

How Israel Advocates Shut Down a Union’s Motion to Endorse BDS

When unionists wrote a pro-Palestine motion, Israel advocates contrived a wide-ranging campaign to stop it from receiving a vote.

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Members of Los Angeles' teachers union strike in front of city hall on January 22nd, 2019.

AP Photo/Richard Vogel

IN MAY, as high school social studies teacher Soni Lloyd followed Israel's violence against Palestinians from his home in Los Angeles, he received an email from a fellow member of

the Los Angeles teachers union. "We have a motion on Palestine," it said, proposing that he introduce the resolution to condemn Israeli actions and express solidarity with Palestine in his regional chapter, in West LA, and explaining that other members planned to introduce similar measures across the city. "People activated," Lloyd told *Jewish Currents*. "This was a movement of social justice activist-teachers." On May 19th, motions supporting Palestine passed at five of the union's eight regional meetings. Two of the motions endorsed the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement—a first for the union, whose members teach in the nation's second-largest school district. "We have a special responsibility to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people," said one motion obtained by *Jewish Currents*, "because of the 3.8 billion dollars annually that the US government gives to Israel, thus directly using our taxdollars to fund apartheid and war crimes."

Lloyd's motion was voted down at his chapter meeting after a Zionist unionist "spoke up against it very forcefully," he said, but he continued looking for ways to organize support for Palestine within Unified Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA). In the days after Israel and Hamas declared a ceasefire on May 20th, Lloyd and a few colleagues at Venice High School began organizing a teach-in about Palestine for the school's union members. On May 27th, administrators at Venice High received an email from Daniel Gold, a vice president at the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles. "I am reaching out to you hoping to address this civilly and in partnership," Gold wrote. The Federation had learned about the teach-in "via UTLA and in public spaces via social media," he explained in one of several emails obtained through a public records request, and was "very concerned" to hear that Lloyd and several colleagues were promoting "anti-Israel/anti-Zionist political activity" at Venice High. "We are asking you to address the current unacceptable rhetoric and programming at your school," he wrote, adding that the Federation had also contacted "the school board and local representatives."

The senior staff of Venice High responded within hours of receiving Gold's email. "Thank you for taking the time out of your today [sic] to discuss some of your organizations [sic] concerns and how they relate to our Venice High School Staff," an assistant principal wrote. "We look forward to being a productive supporter of progress." Days later, Lloyd said, his supervisors called him into a meeting to speak about "community concerns," where they told him to state on his social media accounts that his views did not represent the school district's. He left the meeting keenly aware that he had become a person of

interest to his employer and an outside organization. Though Lloyd proceeded with the teach-in—the school could not cancel a union event—he did so cautiously. “These people were going to keep watching my activities,” he told *Jewish Currents*.

Gold’s missive marked the beginning of a pressure campaign that would proceed over several months, sustained not just by the Federation but also by several other prominent Israel-advocacy groups. In an interview with *Jewish Currents*, Gold said that upon learning of the union’s pro-Palestine activity, the Federation solicited help from the Anti-Defamation League and other Jewish organizations; an open letter written with help from the Federation also lists StandWithUs, the Israeli-American Council, and the American Jewish Committee as coalition partners. “Our Federation coordinated the coalition,” Gold said. “Our goal was very straightforward: Communicate the same message on the same strategy and timeline.” The groups already constituted an informal network: All but the ADL have at least one board member in common with one of the others, and StandWithUs has donated to the rest through the Saidoff Foresight Foundation, of which it is the controlling entity, in sums ranging from \$2,500 to \$1 million per year, according to IRS filings. (In response to a list of questions from *Jewish Currents*, StandWithUs CEO Roz Rothstein replied through a spokesperson: “While smearing hundreds of UTLA members as puppets for outside groups may suit the political agenda of anti-Israel extremists, readers can be certain that these are real educators and human beings who believe that BDS would harm their union and the students they serve.” The Federation, the AJC, and the Israeli-American Council did not reply to questions by press time. The ADL declined to comment on the record.)

