

The Jewish Labor Committee Story

The Jewish Labor Committee was founded in 1934 by leaders of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, the Workmen's Circle, the Jewish Daily Forward Association and other kindred groups in response to the rise of Nazism in Europe. From our first days, we have had recognition from and close ties with the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (and, since the merger, the AFL-CIO).

Today, the Jewish Labor Committee is recognized by the organized Jewish community and organized labor as the bridge between these two vital sectors of American society.

During its first decade, the JLC's priorities were initiating and strengthening anti-Nazi and anti-Fascist activities of the two U.S. labor federations (as well as their Canadian counterparts) and the more than 500,000 members of the Jewish labor movement of North America. Developing relations with diverse Jewish organizations, the JLC, together with the American Jewish Congress, initiated a successful anti-Nazi boycott, designed to raise consciousness among Americans as well as to create economic difficulties for Nazi Germany.

When the efforts to persuade the United States Olympic Committee to withdraw from the 1936 Berlin Olympics failed, the JLC organized a "counter-Olympics" (entitled the World Labor Athletic Carnival), held on New York's Randall's Island, in which athletes, who refused to compete in that Nazi showcase, actively participated. The event provided a focus for labor's anti-Nazi sentiment, and also helped

publicize opposition to Hitler's regime in Germany.

Before and during America's entry into World War II, the JLC established communication channels to underground anti-Nazi labor, socialist and Jewish forces in occupied Europe, including groups and individuals in Germany, France, Poland, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, Holland and Italy. We raised emergency funds for partisan forces, and organized an American coordinating committee of European trade union leaders operating in exile from New York. Working behind the scenes, using extensive contacts with the labor movement, the Jewish community, and other agencies, the JLC was able to rescue well over a thousand Jewish and non-Jewish political and cultural leaders.

After the war, the Jewish Labor Committee was actively involved in relief and rehabilitation work for the survivors. JLC staff worked with displaced persons in post-war DP camps, special "children's homes," and other newly-reestablished Jewish

institutions. Working with the Yiddish-language Jewish Daily Forward and New York radio station WEVD, the JLC was able to renew ties between family members disrupted by the war and help bring these scattered remnants back into the fold of the larger Jewish world.

For many decades, we helped Jewish and non-Jewish survivors in their struggles to rebuild their lives after the war. Many of those from Western Europe who were rescued by the JLC returned to their countries, and established democratic institutions, parties and trade union movements.

As early as 1944, the JLC started educational activities against prejudice among American workers. This effort received the strong backing of the leadership of the AFL, the CIO and the Canadian CLC. In the 1950s, our organization focused more energies and resources on this important work, spearheading the development of civil rights programs in U.S. and Canadian unions. The JLC established nearly two dozen local committees to combat intolerance across the United States and Canada. These local committees became the foundation for the AFL Civil Rights Department. The JLC distributed tens of thousands of pieces of literature, showed filmstrips, and ran "rumor clinics" to combat racism. In time, the JLC helped a number of the largest national unions establish their own civil rights departments.

The JLC played a key role in national and state campaigns for civil rights legislation, in the historic civil rights marches of the 1950s and '60s, and in the Leadership Conference for Civil Rights. The JLC office was called on to coordinate local campaigns



Image courtesy Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU

Bill Seaman - *Labor Reports*, April 1963.

70 Years Strong: The Jewish

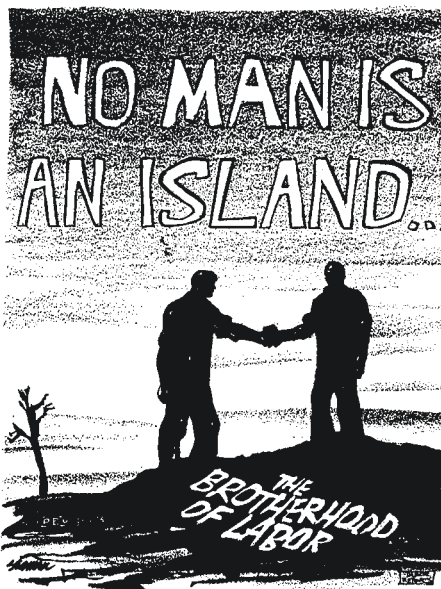


Image courtesy Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU

Graphic by veteran labor cartoonist and illustrator, Bernard Seaman, from the JLC news service **Labor Reports**, November 1957. The service was sent to – and reprinted by – hundreds of trade union publications throughout the United States and Canada. Seaman, considered one of the best labor cartoonists of his time, was the editorial cartoonist for the newspapers of the ILGWU and the Seafarers International Union. He passed away in September, 1998.

