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ACTIVISM

The ongoing battle over Israel within the U.S. labor movement

The author of the new book, "No Neutrals There: U.S. Labor, Zionism, and the Struggle for Palestine," discusses how U.S. labor unions have played a key role in building and maintaining the state of Israel.

BY [MICHAEL ARRIA](#) - NOVEMBER 20, 2025 -  0



UAW LABOR FOR PALESTINE ACTION IN ALBANY, NY, MARCH 2024. (PHOTO: UAW LABOR FOR PALESTINE X ACCOUNT)

This year, on the eve of International Workers’ Day, General Federation of Trade Unions in Gaza, published a [call](#) to the U.S. labor movement.

“This war would not have been possible without the unlimited U.S. support for the occupation, whether through military funding, political and diplomatic backing, or arms deals that kill our children, women, and elderly every day,” it read. “The U.S. administration under Trump has continued what the previous administration started, becoming a direct accomplice in genocide, ignoring the voices of millions inside and outside of the United States, and an overwhelming majority of the nation, who reject this brutal aggression.”

“Therefore, we call on you, the American labor unions, to translate your solidarity into effective actions that go beyond statements and speeches and create real pressure to

stop this dirty war,” it continued.

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Over the years, many rank-and-file U.S. workers have engaged in such effective actions, but labor leadership has consistently backed Israel and even cracked down on organizers who have taken a stance on the issue.

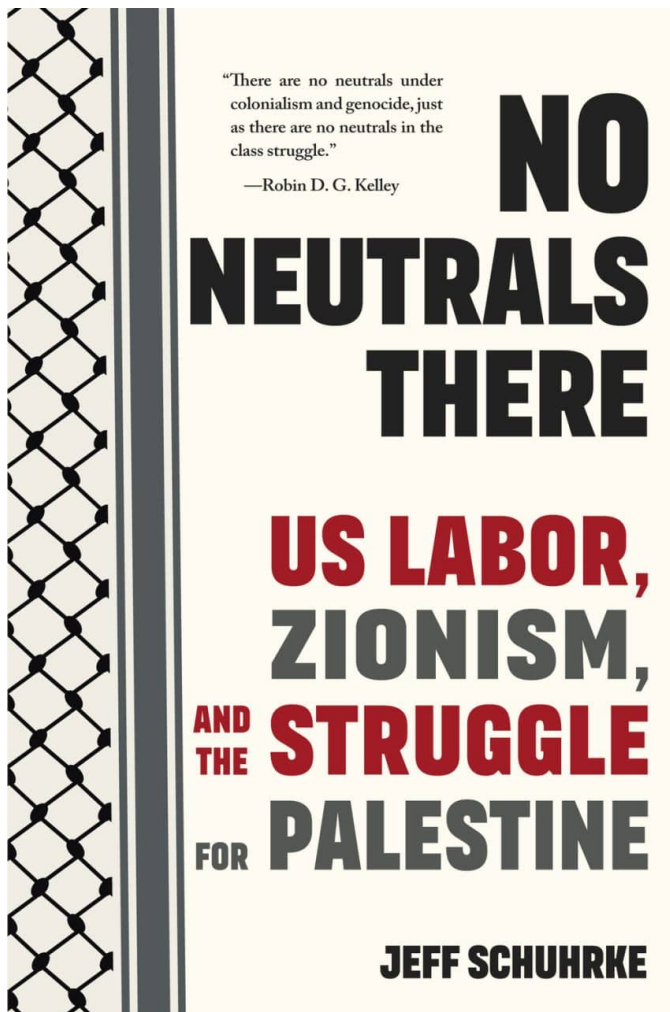
Labor historian Jeff Schuhrke has published an important new book on this disconnect. [*No Neutrals There: U.S. Labor, Zionism, and the Struggle for Palestine*](#) details how U.S. labor unions have played a key role in building and maintaining the state of Israel.

Mondoweiss U.S. correspondent Michael Arria recently spoke with Schuhrke about the book.