UTLA was an unprecedented target for the Federation, one of the first unions in the country slated to vote on a pro-Palestine motion and endorse BDS. “We were more alarmed by [pro-Palestine activity] happening at UTLA than elsewhere,” Gold said. If its highest decision-making body voted to support BDS, the union would be breaking with the position of its own labor federation, the Israel-supporting AFL-CIO, and with the American Federation of Teachers, of which it’s a member, which has purchased \$200,000 in Israeli-issued bonds under the leadership of Randi Weingarten. UTLA would not disclose whether it holds any bonds from which it would have to divest if it endorsed BDS, and did not respond to requests for comment about whether the passage of the pro-Palestine motions would translate into altered policies in the union. But Gold argued that even a statement in support of Palestine—or of boycotts of Israel—from one of the

country's largest unions of educators could contribute to the normalization of the BDS movement and dent the political consensus on Israel. "If a student government condemns Israel and it has no impact at all, we know that's a symbolic political statement," Gold said. "With a union, especially one of this size, it would be incredibly problematic."

Traditionally, the Israeli government and its American backers have found a friend in organized labor. Since 1948, the AFL-CIO and its affiliates have purchased tens of millions of dollars in bonds issued by Israel, and labor organizations have donated regularly to Histadrut, Israel's foremost labor federation. US labor has aligned itself with the Palestinian cause only infrequently—most notably in 2002, when radical stevedores in the Bay Area demanded "the halt of all military aid to the State of Israel," and in 2014, when the union of graduate workers across California's public university system became the first in the US to endorse BDS. These tremors intensified in May 2021, when workers—from the dockhands of the Bay to New York's Teamster truckers and the electrical engineers of Pittsburgh—backed Palestine in unprecedented numbers. All told, no fewer than 144,000 American workers, represented by 14 unions, criticized Israel for the first time. Along with the two UTLA chapters, teachers unions in San Francisco and Seattle also voted to endorse BDS. "It's not new that labor has something to say on Israel/Palestine," said Jeff Schuhrke, a labor historian at the University of Illinois Chicago. "What's new is that some unionists, especially at the local level, are supporting Palestine instead of Israel."

Israel-advocacy groups foresaw this shift. StandWithUs, a lobby group that has historically wielded its influence within academia, includes labor unions in a list of organizations that have "become common targets and platforms for creating ill will against Israel," according to its most recent IRS filing, on March 1st, 2021. The filing explains: "The same strategies and tools that StandWithUs is using on college campuses are also being used within communities."

Sure enough, in California, Israel advocates applied the tactics they have long deployed on campuses to stamp out UTLA's pro-Palestine activity. They contrived a campaign of parents who inundated UTLA with declarations of support for Israel, [publicly labeling](#) as [hateful](#) UTLA's support for BDS, and [explicitly linking the union's actions](#) to antisemitic violence. "Demonizing Jews and Israeli-Americans simply adds fuel to a fire," said an

open letter from a Federation-backed group of parents delivered to the union's leadership, "and fosters more bullying and verbal or physical harassment." Meanwhile, in private convenings, the Federation and its coalition organized a base of teachers who contested the pro-Palestine motions from within the union. Wherever teachers gathered—from schools to social media—a vocal group of Zionists "came out of nowhere," said David Feldman, a Jewish teacher who sees Israel as an apartheid state. "I had never seen these people before. They just came out of the woodwork."

WHEN UTLA'S REGIONAL CHAPTERS VOTED in support of Palestine, they initiated a larger process: Any motion that passes at a regional meeting progresses to a vote in the union's House of Representatives, scheduled in the case of the pro-Palestine motions for September 23rd. The motion set for a vote included both an endorsement of BDS and a resolution to call upon President Joe Biden "to stop aid to Israel." (Though five motions were approved by regional chapters, only one advanced to the House of Representatives. Union leadership declined to share the text of the final motion in response to inquiries from *Jewish Currents*, and it did not clarify why only one motion of the five advanced.) The campaign to kill the motion ramped up quickly. On May 28th, the president of UTLA received a letter from a regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, arguing that the motion "may isolate Jewish and non-Jewish students and staff who are supportive of the state of Israel." The union responded with a statement condemning "both anti-Jewish hate and violence and anti-Arab hate and violence," and "the destruction of schools on both sides." (Israeli bombs damaged 149 schools in Gaza over the course of 11 days in May; to date, the UN has been unable to verify claims that three Israeli schools were damaged, according to a spokesperson for UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund.)



