

The labor question and Palestine

by: J

In the U.S., the most prominent actions of the Palestine solidarity movement have been within the student sector, with the “Student Intifada” at the forefront, its first flames rising at Columbia University before spreading nationally and internationally. Despite the great struggle of the student movement, there is another theater we should look to: the struggle within the labor movement. This article explores the history of the relationship between Zionism and the labor movement, namely how the establishment labor movement came to be tied up with Zionism, and how Palestine solidarity can make its return to the labor movement.

Zionism’s influence on the U.S. labor movement

In the early period of the labor movement in the U.S., a significant amount of the leaders were immigrants from Europe. The Jewish labor leaders were often influenced by the various Bundist organizations of Europe (Bundism is a Jewish socialist movement that, at the time, was entirely opposed to Zionism). The 1919 First Jewish Labor Congress in New York passed a measure that rejected Zionism altogether.

The Histadrut (General Federation of Labour in the Land of Israel), a trade union center in the occupation which today represents a majority of the “Israeli” workforce, would be founded in 1920 and wasted no time in courting the business unions¹, with a delegation being sent to the U.S. the next year. Over the next decade, ties between Histadrut and U.S. organized labor fully crystallized. These Histadrut-influenced unions would, during the Nakba, strike and rally *in support of* the Zionist forces, influencing President Truman to lift an arms embargo and later fully recognize “Israel”².

Tragically, at the same time that the Zionist occupation gained a foothold in Palestine, the U.S. Communist movement, and by extension the left line of the labor movement, was suffering from a number of setbacks. The Communist Party USA had been degenerating for years, leaving the left line of the labor movement without a clear center of leadership. The material basis for this degeneration of the CPUSA was the U.S. beginning to consolidate its imperialist position in the run-up to World War II. First, in the CPUSA, the Black National Question was liquidated, going against the advice of the Communist International³ (We will go on to explore the importance of the Black National Question to the issue of Palestine). Then, the CPUSA liquidated its factory cells, and therefore its base among all workers. Finally, the CPUSA as a party was liquidated into the “Communist Political Association” in 1944. Although it was refounded the following year, a purge of anti-revisionist members would ensure that to this day it has yet to return to a revolutionary line or its formerly revolutionary practice. The Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which was a battleground in the struggle between revolutionaries and business unionists, would purge Communists from its ranks, thanks to the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 which penalized unions with “anti-American” membership. Another factor in this process of the labor movement coming to support Zionism was the Soviet Union’s great error of initially recognizing the Zionist state, before it later switched positions.

Starting in the 1930s, a shift occurred in the “establishment”/rightist U.S. labor movement. The business unions entered the process of becoming integrated into the U.S. bourgeois state apparatus, a process that has been termed “state unionism”⁴. A milestone in the shift was the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which created the NLRB, creating a system whereby the business unions were

1 “Business unions” refers to the historical right line of the contradiction within the labor movement, the left line being class-conscious or revolutionary unions.

2 Adam M. Howard, “Sewing the Fabric of Statehood: Garment Unions, American Labor, and the Establishment of the State of Israel”, 86.

3 The Crusader, “The Black National Question and the Black Belt Thesis” <https://thecrusader.news/2024/06/14/the-black-national-question-and-the-black-belt-thesis>

4 Southern New England Labor Council, “State Unionism in the U.S.” <https://newlaborpress.org/2025/02/01/re-publishing-state-unionism-in-the-us/>

“provide[d] with official legal status provided that they played by the rules of the new state-regulated collective bargaining system [and] limited the militancy of their members”⁵. The shift was fully materialized by the time of the passage of the aforementioned Taft-Hartley Act. This ensured that these former business unions, now state unions, would unwaveringly support U.S. imperialist policy, not restricted to Zionism. Quoting from the reactionary, State Department-funded Freedom House: “The AFL helped with direct support to rebuild free trade union movements throughout Europe and fend off communist-dominated labor federations supported by the Soviet Union. Free trade union federations in France, Italy, Germany, and elsewhere helped establish stable conditions for democracy” (Freedom House later makes the laughable claim that the AFL and later AFL-CIO’s foreign policy was “independent”, followed by an admittance that the organization received funds from the CIA). The merged AFL-CIO in collaboration with the U.S. state would use a revolving door of proxy organizations to provide on-the-ground support to the CIA’s campaign of coups in Latin America and Asia.