How was Zionism originally perceived by the U.S. labor movement? How was it specifically perceived by Jewish union members?

Jeff Schruke: When Zionism first emerged as a deliberate political project in the 1890s and early 1900s, its main spokespeople and champions were primarily middle- and upper-class bourgeois Jews in Europe, such as Theodore Herzl. The participants were not working-class Jewish folks. They were not leftists.

Working-class Jews, particularly in Eastern Europe, had their own organization that was founded the same year as the Zionist organization, called the Jewish Labor Bund. It was



"There are no neutrals under colonialism and genocide, just as there are no neutrals in the class struggle."

—Robin D. G. Kelley

NO NEUTRALS THERE

US LABOR, ZIONISM, AND THE STRUGGLE FOR PALESTINE

JEFF SCHUHRKE

a socialist group. It was working-class Jews, men and women, who were rebelling against the Tsarist regime and the Russian empire, and also fighting back against exploitative working conditions.

Many of them worked in the factories in newly industrializing cities across Eastern Europe. They regarded Zionism as a major distraction from class struggle. It was a nationalist movement, and as socialists, they rejected nationalism. They believed that the working class should unite worldwide, regardless of nationality.

They also viewed Zionism as something of a fantasy, the idea that Jews were going to go to Palestine, which was already populated

and, at that time, part of the Ottoman Empire. The idea of creating your own state seemed absurd, and it seemed much more practical to the working-class socialist Jews to work on improving their lives and their conditions where they already were.

It wasn't until around the 1910s that labor Zionism emerged as an attempt to fuse the nationalist and settler colonialist ideology of Zionism with the more socialistic, working-class-oriented politics of the Jewish Labor Bund.

The Labor Zionists, who were mostly working-class Jews, regarded the more bourgeois mainstream Zionists as having an inefficient way of going about settler colonialism. They thought the middle-class and upper-class Zionists were simply trying to appeal to major world powers like the British Empire, the U.S., or the Ottoman Empire and win a Jewish state through these diplomatic channels.

The Labor Zionists thought the best way to establish a Jewish state in Arab Palestine was to just literally go there and start colonizing the place. To start building their own economy, communal farms, cooperative villages, housing programs, schools, and industrial businesses. A transportation network, their own healthcare system, their own workers' bank, and literally lay the foundations for a Jewish State.

They wanted to do the settler colonialism themselves as workers and have it all be centered on this ideology that sounded like socialism, but was actually premised on the exclusion, dispossession, and expulsion of the native Palestinian Arab population. They were consciously saying "Jews Only," and they weren't open to Palestinian workers.

If a Jewish employer was hiring native Arab workers, Zionists would go and try to literally force out those workers through direct physical force.

Slowly, this argument began to be made to working-class socialist Jews in Eastern Europe and in the United States that supporting Zionism was not so much about supporting nationalism; it was actually about working-class solidarity.

Starting in 1920, the primary instrument of this Zionism was the Histadrut, an organization often referred to as a trade union federation. In some ways, it was that, but it was so much more. The Histadrut was doing all the things I just mentioned. Setting up farms, healthcare networks, and a workers' bank. It was a major employer and paved the way for the eventual establishment of the state of Israel.

They were enforcing this racial line, excluding Palestinians and pushing them off to the margins economically in the hopes that this would push them off the land altogether.

Histadrut officials would appeal to Jewish American labor leaders, many of whom had come from the Jewish Labor Bund and were socialists. They were traditionally anti-Zionists, but the Histadrut appealed to them on the grounds that this was a matter of worker solidarity. They were asking Jewish-led unions in the U.S. for financial contributions for all of their settler colonial projects that they were doing in Palestine.

Can you talk about the creation of Israel in 1948 and the role that unions played in that process?

Over the last two years of genocide, whenever unions in the U.S. or union members have put forward statements in support of a ceasefire, or an arms embargo, or a boycott, critics will jump in and ask, Why are unions talking about Palestine in the first place? Why are unions talking about Israel? This has nothing to do with the work of unions. They should just stay out of it.