A rally to support Israel and protest antisemitism in Los Angeles on May 23rd, 2021.

Ronen Tivony / Sipa USA via AP

The Federation also set about organizing teachers. “Given the violent anti-Israel activity and rhetoric directed at anyone Jewish, these resolutions and actions are unacceptable,” the Federation wrote in an email addressed to “teachers and friends” in late May. “We need your help and would love for you to join us in putting an end to this unacceptable and inappropriate political activity by the union . . . We are inviting as many LAUSD teachers as we can to unite.” The Federation convened its first Zoom meeting with teachers and unionists on June 2nd, according to the email.

Still, the Federation and its allies ensured that the teachers occupied the foreground. “It’s a better idea to support the teachers in making change than externally condemning or opposing the union,” Gold told *Jewish Currents*. “That would have caused multiple layers of problems.” As the summer progressed, union members with a history of engagement

in UTLA began seeing unfamiliar faces at meetings, where they noticed “a lot of anger” from unionists who supported Israel, said Feldman. In UTLA’s private online forum, supporters of Israel were calling pro-Palestinian unionists antisemitic; in the union’s Facebook group, “The Zionist faction in UTLA spoke up, and it divided the group,” said Lloyd.

The Federation could quickly assemble an opposition in LA because of a longstanding relationship with the school district. “Upon hearing news of [the UTLA] motion, we immediately activated our relationships with teachers that we have cultivated over the years through our Holy Land Democracy Project,” the Federation wrote in a June 18th newsletter obtained by *Jewish Currents*, referring to its program for public and private school teachers throughout Southern California. The Holy Land Democracy Project exposes teachers to information favorable to Israel; because it constitutes an official school-district training, participants earn “salary points” that boost their wages. The spring 2021 session included a training called “The Many Faces of Israel,” per a school district document, and promised a free trip to Israel, “date tbd covid.”

Gold and the coterie of Israel-advocacy groups not only mobilized dissenters within the union, but spearheaded a movement to pressure it from without. They created a nominally grassroots campaign of “concerned parents,” called LA Parents Against Antisemitism, which delivered letters to the leadership of UTLA and the school district. The letters warned that “we will not tolerate any form of antisemitism or anti-Israel activity,” and demanded that the union and the school district adopt the sweeping [IHRA definition of antisemitism](#), which labels as antisemitic many criticisms of the Israeli regime. The letters were signed by hundreds of Angelenos, but drafted by Gold himself. “I literally wrote up LA Parents Against Antisemitism,” he said. “We gave parents an outlet, and we drafted a letter twisted to come from the parent perspective.”

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SUMMER, Lloyd received a call from a teacher threatening to resign from UTLA if the pro-Palestine contingent didn’t drop its motion. “He said, ‘I’m willing to quit the union over this, and a lot of people are,’” recalled Lloyd, who says he is known within UTLA as a committed unionist. “He was trying to get into my head about the whole thing.” According to substitute teacher Gregg Solkovits—who is also president of Democrats for Israel Los Angeles, a group affiliated with the California Democratic

Party—up to several thousand teachers were prepared to quit, and made their ultimatum clear to UTLA leadership. “Not just Jewish ones, but evangelical Christians,” said Solkovits. “This blew up in their face,” he said of the union leadership.

As the teachers aligned with Israel-advocacy groups were well aware, 1,000 departures would have cut UTLA’s funding by \$1.1 million per year, a serious blow to a union trying to enforce coronavirus safety measures across more than 1,000 school sites. UTLA is also bargaining with the school district for better working conditions, and combating a privatization movement seeking the wholesale commodification of LA’s public education system. “If we don’t attend to that, our schools will go under,” said Aydé Bravo, a teacher and union board member. Support for Palestine would “create division,” she said. Solkovits agreed: “There are much bigger fights that UTLA has,” he said, “than to become lost in a divisive argument over policy in the Middle East.”

