

# The Labor Movement's History of Backing Israel—and the Changing Climate Amid the War on Gaza

The U.S. labor movement has a decades-long history of supporting Israel wholeheartedly, punctuated by moments of pro-Palestine actions by rank-and-file activists. As Israel wages its war on Gaza, those pro-Palestine moments are becoming increasingly common.

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People, holding Palestinian flags and banners, stage a pro-Palestinian demonstration in New York City, USA on 18 November, 2023.

(PHOTO BY FATIH AKTAS/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES)

As the Israeli government carries out what experts describe as a potential genocide in Gaza—with full political, financial, and military backing from the United States—millions of people around the world are mobilizing to demand an immediate cease-fire and a free Palestine. Workers in the United States, including numerous rank-and-file unionists and local union representatives, are similarly speaking out against the ongoing siege and bombardment of Gaza and pledging their solidarity with Palestinian trade unions, which have called on organized labor to refuse to manufacture or transport weapons destined for Israel.

Labor leaders in various countries have joined in these calls, but top US labor officials—especially those in the AFL-CIO, the country’s top labor federation—have mostly refrained from supporting a cease-fire, with a few making tepid statements about the “humanitarian crisis” in Gaza. After a central labor council in Olympia, Washington, unanimously passed a cease-fire and Palestine solidarity resolution a few weeks ago, the national AFL-CIO even stepped in to quash the measure.

The flare-up over Gaza is hardly the first time disagreement on foreign affairs has erupted within US labor. During the Vietnam War, conservative officials like AFL-CIO president George Meany unstintingly backed Washington’s adventurism, even as health care workers with Local 1199 and some United Auto Workers (UAW) leaders were among the earliest voices in the antiwar movement. Eventually, a majority of union presidents opposed the war—helping pressure the US government to finally end it—but not before millions of Vietnamese civilians and tens of thousands of US troops had been killed.

It is therefore urgent for rank-and-file activists to know the history of US labor’s close relationship with Israel—as well as the brave cases of US unionists working to alter that relationship to achieve peace and freedom for everybody in historic Palestine.

## **Embracing Israel**

In the early twentieth century, most working-class Jewish Americans were non-Zionists or anti-Zionists. The immigrant Jews who founded and led powerful organizations like the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) and Amalgamated Clothing Workers had cut their political teeth back in Eastern Europe as members of the socialist Jewish Labor Bund, which rejected Zionism as a bourgeois, nationalist project that sidetracked class struggle.

At the First Jewish Labor Congress—a 1919 national gathering in New York of representatives from Jewish-led unions claiming to represent five hundred thousand workers—the delegates debated Zionism and passed a measure that explicitly rejected the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine. Instead, the resolution called for the establishment of “a free, independent republic in which no nationality, whether a minority or majority people, shall have any special rights.”

But as more European Jews moved to Palestine amid new US immigration restrictions and the rise of Naziism, Jewish-American labor officials grew increasingly sympathetic to the leaders of the Yishuv—the Jewish community in Palestine—despite their own aversion to Zionism. They established a close relationship with Histadrut, the Labor Zionist organization in Palestine that simultaneously functioned as a union federation and a network of cooperatives, farms, industrial enterprises, housing companies, health clinics, and banks all aimed at building a new economy that would absorb the influx of European Jewish settlers—while deliberately excluding Palestinian Arabs.

Histadrut received millions of dollars in donations from US unions between the 1920s and 1940s. Some of its early leaders—like David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir, who counted US labor officials among their most reliable foreign allies—later became Israeli prime ministers.

By the end of World War II, the sheer horror of the Holocaust motivated non-Zionist Jewish-American unionists like ILWGU president David Dubinsky to advocate for the partitioning of Palestine and the creation of the State of Israel, but with no apparent regard for Palestinians. They were joined by non-Jewish labor leaders as well, including AFL president William Green and CIO head Philip Murray.