Returning to the support for Zionism as one specific manifestation of the reactionary character of the state unions: since the 1950s they have held a significant amount of investment in “Israel bonds”. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters had invested, as far back as 1988, at least \$26 million⁶. The exact total is held, by policy, as a secret. Quoting from a manual written by the Jewish Labor Committee: “Please DO NOT discuss with union members, representatives of the press or others, guesstimates of the value of the State of Israel bonds held by unions. ‘Divest from Israel’ activists have used such information in their arguments”.⁷ To be clear, this means that the state unions literally take money from workers in the form of dues, and invest it into genocide, all the while hiding from the workers where their money is being used. Just like their broader support for U.S. imperialism, the state unions taking dues money from the workers, investing it, and either pocketing the profits, or using them to support forces which are opposed to the workers they are claiming to represent, is not limited to “Israel bonds”.⁸

Independent Labor Emerges for Palestine

In the 1960s, the New Left emerged in the U.S. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and Progressive Labor Party would revive the Black National Question, in a revolutionary sense⁹, for the first time in decades. The Black National Question and Palestinian liberation came to be closely tied, both being struggles for self-determination of oppressed people on occupied land. It is not a coincidence that the labor misleaders who brought Zionism into the picture were often the same misleaders who were racist against workers of color (the AFL enforced segregation on union locals at the time).

The 1967 war in the Middle East nearly exactly coincided with the Detroit rebellion of July 1967, “one of the largest Black insurrections this country has seen”¹⁰. In the aftermath of the rebellion, many organizations were founded which continued the Black National struggle beyond the spontaneous uprising. The Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) was one of the organizations founded

5 SNELC, “State Unionism in the U.S.”, 7

6 https://www.multinationalmonitor.org/hyper/issues/1988/04/mm0488_10.html

7 Jewish Labor Committee, “Introduction to Labor: The U.S. Trade Union Movement and the Organized Jewish Community”, 17.

8 See New Labor Press, “Political Economy of the American Labor Movement”
<https://newlaborpress.org/2024/06/22/political-economy-of-the-american-labor-movement/>

9 I demarcate here between a reformist perspective on the Black National Question, embodied by organizations like the NAACP, with the revolutionary, class-based line originally found in the CPUSA and taken up later by the named New Left organizations.

10 Pan-African News Wire, “The League of Revolutionary Black Workers, Arab-Americans & Palestine Solidarity”
<https://laborforpalestine.net/2006/08/20/the-league-of-revolutionary-black-workers-arab-americans-palestine-solidarity-pan-african-news-wire/>

in this wave, operating at a car factory in Detroit, followed by other Revolutionary Union Movements at Ford, Chrysler, and Chevrolet plants, then hospital workers (HOWRUM), newspaper workers (NEWRUM), and logistics workers at UPS (UPRUM). In 1969, the Detroit RUMs merged into the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.¹¹ The League was unlike the state unions, it was a combative, class-conscious, and independent labor organization. The League took over the Wayne State University student publication and turned it into a revolutionary news service, where articles on Palestinian liberation were published, drawing the ire of university officials. The League worked alongside other labor organizations like the Arab Workers Caucus. The AWC organized within UAW Local 600 to protest against the purchase of \$300,000 in “Israel bonds”. This culminated in a wildcat strike in October 1973.¹² The AWC later held another strike to protest the International UAW President being presented with an award from the Zionist organization B’nai B’rith.¹³