The teachers who opposed the motions invoked this anxiety in their messages to the union, arguing that the issue of Palestine threatened the union’s cohesion at an inopportune time. In a petition to the UTLA leadership, unionists aligned with the Israel-advocacy groups wrote: “We believe that this motion, if it becomes union policy, will do great harm. It will create bitter division within our own ranks and undermine the collective work we have set in motion to . . . protect public education in Los Angeles.”

Gesturing toward divisiveness is “a very effective argument against raising any pro-Palestinian or pro-BDS resolution,” said the historian Jeff Schuhrke. The same arguments have long been used to shut down other forms of activism within unions. “Abortion politics is generally not brought up in the unions because there is usually a minority that feels very intensely about it,” said Nelson Lichtenstein, a labor historian and professor emeritus at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Schisms within organized labor are especially dangerous in light of the Supreme Court’s 2018 ruling in *Janus v. AFSCME*, which allows public-sector workers to stop paying dues without losing the coverage of their labor contracts. It renders resignations a more tangible, existential threat for public-sector unions, thereby heightening the risks they might face for engaging in broader solidarity work. But Lichtenstein argued that such political activism can also fuel a union’s power. “Today especially, workers are concerned about all sorts of questions—climate, race, Black Lives Matter, Palestine,” he said. These issues “are in fact the glue that can hold together a union.”

In July, two UTLA board members wrote an amendment to the pro-Palestine motion, in which they argued that the danger to “union unity at a time where we need solidarity in our coming contractual battles” necessitated UTLA to abstain from codifying any official position on Israel/Palestine; instead they proposed that the union hold a series of discussions on the issue. The amendment “in effect kills” the original motion, said Scott Mandel, one of the authors of the amendment and a teacher who Gold identified as one of the unionists collaborating with the Federation. (The other author, union secretary Arlene Inouye, did not respond to a detailed list of questions from *Jewish Currents*.) Some pro-Palestine unionists found hope in the prospect of a discussion series: “We can use them to organize people around this issue,” said Feldman. But it was unclear whether that aspect of the amendment would be put into practice. “To get it to pass, we said that we would be promoting some educational forums,” Mandel told *Jewish Currents*. “They needed to be in there to get everybody to go along with this. I would rather not see them happen, and I don’t know if they will.”

On September 23rd, when UTLA’s elected officials convened on Zoom for their regular House of Representatives meeting, the pro-Palestine motion never came up for a vote. “The original motion was put on the screen,” said an attendee granted anonymity to speak freely, “but the [amendment] was the one discussed.” The Board of Directors—which proffers a formal recommendation on all motions bound for the House—had earlier advised the representatives to vote on the amendment, not the pro-Palestine motion, according to two board members who were granted anonymity to speak about private proceedings. The amendment ultimately passed 94 to 35.

Although this result bars UTLA teachers from bringing up the pro-Palestine motion again “in its current form,” according to a UTLA statement to the *Los Angeles Times*, several unionists told *Jewish Currents* that opposition to Israel’s occupation is not a dead issue within their ranks. Some saw a silver lining in the margin of the House of Representatives vote. “The vote is usually 90% with the leadership,” said Feldman. “Thirty-five against it really wasn’t that bad of a showing.” Others argued that the right moment would arrive before long. “We will come back to this,” said Bravo, “if not today then in a couple of years.”

For now, the question of union solidarity with Palestine has been deferred not only within UTLA, but across the broader labor movement, in part due to the efforts of Israel’s

backers over the six months since the May violence. Over the summer, more than 50 professors [resigned from CUNY's faculty union](#) to protest a resolution that criticized Israel. In September, the national leadership of the AFL-CIO [told one of its subordinate groups](#), the San Francisco Labor Council, that it could not vote on or even debate a planned resolution on BDS. Within UTLA, the Israel-advocacy groups successfully forestalled the establishment of any position on Palestine—but Lichtenstein argues that campaigns like this one also chip away at Israel's alliance with American workers. Labor unions are moving left, he said, and "Israel has linked itself to the American right." Ultimately, he predicted, "The labor movement will be against these groups. Within years, not decades." **JC**

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