support from major unions.²⁴

Nonetheless, NYCLAW and its allies continued to fight for inclusion of Palestine in the antiwar movement. In April 2004 the Second National Convention of Al-Awda: The Palestinian Right to Return Coalition, adopted NYCLAW's proposal for a campaign against US labor's complicity with Israel.²⁵ Toward that end, in October 2004, NYCLAW and Al-Awda NY jointly established Labor for Palestine, whose founding statement called on trade unionists to (1) fully support Palestinian national, democratic, and labor rights throughout historical Palestine, including the right of all Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and land; (2) demand an end to US military and economic support for Israeli apartheid; (3) divest all labor investments in Israeli apartheid; and (4) affiliate with Labor for Palestine.²⁶

The founding of LFP spurred additional efforts. In 2006 NYCLAW and several other labor antiwar groups denounced Israeli attacks on Lebanon and Gaza.²⁷ On October 19, 2007, the *Chief*, New York City's civil service newspa-

per, published a letter from NYCLAW members defending BDS as “no more unfairly selective or one-sided than the isolation of apartheid South Africa, a campaign in which we and many others actively participated,” and pointing out that “this boycott—many of whose supporters are Jewish—does not target Israel for its ethnicity, but for theft and colonization of Arab lands, denial of equality to Arab-Palestinians in Israel, and violation of Palestinian refugees’ right to return home.”²⁸

On March 23, 2008, NYCLAW condemned new Israeli attacks on Gaza and pointed out that “through a combination of intent, ignorance and/or expediency, much of labor officialdom in this country—often without the knowledge or consent of union members—is an accomplice of Israeli Apartheid.”²⁹ On June 5, 2008, fifteen union members and other activists joined an emergency NYCLAW-LFP picket line in front of a “Celebration” of the “60th Anniversary of Israel” held at American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) District Council 37, the largest municipal workers’ union in New York.³⁰

The next trigger was “Operation Cast Lead,” Israel’s brutal attack on Gaza in 2008–9. On December 31, 2008, NYCLAW echoed the Congress of South African Trade Unions and other international labor bodies by denouncing the attack, which it put in the context of “Israel’s ongoing dispossession and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians since before the Nakba (Catastrophe) of 1948,” and reaffirmed “support for the international Boycotts, Sanctions and Divestment campaign, including an immediate end to all support for Israel—including that provided by US labor leaders.”³¹

On December 4, 2009, LFP issued an open letter challenging AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka’s opposition to BDS. The letter, signed by scores of trade unionists, called for divestment from Israel Bonds, support for workers’ refusal to handle Israeli cargo, an end to ties with the Histadrut, and opposition to US aid for Israel.³² Trade union BDS further escalated in the wake of Israel’s lethal May 2010 attack on the *Mavi Marmara*, an unarmed Turkish merchant vessel carrying humanitarian relief to Gaza in the wake of the Israeli 2008–9 attacks. On June 8, 2010, the executive board of ILWU Local 10 issued a unanimous condemnation of the massacre and a “call for unions to protest by any action they choose to take.”³³ This statement was particularly significant, since ILWU members had refused to handle cargo for Nazi Germany (1934), fascist Italy (1935), Chile (1978), apartheid South Africa (1984), and US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (2008).³⁴ On June 9, 2010, 133 US trade unionists signed Labor for Palestine’s response, which reaffirmed the BDS call.³⁵

Most importantly, on June 20, 2010, members of ILWU locals 10 and 34 in Oakland reaffirmed their tradition of industrial action for social justice by honoring an eight-hundred-strong picket line against the Israeli-owned *Zim Shenzhen* ship—the first US labor-based BDS action.³⁶ On December 2, 2010, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) announced that it had become “the first union in the US and the third union in Canada to officially support the Palestinian United Call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions.”³⁷ On June 13, 2011, in the wake of another Israeli massacre in Gaza, fifty supporters of LFP and other organizations picketed a NYC Israel Bonds “celebration” chaired by Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union and JLC head Stuart Appelbaum, at which New York State AFL-CIO president Dennis Hughes was awarded a “Peace Medal.”³⁸

The next major spark was Israel’s renewed war on Gaza in July 2014. Hundreds of trade unionists signed LFP’s July 28, 2014 statement reiterating its calls for an end to aid for Israel; for “workers to emulate dockers in South Africa, India, Sweden, Norway, Turkey, the US west coast, and elsewhere, by refusing to handle military or any other cargo destined for Israel”; and for “labor bodies to divest from Israel Bonds, and cut ties with the Histadrut, Israel’s racist labor federation.”³⁹ On July 29, 2014, the eighty-three member Joint Council of UAW Local 2865, representing thirteen thousand graduate student workers throughout the University of California, responded to Palestinian trade union and Labor for Palestine appeals by submitting a BDS resolution for a full membership vote.⁴⁰

Israel’s 2014 assault on Gaza also set off an unprecedented community-labor campaign against Zim Integrated Shipping Services, Israel’s largest cargo shipping company (and tenth largest in the world).⁴¹ On August 16, 2014, a coalition of seventy San Francisco Bay Area organizations led by the Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC) responded to a call from the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions by mobilizing a mass community picket under the banner of Block the Boat for Gaza to prevent unloading of the Israeli vessel *Zim Piraeus*.⁴² Countering Zim’s attempts to evade the picket, over three thousand people marched to the docks, chanting “When people are occupied, resistance is justified” and “From Ferguson to Palestine, occupation is a crime.” When the ship finally docked, ILWU Local 10 members responded to various pickets, some organized independently of AROC, by refusing to unload it for four consecutive days.⁴³ These events were mirrored by solidarity actions in New York City, Long Beach, Seattle/Tacoma, and Vancouver, and were widely covered in the international press.⁴⁴ Inspired by the victory in August, another picket was called by the Stop Zim Action Committee on

September 27, which Local 10 members honored by not working the *Zim Shanghai*.⁴⁵ On October 25, Block the Boat once again preempted the ship's return to Oakland,⁴⁶ and Zim line has subsequently abandoned attempts to return to Oakland or Los Angeles.⁴⁷

On December 4, 2014, in the wake of these events, UAW 2865 members voted by 65 percent to adopt their leadership's BDS proposal. Thus the union had "become the first major U.S. labor union to hold a membership vote responding to the Palestinian civil society call for boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israeli occupation and in solidarity with Palestinian self-determination."⁴⁸ Nine months later, the United Electrical Workers, with thirty-five thousand members, became the second national union (after the IWW) in the United States to endorse BDS.⁴⁹ Significantly, both of these resolutions embraced the full BDS call, which demands not only an end to the 1967 occupation but equality for Palestinians with Israeli citizenship and refugees' right of return.

Conclusion

Zionism has long been the default position in US labor. However, there has been another, hidden tradition of postwar labor anti-Zionism that began with Detroit in 1969–73 and has slowly reemerged after September 11, 2011, from the antiwar, Palestine solidarity, and racial justice movements. As shown above, such efforts have the potential to play an increasingly important role in the growing BDS movement.

Notes

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5. Howard, "Sewing the Seeds of Statehood."
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