In April 1948, the Nakba officially began as Zionist militias initiated their bloody Plan D (Dalet) campaign of ethnic cleansing in majority-Palestinian areas as preparation for the founding of Israel. On April 14, only five days after at least 107 Palestinian villagers were murdered in the Deir Yassin massacre, about thirty thousand members of the ILGWU and other needle trades unions in New York staged a half-day work stoppage and rallied at Yankee Stadium to demand President Harry Truman embrace partition and lift the arms embargo he had imposed on Palestine so more weapons could flow to Zionist forces.

It was partly due to this intense pressure from his allies in organized labor, during his shaky reelection campaign no less, that Truman immediately recognized Israel upon its formal founding the next month. Under Dubinsky, the ILGWU extended a \$1 million loan to the new Israeli government and set up a multimillion-dollar bond program to fund the building of eight thousand homes in Israel for incoming Jewish settlers.

In the years after the Nakba—which turned 750,000 Palestinians into permanent refugees—US unions donated millions of dollars for the construction of public facilities in Israel, several of them in previously majority-Palestinian cities, towns, and villages. A partial list includes: the Walter Reuther Youth Center in Holon, George Meany Stadium in Nazareth, Philip Murray Memorial Center in Elath, William Green Cultural Center in Haifa, James R. Hoffa Children's Home in Ayn Karim, and ILGWU Hospital in Beersheba.

In addition, starting in 1951 and continuing ever since, US labor at every level purchased at least hundreds of millions (more likely billions) of dollars in State of Israel bonds—money primarily used to

bankroll infrastructure projects. And whenever Israel went to war with neighboring Arab states between the 1950s and 1980s, US labor leaders wasted no time in expressing their support and organizing emergency fundraising campaigns for Histadrut and the Israeli government.

### **Early Palestine Solidarity**

Despite US labor's close ties with Israel, there have always been some dissenters. The earliest such example occurred in April 1949, when Dubinsky received a remarkable letter drafted by a group of New York ILGWU members identifying themselves as “a community descendent of Arabic-speaking people.”

“We would like to draw your attention,” the letter's signers told Dubinsky, “to the plight of ... the Arab refugees of Palestine who fled their homes into the desert and neighboring countries. They number around 750,000. They are destitute, homeless suffering human beings threatened by hunger and disease.” They appealed to the ILGWU president as “a man of noble character and high integrity” and “as a leader of our Union” to provide funds to aid Palestinian refugees.

The twenty-nine signatories included Vickie Karadashly, who apparently organized the effort, James and Norman Shaleesh, Merta Khoury, and Amelia Abraham. As Karadashly explained in a postscript, though the letter was initially only going to be signed by “people of our race,” once fellow ILGWU members “heard of our plea,” they also “gladly attached their names to our petition”—names like Helen Campanelli and Irma Taverna, Jola Springer, and Mildred Challenger.

Dubinsky responded by authorizing the ILGWU to donate \$5,000 “for the use of Arab-refugee relief” to the American Friends Service Committee, the Quaker humanitarian organization administering aid to Palestinian refugees in Gaza on behalf of the United Nations. Compared to the millions of dollars the ILGWU was busily giving to Histadrut and the Israeli government, \$5,000 was a paltry handout.

There is little record of any further pro-Palestine actions from US labor until the Six-Day War in 1967, during which Israel seized the West Bank and Gaza Strip (territories meant to comprise a future Palestinian state, per international law), as well as Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and Syria's Golan Heights. In the immediate aftermath, young black and Arab autoworkers in Metro Detroit started voicing their support for the growing Palestinian liberation movement.

When Egypt and Syria launched the October War of 1973 to try to regain the territory they'd lost six years earlier, Detroit's large community of Arab autoworkers was shocked to discover that their union, the UAW, held \$785,000 in Israeli bonds. On October 13, around three thousand Arab protesters marched in Dearborn to the UAW Local 600 office, demanding the bonds be liquidated. Soon after,

they formed an Arab Workers Caucus, forging an alliance with fellow UAW dissidents from the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

The Arab Workers Caucus learned that on November 28, UAW president Leonard Woodcock would be honored by B'nai B'rith International, a Zionist charitable organization, with its Humanitarian of the Year Award at a gala dinner in downtown Detroit. At the start of the October War, Woodcock had issued a public statement on behalf of the union “unreservedly” condemning “the unprovoked Egyptian-Syrian military attack” and expressing “our solidarity and support with the State of Israel.”

