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## The Teamster Connection: Apartheid Israel and the IBT by Joe Allen



Jimmy Hoffa with Golda Meir in Israel, 1956

At the December 17 monthly membership of Teamsters Local 705 in Chicago, a resolution was put forward by several members of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. I was told by several people present that while the resolution was voted down decisively, it was not overwhelming. They estimated on a voice vote that around 65% to 70% percent voted against it, while 35% to 40% voted for it.

While I was heartened to see that a sizable minority of the meeting was for a ceasefire, I was also saddened that my old local union couldn't make the

smallest gesture towards opposing genocide. In sharp contrast, two decades ago, Teamsters 705 pioneered labor opposition to the Iraq War, when it passed a resolution condemning President George W. Bush's war drive. I've written about this recently [here](#).

The Teamsters 705 vote followed the tabling of a ceasefire resolution at the Teamsters for a Democratic (TDU) convention in early November, and many activists are wondering what comes next for Palestine solidarity in the Teamsters? Israel's ongoing genocidal war shows no sign of abating. Opposition to the U.S. backed war is growing but also faces determined resistance from the Democratic and Republican Party establishments and slander from the media.

Many U.S. unions have longstanding ties to the State of Israel. What is the Teamster connection?

**Jimmy Hoffa: "Critical support to a struggling Jewish state."**

One of the least known aspects of Teamster history is its long relationship with the State of Israel, right from its very origins. Something I was surprised to discover until I started looking into it over the past few weeks. During a 2008 fundraiser held in Washington, D.C. organized by the American Friends of the Yitzhak Rabin Center, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) reported:

"A little-known chapter in the life of the legendary Teamsters leader [Jimmy Hoffa] is about to come to light in a tribute planned for Feb. 13, when the American Friends of the Yitzhak Rabin Center will have a commemorative dinner. Former President Bill Clinton will address the gathering."

What was this little known chapter? General President James P. Hoffa, Jr, son of Jimmy, told the JTA:

“They were not only fighting for working people but fighting for independence,” adding that his father was influenced by Israel’s struggle against the British and the Arabs. “He became involved in that and in facilitating arms for the struggle.”

The JTA straightforwardly commented, “Facilitating” in this case is a euphemism for “smuggling.” Stuart Davidson, of the American Friends of the Yitzhak Rabin Center, said that Jimmy Hoffa and the Teamsters “provided critical support to a struggling Jewish state rising from the ashes of the Holocaust.”

Hoffa in the late 1940s was president of Local 299 in Detroit, as well as a prominent Michigan Teamster leader well-known for his political ambitions. He was still a decade away from becoming the union’s national leader, and two decades away from going to federal prison. Yet, he already had extensive ties to organized crime in Detroit, that were well documented in the 1950s by the Senate Rackets Committee, and later popularized by Dan Moldea for a younger generation of Teamster activists in his classic book *The Hoffa Wars* published in the late 1970s.

It was these connections to organized crime that most likely explain how Hoffa smuggled American weapons illegally into the hands of Zionist militias and nascent Israeli military. If these claims are true, they are disturbing because they mean that Hoffa smuggled weapons to Zionist militias involved in ethnic cleansing against Palestinians, during what Palestinians’ call the “Nakba,” meaning catastrophe. Over 750,000 Palestinians were driven from their ancestral homes during this period of time.

Jimmy Hoffa also helped burnish Israel's image internationally as a caring society during the 1950s, while Palestinians were struggling for their very existence in Gaza and other territories. The JTA reported:

“In 1955, Hoffa held a dinner that raised \$300,000 — a phenomenal sum at the time — for an orphanage in Ein Kerem, a Jerusalem suburb. He visited Israel in 1956 to dedicate the orphanage; a year later he became Teamsters president.”

Hoffa visited the orphanage that during his 1956 visit to Israel he had his picture taken with then Minister of Labor and soon to be appointed Foreign Minister of Israel Gold Meir. Meir was a hardened Labor Zionist, who was later quoted as saying, “They [Palestinians] did not exist.” He also met with Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, considered one of the “Founding Fathers” of Israel.

### **The Rabin Center: “Breaking the bones of Palestinians”**

Hoffa Senior's contributions to the creation of the Zionist state were honored in Washington by the American Friends of the Yitzhak Rabin Center. Soon after the election of Barack Obama to the presidency, Teamster General President James P. Hoffa traveled to Israel. According to the Jerusalem Post:

The Younger Hoffa raised \$2.5 million for the Yitzhak Rabin Center. During his visit, a room at the center will be dedicated to the Teamsters. Hoffa said he had been looking for a way to strengthen his ties to Israel, and began to work for the Rabin Center on the advice of friends. During his time here, he plans to visit the Histadrut-run Alumim Youth Village in Kfar Saba, whose original Jerusalem facility was built by a \$300,000 donation from his father.