for civil rights in many cities, because we had the confidence of labor, liberals, the African-American

community and the churches, as well as the Jewish community. Our efforts during that era included a key role in the founding of the United Farm Workers, the passage of the Fair Employment Practices Act in California, and staffing and support of the historic 1963 March on Washington. Canadian branches of the JLC were recognized as the spearhead of the civil rights effort in that country as a whole, not only within the organized labor movement, but in the general community as well. Intergroup community relations is still a major priority, even as the number of tasks on our agenda has grown with the times.

At the close of World War II, the JLC, as a principled opponent of totalitarianism on the left as well as the right, provided material assistance in liberated areas to many of the financially-stranded European labor movements in their efforts to reestablish themselves in the face of Soviet-backed Communist efforts to strengthen their presence in Europe.



Image courtesy Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU

It soon became clear to the JLC that the Soviet regime, in addition to its suppression of efforts to form independent free trade unions, was engaged in a policy of discrimination against Jews. They discriminated against Jews in employment, education, culture or any form of religious expression allowed to other recognized ethnic and religious groups in the multi-ethnic Soviet population. We raised our voices in protest in the arena of public opinion.

For a number of years, the JLC carried this issue alone. We raised our concern in both the Yiddish-speaking Jewish community and in the halls of the American labor movement. JLC received support from the two American labor federations, the AFL and the CIO, even before their merger in 1955.

Shortly thereafter, the JLC brought a report on the discriminatory treatment of Soviet Jews to the world congress of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) at a meeting in West Berlin; the ICFTU then took up the cause. In its position as a consultative body to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, the ICFTU submitted a lengthy report, which was the first document on this issue circulated through the official channels of the U.N. The following year both the U.S. and Israel raised the cry at the U.N. By then, it had attracted the support of the general Jewish community in North America, Israel and elsewhere, and the Jews in the Soviet Union began speaking up for their own cause.

In the early 1960s, the JLC was a founding member of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry. Two decades later, the JLC formed a special Trade Union Council for Soviet Jewry, headed by Lane Kirkland, through which American trade unions "adopted" refuseniks,

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protested non-delivery of mail to Soviet Jews, and demanded full rights for Jews living in the USSR – including the right to leave if they so wished. In time, this led to the unprecedented action of the Soviet Union allowing hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews to leave the USSR. (This took place before *glasnost* and *perestroika*.)

As the United Nations was debating the creation of what would ultimately be called the State of Israel, the Jewish Labor Committee played a little-known behind-the-scenes role, working with socialist, labor and trade unionist allies in a number of countries to secure their representatives' support. It was with some private satisfaction that the JLC office listened with the rest of the Jewish world as the historic positive vote took place in 1947. The JLC lent support and sent aid to cooperatives in the young country, assisted a number of labor-related and cultural institutions, and did what we could to assist in the resettlement and absorption of some of the remnants of European Jewry.

Through the years, we have maintained ties of solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Israel, with an emphasis, of course, on "Labor Israel." Israel is a country founded and built by organized labor. Younger American trade unionists often do not know the history of Israel's birth and early years. To maintain and strengthen close relations between the labor movements of these two countries, the JLC organized Trade Union Seminars in Israel, sending up-and-coming U.S. labor leaders to learn about the people and State of Israel, the peace process, and to see and meet their fellow trade unionists, Jews and Arabs, kibbutzniks and city folk.