The workers used Woodcock's B'nai B'rith dinner to demand the union divest from Israel. The caucus circulated seventy thousand flyers in Arabic and English calling on Arab autoworkers to join in a wildcat strike on the day of Woodcock's award ceremony. In an advertisement published in the *Detroit Free Press*, the local American Arab Coordinating Committee questioned whether the UAW leadership was acting in members' best interests by spending “over ¾ million dollars” on “non-economical, low-interest, foreign bonds.” The ad further noted that the UAW had an estimated fifteen thousand Arab members. “Purchase of Israeli bonds is regarded by these workers similarly as would a UAW investment in racist South Africa would be regarded by black workers,” it said.

At Dodge Main in Hamtramck, where Arab immigrants comprised upward of 25 percent of the workforce, two thousand workers heeded the call for the November 28 wildcat strike and halted production for the day. Other plants in the area experienced slowdowns. That evening, about a thousand protested outside Cobo Hall, where Woodcock was being honored. Holding signs that read “Dispose of the Bonds” and “Jewish People Yes, Zionism No,” the Arab protesters chanted “don't abuse workers' dues” and “no more bombs, no more bonds.” Woodcock snuck into the venue through a back door to avoid the protesters.

For his part, UAW secretary-treasurer Emil Mazey issued a condescending statement a few weeks after the wildcat action, saying that “a worker in any of the Arab countries who would do likewise would soon find himself in jail.” He added, “American workers of Arab descent ought to expend their energies helping their compatriots get rid of the feudal and totalitarian overlords who are ruling those lands with an iron fist.”

Undeterred, the Arab Workers Caucus continued organizing. The caucus sent delegates to the 1974 UAW constitutional convention in California, who put forward a program urging the union to “stand firmly in support of all workers and people struggling in Africa, Asia and Latin America.” “In the Middle East,” the caucus's program declared, the “UAW should support the principle of establishing a secular, non-theocratic, democratic state in Palestine for all people, Jews and Arabs, and stand against any outside intervention.”

Although the convention's resolutions committee ignored these proposals, by organizing among the rank-and-file over several months, the Arab Workers Caucus convinced multiple UAW locals to dispose of their own Israeli investments, resulting in the liquidation of \$48,000 in bonds by 1975.

Over a decade later, as the Palestinian uprising known as the First Intifada swept the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, a group of US activists took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* with a statement demanding Washington cut all military and economic assistance to Israel, which they compared to apartheid South Africa. "In Israel, no less than in South Africa, minimum justice requires dismantling the apartheid state and replacing it with a democratic secular Palestine, where Jews and Arabs, Christians and Moslems, live together with equal rights and opportunities," the March 1988 statement said.

Over three hundred prominent individuals attached their names to the message, including a dozen local union officers from around the country. The most well-known trade unionist was Jim Guyette, former president of Local P-9 of the United Food and Commercial Workers, who two years earlier had led the high-profile (but ultimately unsuccessful) strike at the Hormel plant in Austin, Minnesota.

In a statement of its own, the AFL-CIO's Executive Council dismissed attempts to liken Israel to South Africa, labeling it "a calumny we categorically reject and resent" because, they asserted, Israel was a democracy.

As the First Intifada continued, the supposedly democratic Israeli state jailed thousands of Palestinians without charge, including scores of union organizers. Among them was Hani Beydoun, a leader of the Jerusalem Hotel Workers' Union, who was arrested in 1990 shortly after returning to the West Bank from a whirlwind tour of North America, where he met with US and Canadian unionists and testified before the United Nations about Israel's suppression of labor rights in the occupied territories.