The most basic argument of my book is that this position is completely ridiculous because unions in the U.S. have always been very much involved in this issue. They have never been neutral or silent on the question of Palestine.

Unions in the U.S. have always been very much involved in this issue. They have never been neutral or silent on the question of Palestine.

In 1948, the U.S. labor movement was at its peak in terms of historic strength, thanks to the New Deal, World War II, and numerous major organizing campaigns that occurred in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as general support from the federal government. One in three workers in the U.S. was unionized,

and unions had considerable economic and political strength during this period, exerting significant influence.

U.S. labor support for Zionism began as early as 1917, during World War I. The American Federation of Labor endorsed the Balfour Declaration in 1917 as part of its broader support for U.S. entry into the war. Then, as I mentioned, in 1920, the Histadrut was convincing Jewish American labor leaders to donate some of their union funds to help projects on the ground in Palestine under the guise of worker solidarity.

By the 1940s, support for Zionism extended beyond Jewish American labor leaders. It was supported, really more significantly, it was the non-Jewish Christian labor leaders. People William Green, who was president of the AFL at the time, and Philip Murray, who was president of the CIO. Well-known, non-Jewish labor leaders like Walter Reuther, George Meany, and Jimmy Hoffa were strongly supporting Zionism by this point, partially because replacing class struggle with class collaboration in the service of nationalism was very similar to how the U.S. labor movement approached unionism at the time, but also because these high ranking U.S. labor officials very much invested in U.S. empire and showing how they were patriot loyal patriots supporting the U.S. government in the hopes of getting a seat at the table.

In terms of how they were supporting it, there were continued donations, with millions of dollars from union treasuries, union pension funds, strike funds, and healthcare funds going to these settler-colonial programs that were being established.

They were also lobbying President Harry Truman to immediately recognize Israel. The Truman government had actually imposed an arms embargo to try to reduce the bloodshed in the area, but U.S. unions were demanding that he lift that and send weapons to the Zionist militias like the Haganah, which became the IDF.

In 1948, approximately 30,000 members of the garment unions went on a half-day strike. They left work early and traveled to Yankee Stadium in the Bronx for a large pro-Zionist rally, demanding that Truman immediately recognize Israel, lift the embargo, and send weapons to these Israel militias that were carrying out an ethnic cleansing campaign. In some cases, the garment unions were even voluntarily stitching together uniforms and caps for Zionist soldiers.

Did the Red Scare and McCarthyism have an impact on U.S. union support for Israel? Would things have been any different if there hadn't been a purge of Communists from unions and a wider crackdown on the left?

I think in the longer term, it could have gone a different way, but what's particularly complicated about that moment is that the Soviet Union initially supported the creation of Israel.

Before 1948, the communist movement worldwide had been consistently anti-Zionist due to the belief that the entire working class needed to be united. So they saw labor Zionism as being basically just a nationalist, racist form of worker organizing and generally rejected it in favor of having Jewish and Arab workers organizing together in Palestine.

From about 1950 on, the Soviet Union's official policy was anti-Zionist, and it was highly critical of the state of Israel, supporting the surrounding Arab countries and the Palestinian liberation movement, but in that brief period around 1948, in the aftermath of World War II, the official Soviet policy was supporting Israel and that trickled down to many communist groups across the world. The Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc states were the crucial votes at the UN General Assembly when the 1947 partition plan, which basically set the stage for the Nakba, was passed.

It was also the communist government of Czechoslovakia that provided weapons to the Zionist militias that carried out the Nakba, because, as I said, the U.S. and the U.K. were enforcing an arms embargo at that time.

So even communist trade unionists in the U.S. were supporting Zionism and Israel, and then by the 1950s, they kind of went back to being anti-Zionist. Maybe if communists hadn't been systematically purged from the U.S. labor movement during the McCarthy period, then labor's position might have been different, but in that moment, at least in 1948, everyone was basically on the same page, unfortunately.