Nearly two decades ago, the JLC realized that a new generation was growing up without any meaningful

knowledge of the Holocaust – the awareness of which had so shaken the world at the close of World War II and contributed to a firm commitment to democracy and popular revulsion at racism. We understood that it was very important that public schools, in particular, should be teaching the facts and the lessons of the Holocaust. The Educators Chapter of the JLC, together with the United Federation of Teachers of New York, prepared teaching material on this subject, which the teachers' union put in the hands of 230,000 teachers in New York State and Philadelphia. Local Jewish communities distributed

thousands of additional copies to teachers in other parts of the country.

In this same period, the JLC initiated discussions with our colleagues in the Federal Republic of



Image courtesy Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU

Civil rights and labor activist Bayard Rustin, chairman of the board of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, addressing Conference on Polish Anti-Semitism, sponsored by the JLC National Trade Union Council for Human Rights, 1968.



Stuart Appelbaum, President of Jewish Labor Committee and President of RWDSU, joins JLC at New York's 2003 Labor Day Parade up Fifth Avenue. With him are Steve Pezenik (with beard, left, Local 338, RWDSU), Carolyn De Paolo (Coordinator, United Hebrew Trades - New York JLC), Mark Kaufman (Local 3, IBEW).

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Germany - the Socialist Party and the West German teachers' union - about how the history of the Nazi era was being taught in West German schools.

In the summer of 1985, the Educators Chapter of the JLC, together with the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and the UFT and soon thereafter, the American Federation of Teachers, initiated what has become an internationally-renowned intensive three-week summer teacher-training program on the Holocaust and Jewish resistance. The program takes a group of selected teachers to Poland for one week and then to Israel for two weeks. In Poland, the teachers visit the Warsaw Ghetto, concentration camps, and hear testimony directly from survivors. In Israel, the teachers study at the two prime institutions in the field, the Ghetto Fighters House of Kibbutz Lohamei HaGhetto, and the Yad Vashem Holocaust Research and Documentation Center in Jerusalem. As of September, 2003, over 700 educators have completed the training. We estimate that approximately 140,000 - one hundred and forty-thousand! - students are reached by "our" teachers annually.

For years, the JLC has encouraged the continued use of union-made goods and services by Jewish institutions. We have been called upon from time to time to secure the support of the Jewish community for labor campaigns for social justice, whether it has been agricultural workers in grape vineyards and strawberry fields, truckers or nurses or teachers, or to focus attention on those who labor in



Image courtesy Milton Williams, AFT

JLC activists from Eastern Seaboard at National Rally in Solidarity with Israel, Washington DC, April 15, 2002. AFL-CIO President John J. Sweeney, representing 13 million U.S. trade unionists, addressed the massive demonstration.

sweatshops within blocks of our offices.

In April, 2000, the JLC published a special Passover Haggadah, now in its third edition. At the same time, we initiated a growing number of local "Labor Seders" held in communities across the U.S. They are now a tradition in such places as Boston, MA; Washington, DC; Los Angeles, LA; Cedar Grove, NJ; Philadelphia, PA; Chicago, IL; and Detroit, MI. Often cosponsored with local Jewish Federations and with the assistance of local Central Labor Councils, these special festive meals are unique opportunities for local Jewish community leaders and local trade union leaders to meet, eat, recount the story of the Exodus from ancient Egypt - and relate that story to the never-ending story of the struggle for basic workers' rights, from sweatshops a century ago to today's workplaces.

For seven decades, the Jewish Labor Committee's program has included strengthening and focusing Jewish community support for labor's domestic economic and social positions, working with unions in their support for the security of the State and people of Israel, maintaining the cultural heritage of the secular Jewish communities of Europe (including support for Yiddish language, literature and cultural expression), support for a range of local, national and international labor causes, and doing whatever we can when a Jewish presence - or a labor presence - can help resolve a conflict or support the disenfranchised, the weak, the defenseless or the oppressed.

The Jewish Labor Committee, from its first day to this day, involves itself in all aspects of labor-related causes that touch upon the survival and life of the Jewish people, and acts as a clear Jewish voice in the house of labor.