The Rabin Center, created by an act of the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, is a favorite of American trade union leaders, including the Teamsters. What makes it possible for U.S. trade union leaders to so enthusiastically embrace the Rabin Center? Along with their general subservience to U.S. foreign policy, it also has to do with Rabin's affiliation with the Israeli Labor Party and the thinning gloss of "Labor Zionism" covering some of Israel's institutions, notably the Histadrut, Israelis racist trade union federation.

John T. Coli, the former head of the Teamsters in Chicago, soon to be released from federal prison, led one union delegation to the Rabin Center in 2013, where he enthused:

"There wasn't a nation here. Now it's totally different. [Tel Aviv] is a modern city. People have access to health care, to education. That's what we want to build everywhere."

Add to this Rabin's image as a fallen hero for peace. He was assassinated in 1995 following the signing of the now discredited Oslo Accords. J. David Cox, the president of American Federation of Government Employees, who led another union delegation in 2013, couldn't say enough about Rabin the peace maker, his "commitment to peace in not just Israel but the world is amazing."

However, the image and reality of Rabin the peacemaker are two different things. Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, in *The Ethnic Cleansing Of Palestine*, wrote of Rabin's military and political career:

"Yitzhak Rabin who, as a young officer, had taken an active part in the 1948 cleansing [Nakba] but who had now been elected [1992] as prime minister on a platform that promised the resumption of the peace effort. Rabin's death came too soon for anyone to assess how much he had really changed from

his 1948 days; as recently as 1987, as minister of defense, he had ordered his troops to break the bones of Palestinians who confronted his tanks with stones in the first intifada ; he had deported hundreds of Palestinians as prime minister prior to the Oslo agreement, and he had also pushed for the 1994 Oslo B agreement that effectively caged the Palestinians in the West Bank into several Bantustans.”

Bantustans are a reference to one of the methods that the old Apartheid regime in South Africa used to divide and disenfranchise the majority Black population. As one online South Africa history [website](#) puts it succinctly, “Bantustans were established for the permanent removal of the Black population in White South Africa.” This was a model for the type of “peace” that Rabin offered the Palestinians.

The *Times of Israel* [reported](#) in 2013 that, “Members of U.S. labor unions raised \$1.4 million for the Yitzhak Rabin Center in Tel Aviv last year, 45 percent of the center’s total 2012 fundraising. Since 2005, American unions have raised \$12 million for the center.” It also reported, “Cox’s group met with Arab-Israeli union members, but did not meet with Palestinians despite visiting religious sites in Bethlehem, a Palestinian city in the West Bank. Coli’s delegation did not have any meetings with Palestinians or Arab-Israelis.”

A dinner in honor of Coli [raised](#) \$700,000 for the Rabin Center in 2012, alone. He returned to Israel in 2015, with injury lawyer Michael Goldberg, who referred to “as a guest of the Teamsters union.” Goldberg’s firm [donated](#) a \$750,00 to the Rabin Center. It should be noted that John Coli was sentenced to federal prison for extortion in 2019, and in the following year, J. David Cox [resigned](#) from office charged with misuse of unions funds and sexual harassment.

Teamster General President James P. Hoffa apparently screened a showing of a film made by Yitzhak Rabin's daughter Dalia Rabin-Pelosof about her father to the union's General Executive Board . He told the JTA that , “People were visibly moved by the story and the connection of the Teamsters” to the Zionist movement. At the end of the day, Hoffa's gun running to Zionist militias may turn out to be exaggerated boasts from the Hoffa family or flattery from Israeli officials eager to curry favor, but Jimmy Hoffa established a connection that has continued for decades.

**Israel Bonds: “Great PR value”**

**TEAMSTER GENERAL** President Frank E. Fitzsimmons was awarded Israel's Silver Anniversary Medal in Washington, D.C., last month at a tribute dinner attended by nearly 2,500 guests from labor, government, and industry.

Joining in the 25th Anniversary celebration of the founding of the state of Israel were Secretary of the Treasury George Shultz, Secretary of Labor Peter Brennan, Attorney General Richard Kleindienst, Director of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service William Usery.

Honorary Chairman of the dinner was Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors Herbert Stein. Israel Ambassador Simcha Dinitz presented the Silver medal to Fitzsimmons in recognition of the Teamster President's leadership in mobilizing American Labor support for Israel's economic development.

Bonds for Israel sold an unprecedented \$26 million in Israel Bonds in connection with the dinner.

Murray W. Miller, Teamster General Secretary-Treasurer served as general chairman of the dinner committee and was presented with a bible bound in a silver cover in recognition of the outstanding job he did.

Messages of tribute to Fitzsimmons were received from President Nixon and from Israel Prime Minister Golda Meir.

In his acceptance message, Fitzsimmons recalled his visit to Israel in December, 1972, and said: "It was a golden opportunity for me to see how the people of Israel turned a wilderness into the promised land. Only if you can see it first hand can you comprehend what these people have done through sacrifice, dedication and perseverance.

"While the struggles of the people of Israel are difficult to equate in exact terms to the struggles of the working people in America, there are definite parallels and there are like experiences.