Certainly, after the post-World War II Red Scare and the onset of the Cold War, U.S. labor officials shifted significantly to the right, including those who had traditionally been more progressive, and this included many Jewish American labor leaders who had emerged from the Jewish labor movement.

They embraced anti-communism, in part because they believed in it ideologically, but it was also a political calculation. They were reacting to McCarthyism and Red Scare tactics that were always trying to paint unions as some kind of Soviet conspiracy. So they tried to distance themselves from any left-wing radicalism. Many U.S. labor officials really became full-throated cold warriors.

Then you had the Vietnam War and AFL-CIO's, a formal partnership with the CIA and the State Department. They were trying to undermine any kind of left-wing type of labor movement all around the world, not just actual communists, but anyone, any type of union that was oppositional to the power of imperialism. The AFL-CIO worked with the U.S. government to try to undermine those unions. The more radical and left-wing elements of the labor movement had already been marginalized and sidelined, so all this went largely unchallenged.

We've been discussing union leadership, and there's obviously been a long history of solidarity efforts among rank-and-file workers that defy the reality you're detailing. Your book details important organizing efforts from the 1970s and 1980s, such as the Detroit autoworkers' [strike](#) for Palestine in 1973.

Can you talk about some of that organizing and the reaction from union leadership?

I always try to make it clear when I talk about U.S. labor support for imperialism, Zionism, and colonialism that it's not the labor movement writ large, it's the labor officialdom. It's the high-ranking leaders, union presidents, and so on. The rank-and-file members might have different ideas. This is why union democracy is so vital in all these questions.

Throughout all this history, there have been various examples of rank-and-file union members protesting against their own union leaders' support for Israel.

A great example, like you said, is 1973 when 2,000 Arab-American auto workers in Detroit who were members of the United Auto Workers, led a wildcat strike for one day at the main Dodge assembly plant and shut down production to protest not just constant the racial discrimination and harassment that they were facing from their employers and union representatives, who were pretty much all white, but also the fact the UAW had invested about \$780,000 into the state of Israel.

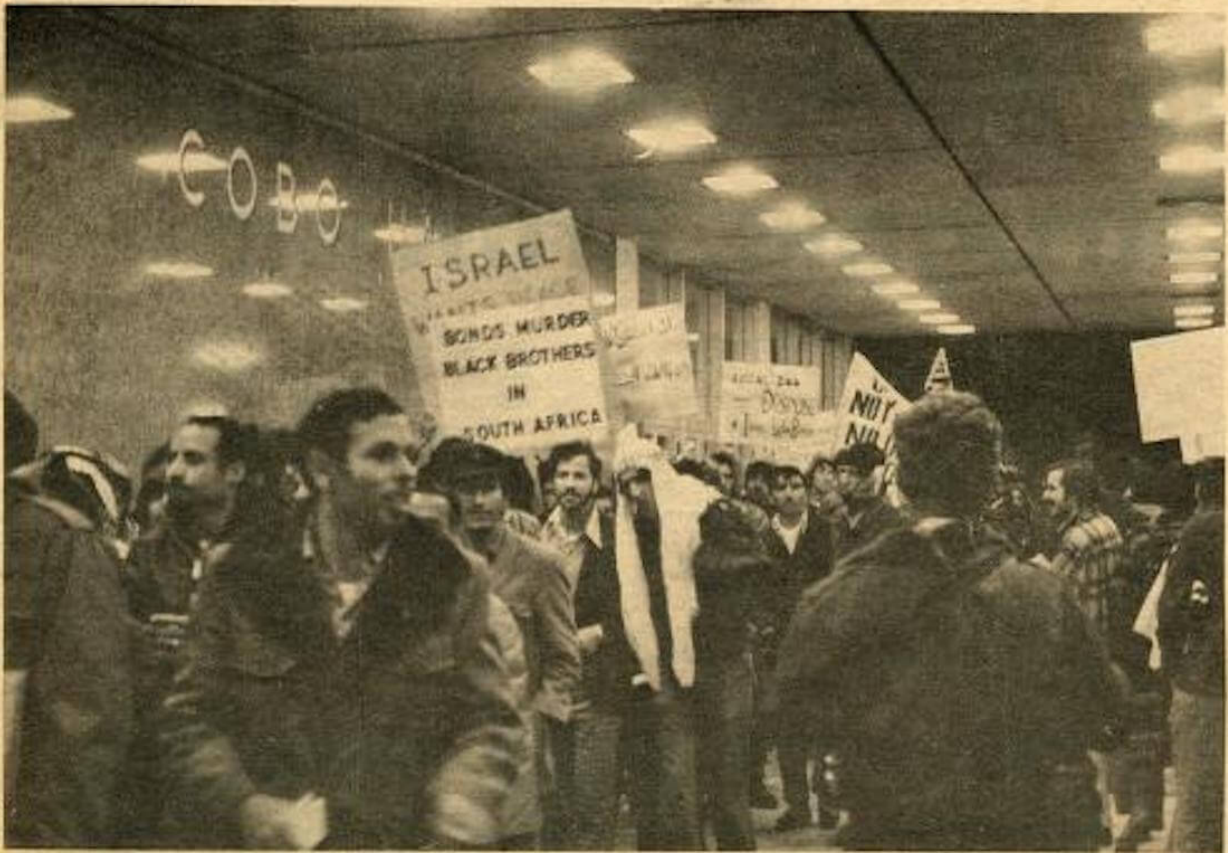
They did it through Israel Bonds. They were using union members' dues money to invest in the oppression of Palestinians, and many of these Arab-American auto workers were understandably upset that their own dues money was being used for this purpose.