Labor for Palestine after Operation Al-Aqsa Flood & Prospects for the Future

As we all know, Operation Al-Aqsa Flood (popularly referred to as October 7) opened up a new wave of the Palestine solidarity movement. Unsurprisingly, the state unions, once again, went against the workers they claim to represent, and aligned with the U.S. state. Rather than using any leverage for concrete actions, the state unions fell in line behind the officialdom of the Democratic Party (of which many state union leaders are outright members, or former members). At their best, they ineffectually released statements “supporting” a ceasefire, while unfailingly condemning Palestinian resistance and supporting the occupation’s so-called “right to exist”. At their worst (the International Brotherhood of Teamsters) they completely ignored the genocide, and continued issuing endorsements and donations for officials who fully back Zionism.¹⁴ Under the leadership of Sean O’Brien, the IBT has began donating tens of thousands of dollars in money stolen from workers to politicians of the Republican Party, while still continuing their donations to the Democratic Party. United Auto Workers president Shawn Fain, who is often praised in the revisionist “socialist” publications as a “class-struggle unionist”, did call for a ceasefire, then proceeded to endorse Kamala Harris anyway.

To simply call for a ceasefire is not enough. While union membership *and* overall strike activity is at an embarrassing historic low¹⁵, because the state unions have entered the role of enforcing labor discipline for the capitalists rather than representing workers’ demands; the state union set-up also means that these organizations hold an outsized influence in the government thanks to massive amounts of spending on political lobbying (about \$2 billion over the past decade¹⁶). This influence has not been leveraged towards a ceasefire or arms embargo, leading to a significant rising opposition from both rank-and-file union members and activists. In 2014, the Block the Boat campaign led by the Arab Resource Organizing Center convinced ILWU Local 10 to respect a boycott on “Israeli” goods at the Port of Oakland. The Palestinian Youth Movement’s Mask off Maersk campaign successfully pressured the shipping company Maersk to cut ties with companies linked to “Israeli” settlements. UAW was criticized by those organized in UAW Labor for Palestine for their apparent hypocrisy in calling for a ceasefire while taking no concrete actions to withhold UAW-organized labor from the production of equipment for the occupation, including weapons.¹⁷ In the National Education Association (the largest

11 Fifth Estate, “To the Point of Production - An Interview with John Watson of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers” <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/1960-1970/watson-point.pdf>

12 Michael Letwin, Suzanne Adely, Jaime Veve, “Labor for Palestine: Challenging US Labor Zionism, 1049 <https://laborforpalestine.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Labor-for-Palestine-Challenging-US-Labor-Zionism.pdf>

13 Letwin et al, “Labor for Palestine”, 1049.

14 New Labor Press, “Why the State Unions Cover for Zionism” <https://newlaborpress.org/2023/11/11/analysis-why-the-state-unions-cover-for-zionism/>

15 New Labor Press, “Political Economy of the American Labor Movement”, 3

16 From figures reported to the Department of Labor’s Office of Labor-Management Standards

17 UAW Labor for Palestine, “Calling for a ceasefire while still making the bombs: an open letter to the UAW” <https://mondoweiss.net/2024/01/calling-for-a-ceasefire-while-still-making-the-bombs-an-open-letter-to-the-uaw/>

union in the U.S.), there was a significant campaign to boycott the Anti-Defamation League, which spreads pro-Zionist (anti-Palestinian) narratives in schools. After the Representative Assembly voted to approve the boycott, it was struck down by the NEA's Executive Committee.¹⁸

In looking to the future of both the Palestine solidarity movement and the labor movement, there can be no break with Zionism if there is no break with state unionism. Without smashing the state unionist status quo, any union which manages to turn away from support for Zionism will be brought to heel by state forces. We must follow the example of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and reconstitute a combative, class-conscious, and independent labor movement, which is truly for the workers.

18 EducationWeek, "Teachers' Union Backs Away From Anti-Defamation League Boycott"
<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/teachers-union-backs-away-from-anti-defamation-league-boycott/2025/07>