"These parallels and experiences form the bond of labor in America with the people of Israel. We in the Teamsters are proud of this bond, because we will finally be judged by our associations and our bonds in common pursuit of freedom and justice."

Ambassador Dinitz reviewed Israel's 25 years of independence comparing its population of 650,000 in 1948 with its present population of three million, of which 1.5 million were refugees from other countries. Twenty-five years ago, he said, Israel had to buy 85 per cent and raised only 15 per cent of its food. These figures are reversed today.

Discussing the unresolved conflict in the Middle East, the Israel Ambassador asserted that the strength of Israel is the first prerequisite for peace. Support for Israel through Israel Bonds, he said, helps keep Israel strong and helps assure the attainment of peace in the Middle East.

Co-industry hosts for the dinner were John Murphy of Gateway Transportation, and John Ruan of Ruan Transportation.

Members of the general executive board of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters were associate dinner chairmen.

Teamster General Secretary-Treasurer Murray W. Miller, dinner chairman, was awarded a silver-bound bible in recognition of his outstanding dinner arrangements and for his support of Israel.

Simcha Dinitz, Israeli Ambassador to the United States presented the Award to President Fitzsimmons.

George Shultz  
Peter Brennan  
Richard Kleindienst  
Herbert Stein  
John Murphy  
John Ruan  
William Usery

Teamster magazine June 1973, Internet archive.

The purchase of Israel bonds have been an important method for financing construction projects, and more importantly demonstrating political support for the State of Israel. As the Israel Bonds website reports:

For 72 years, Israel Bonds has generated \$50 billion worldwide. Additionally, Israel Bonds has doubled its annual global bond sales for 2023, surpassing \$2 billion. Israel bonds are a smart investment, with strong rates, and are meaningful investments, serving as a symbolic connection with Israel and the people of Israel for Jews worldwide.

The Teamsters saw a big public relations value for themselves with purchases and selling Israel bonds beginning in the 1970s. In May 1973, then Teamster General President Frank Fitzsimmons accepted the 25th Anniversary Medal of the State of Israel on behalf of the Teamsters. The Black tie event in Washington, D.C. drew members of President Richard Nixon's cabinet and the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, Simcha Dinitz, who presented the award to Fitzsimmons. Messages of tribute from Nixon and Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir to Frank Fitzsimmons were read.

The following month, Fitzsimmons boasted in his column in the June 1973 *Teamster* magazine:

“In conjunction with the dinner, \$26 million in Israeli Bonds were sold. The money is an Investment in Israel's ability to defend its freedom, and it is an investment that provides a secure return in interest paid on the bonds.”





Jackie Presser

Jackie Presser, the mobbed-up leader of the Cleveland Teamsters and future General President, was placed in charge of a public relations campaign by Teamsters to combat its negative image in the media with Israel Bonds. Steve Brill in his classic book *The Teamsters* recounted a 1975 dinner in Cleveland, Ohio,

“honoring Jackie Presser for his extraordinary work in selling Israel bonds. Supporting Israel had been a favorite, if not the only, Teamsters public relation strategy since the night in 1956 when [St. Louis Teamster leader] Harold Gibbons convinced Hoffa that \$265,000 collected at a testimonial dinner should be donated for the construction of a children’s home in Israel. Since then [Brill’s book was published in 1978] the Teamsters have been the biggest union buyers of Israel bonds. By 1977, they had bought \$26,000,000 worth out of a total of American union purchases of \$100,000,000.”

Meyer Steinglass, an Israel Bonds spokesperson, said, the bonds had “great PR value...these people [the Teamsters] are looking for respectability and this is one way to get it...And, in this union the guys at the top can make the locals buy the bonds. I mean, you know what they say, ‘You can find yourself under a truck if you don’t obey.’”

All of this enhanced the reputation of Jackie Presser. “Just about everyone who was anyone in Cleveland politics or business turned out,” Brill wrote. “At the dinner, Israeli Ambassador Simcha Dinitz inducted the guest of honor into the Prime Minister’s Club, a group made up of people who personally (or in Presser’s case, through his union) bought more than \$25,000 worth of bonds.” At one point, the Teamsters owned more than a quarter of all Israel bonds held by U.S. unions.

## Today

There is a lot we don’t know about the current relationship between the Teamsters and the State of Israel. Educating the Teamster membership on the long relationship between the U.S. labor movement, including the Teamsters, and Israel will be vitally important. Researching the financial investments that the Teamsters and its many pension funds may hold in U.S. based corporations and State of Israel Bonds that support Israeli Apartheid will also be crucial. There will be further opportunities to put forward for ceasefire resolutions in local union meetings in the months to come across the country.

Hoffa

Zionism

Labor For Palestine

Gaza



## Written by Joe Allen



30 Followers

Joe Allen is a former Teamster. He writes regularly for Tempest magazine and is the author of The Package King A Rank and File History of UPS.

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