One of the workers' demands was for union leadership to divest its bond holdings from Israel. They formed an Arab workers caucus within the UAW to try to assert their voices, not only around Palestine and the bond issue, but also to demand more representation in the union itself, more democracy in the union, and the direct election of union.

That's something that only, finally, happened in 2022 with the [election](#) of Shawn Fain. That was the first time the union had a direct election, with members voting directly for the union's top officers. That was something that these Arab workers had proposed back in the 1970s.

January 1974

REVOLUTION



Arab auto workers and supporters in Detroit protest UAW's purchase of \$1 million of Israeli bonds. Demo of nearly 2000 on ~~Dec 4~~ was held outside pro-Zionist dinner at which UAW head Woodcock was "honored."

"PHOTO DATED 28 NOVEMBER 1973 OF ARAB AUTO WORKERS AND THEIR SUPPORTERS IN DETROIT PROTEST, PUBLISHED IN REVOLUTION, JANUARY 1974." (PHOTO VIA THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN LIBRARY DIGITAL COLLECTIONS)

Then, moving ahead to the 1980s during the First Intifada, there was a growing number of rank-and-file union members trying to educate and organize within their unions about Palestine and making the direct comparison to apartheid South Africa.

Many U.S. labor leaders were, to their credit, enthusiastically supporting boycotting and divesting from apartheid South Africa. They were supporting black South African trade unionists who were facing repression and pressuring the Reagan administration to impose sanctions on South Africa until apartheid was ended.

Many rank-and-file union members were clearly supporting those efforts, including many African American workers, so it was natural to make the comparison to say, Look what Israel is doing to Palestinians, especially in the West Bank and Gaza, while the Intifada was happening.

So for the first time, there started to be a more coordinated effort from rank-and-file union members to show solidarity with Palestine and to challenge the labor officialdom's traditional support for Israel. In 1988, there was the first delegation of U.S. Unionists going to the West Bank to see what conditions were like for Palestinian workers living under the military occupation. Such incidents were beginning to occur.

If we fast-forward to the Second Intifada, when the BDS movement was first officially launched in 2005. Around the same time, in 2004, a group of rank-and-file union members and local union leaders around the country founded [Labor for Palestine](#) as a permanent network of organizing within the U.S. labor movement that stands in solidarity with Palestine and tries to push unions to support the boycott movement.

This prompted a crackdown from high-ranking union officials who were trying to make sure that their unions would not embrace BDS and would not become too critical of Israel.