During Beydoun's monthslong detention, US and Canadian union members sent over two thousand letters to the Israeli government demanding his immediate release—though it's unclear when and if he was let go. A resolution adopted by AFSCME Social Service Local 1108 in Los Angeles noted that "it appears that the brutal detention of Brother Beydoun is in retaliation" for providing "direct evidence of the barbarous denial of human and labor rights of Palestinian workers in Israel and the occupied territories."

## **Embracing Palestine**

As the Israeli military bombed the West Bank in 2002 during the Second Intifada, destroying the Nablus offices of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, delegates of the seventy five thousand-member San Francisco Labor Council narrowly passed a resolution condemning Israel for the "bombing of civilian and political targets" and for denying Palestinians' right to self-determination.

Though passed democratically, the measure ignited fierce backlash from pro-Israel groups and was quickly rescinded. Nevertheless, the episode revealed the growing cracks in the nearly hundred-year alliance between the US labor movement and Zionism and Israel.

Indeed, while labor officialdom remained in lockstep with Israel, in the last twenty years rank-and-file activists have demonstrated more solidarity with the Palestinian liberation movement than in any previous period.

Only a month after the San Francisco Labor Council's resolution, on April 15, 2002, AFL-CIO president John Sweeney spoke at the National Rally for Israel—a mass gathering of one hundred thousand people meant to showcase popular support for Israel amid the violence of the Second Intifada. Standing on the steps of the US Capitol alongside the likes of Benjamin Netanyahu, Rudy Giuliani, and Paul Wolfowitz, Sweeney declared, “On behalf of the thirteen million working women and men of the AFL-CIO, I stand with you to express our support for the people of Israel in this darkest of hours.” Illustrating the overall tenor of the rally, Wolfowitz—a soon-to-be architect of the criminal US invasion of Iraq—was literally booed off the stage for merely saying, “Innocent Palestinians are suffering and dying as well.”

Angered by Sweeney's participation in the event, some rank-and-file unionists circulated a petition criticizing him for associating “U.S. labor's name with support for the Israeli invasion of the West Bank, which has resulted in the widespread death and destruction of the Palestinian people and property.”

Many organizers in the emerging antiwar movement after 9/11 understood the connections between US militarism and Israeli apartheid. In April 2004, unionists with New York City Labor Against the War partnered with the Palestinian-led community group Al-Awda New York to form Labor for Palestine. In its founding statement, Labor for Palestine called on US trade unionists to:

1. Fully support Palestinian national, democratic and labor rights throughout historic 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.
4. Affiliate with Labor for Palestine.

The following year, Palestinians launched the global Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement to nonviolently pressure Israel to end the occupation, using tactics inspired by the South African anti-apartheid struggle. Since then, while Labor for Palestine has consistently urged US unions to honor “the BDS picket line,” several top officials within the AFL-CIO have gone out of their way to

condemn the movement and overturn or shut down pro-BDS measures democratically adopted by local labor bodies.

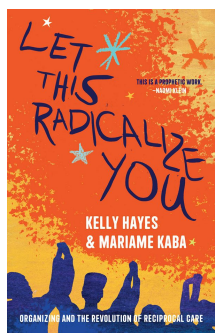
In recent years, unions outside the AFL-CIO—particularly the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers (UE) and International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU)—have had more freedom to support Palestinians. UE endorsed BDS in 2015 and, earlier this year, passed a resolution urging an end to US military aid to Israel. At the Port of Oakland, members of the ILWU—which has a proud tradition of opposing imperialism and apartheid—have honored community-led pickets of Israeli-operated cargo ships on at least three occasions: in 2010, 2014, and 2021.

Despite what some US labor officials may want to believe, there is not a pro-Israel consensus in today's unions. The past several decades have witnessed a slow but steady uptick in Palestine solidarity activism among rank-and-file workers who don't want their unions to be complicit in injustice.

It will continue to take courage and persistent organizing for US trade unionists to ensure the labor movement is a vehicle for peace, justice, and freedom, as it ought to be. But they can take inspiration from the generations of past union members who—defying labor officialdom's overwhelmingly pro-Israel bias—spoke up and stood in solidarity with Palestine.

*This story was first posted at [Jacobin](#).*

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