That's pretty much been the story for the last twenty years. Whenever UAW members or a union graduate student workers pass BDS resolution democratically, the high-ranking national union officials will overturn that decision.

Again, it comes down to union democracy. The rank-and-file are democratically and collectively saying, we don't wanna continue our union support for the state of Israel, and the leadership is rejecting that

Polling shows that support for Israel has dropped among the U.S. population, particularly among Democratic voters. The Democrats are still associated with the labor movement to some extent, and I'm wondering if you believe that's shifted the unions in any capacity.

I think if we're just talking about rank-and-file union members, there's definitely been a shift.

For example, every year, Labor Notes hosts a large conference of rank-and-file union activists in Chicago. I was at last year's conference, and you saw people wearing keffiyehs everywhere. There were at least four or five panels about Palestine. All pro-Palestine. Panels about how the labor movement can show more solidarity with Palestinians mainly.

Each of those panels was jam-packed. It was standing room only. That anecdote shows you the prevailing attitude among union activists.

In the last couple of years, there have been multiple efforts at the grassroots level, where union members are demanding a ceasefire, demanding an arms embargo, and pushing for BDS.

At the University of California, graduate workers, postdoctoral scholars, and other academic staff, represented by UAW Local 4811, went on [strike](#) for several weeks in the spring of 2024 in solidarity with the Gaza solidarity student encampments. So that's all very significant. I think we've seen more Palestine solidarity in the U.S. labor movement in the last two years than at any other time in history.

You even had high-ranking union leaders and labor union presidents call for a ceasefire. Last summer, 7 unions, including two of the largest unions in the country, the National Education Association and the Service Employees International Union, sent a [letter](#) to Joe Biden demanding an arms embargo on Israel.

This is all significant. However, the problem is that all that has come from high-ranking union officials have just been statements and resolutions. There hasn't been much actual action.

Take the UAW, for example. They called for an immediate ceasefire and then turned around to endorse Joe Biden in the presidential race without attempting to secure any concessions from him on the issue. At least there were no efforts we could see publicly.

So there's been a shift in language, but not enough action.

What are some concrete things unions could do to wield their power on this issue?

The divestment of union pension money from BDS targets. Having that be an official policy and then actually doing it.

A boycott on products moving to or from Israel. That's especially relevant for logistics workers, dock workers and railroad workers, and warehouse workers.

We've seen tech workers take a lot of action on this issue, even though they're not unionized. Microsoft workers have [pressured](#) the company as part of the f [No Azure for Apartheid](#) campaign.

You have university workers and engineering students whose research at the academic level supports the technology of the Israeli war machine and the U.S. military industrial complex. I think the unions that represent those workers need to provide more political education and clearly explain the realities of the labor they're doing and the destruction it's contributing to.

One idea that was popular in the 1980s, which I think should make a comeback within the labor movement, is what was called "economic conversion" for workers in the weapons industry. Today, we might call it a just transition, but discussing how workers in the weapons industry can produce products that are not weapons, bombs, or missiles. Socially useful civilian products, like medical equipment, green energy components, public transit vehicles, and things like that.

The companies these workers work for, these executives at these companies are the ones who are making huge profits off of death and destruction, and the U.S. government is that's giving them through contracts. That's who the real enemy is.

There has to be a discussion of what happens to these workers' livelihoods. There has to be a transition to a more humane, rational kind of economy that isn't premised on death and destruction. So having those kinds of conversations, doing that kind of political education, that's something unions really can and should be taking the lead on.

Democrats also rely on unions, not just for donations to their campaigns, but especially for get-out-the-vote efforts, where union members go door-to-door and canvass for political candidates.

So it's important for unions to have a policy that says we're not going to support candidates who are blindly pro-genocide and who will just stand by Israel no matter what. They're going to have to say, we will only support and lend our resources, time, and energy to supporting candidates who are in favor of Palestinian liberation and are not going to be just blindly backing Israel.

Israel is losing the battle of public opinion

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