

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The “Other” Pro-Israel Lobby: The AFL-CIO and Israel (1952–1960)

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Abstract

As the American Left finds itself increasingly alienated from Israel, this article supplements the rich historical narrative regarding U.S.–Israel relations by highlighting the important—albeit mostly forgotten—contribution of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) to forging the so-called “special relationship” from the onset. This transnational study transcends prevailing focus on Jewish-American and Christian-Zionist lobbying operations by weaving together the history of U.S.–Israel relations with that of organized labor in the United States and demonstrating how they mutually reinforced each other. The article makes a two-part argument: first, that the AFL-CIO’s embrace of Israel and Histadrut, Israel’s general federation of labor, proved instrumental in establishing American popular support for Israel in the 1950s and cementing it as a leading liberal cause; second, that such support was not merely rooted in Cold War exigencies, but also served domestic purposes by offering American labor officials an inspiring—yet romanticized—model for social democracy onto which they could project their own aspirations and grievances.

I do believe that there is no other single organization in the world which has supported the state of Israel more, financially and morally, than the AFL-CIO and its affiliates.

—George Meany, AFL-CIO President

Braving unseasonable cold and intermittent rains, 45,000 people crowded into New York’s Polo Grounds on April 27, 1958, to celebrate Israel’s tenth anniversary. Despite the inauspicious conditions, the crowd patiently endured a three-hour program and, according to a front-page account in the *New York Times*, “roared ovations at every mention of Israel.”¹ Among the notable speakers at the rally, which included New York Governor Averell Harriman, Senator Herbert Lehman (D-NY), and the former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, was George Meany, the president of the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). After lauding Histadrut, Israel’s general federation of labor, for its contribution to nation-building of the young state, Meany praised Israel for having “performed miracles” and emphasized the shared destiny of Israeli and American labor. “It is indeed fitting that today the trade union movement of Israel and that of America are both fully aware of the role they must play as citizens in a democracy,” he said. “Both of our organizations have progressed toward the goals of higher standards of living through the democratic processes of collective bargaining. Both of us realize that we now must channel some of our energies

¹Irving Spiegel, “45,000 Hail Israel’s Birthday at Polo Grounds Rally,” *New York Times*, Apr. 28, 1958, 1.

toward preserving a way of life that means freedom and peace for all the citizens of both our young nations.”²

Given the growing hostility in recent decades of segments of the American labor movement toward Israel, and their embrace of, among other things, the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS), it is understandable how mainstream American labor’s once unequivocal commitment to Israel’s security and well-being—alongside its highly romanticized and somewhat skewed perceptions of Israel—have faded from our historical consciousness.³ This article seeks to redress this omission by reminding us that up until a few decades ago, the tables were turned as organized labor, led by the AFL-CIO, played an important role in forging the “special relationship” between the United States and Israel and helped establish the founding myths surrounding Israel that still sustain it to this day.

There is no shortage of scholarship mapping the development of the so-called “pro-Israel lobby” in the United States. Yet much of it remains centered on the activities of Jewish organizations like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) or the American Jewish Committee (AJC).⁴ When scholars do look beyond the Jewish community to explain the pro-Israel lobby, it is usually through the religious bonds of Christian Zionism associated, prior to Israel’s founding (and during its early decades), primarily with organizations from the mainstream Protestant establishment like the American Christian Palestine Committee (ACPC), or alternatively since the 1970s, with the rise of the evangelical right.⁵ More recently, however, scholars have broadened the scope to look into the left-liberal alliance’s progressive stance on Israel, focusing on left-wing elites, politicians, intellectuals, and student activists.⁶

Dov Waxman has observed that what distinguishes members of the pro-Israel lobby is “an unwavering commitment to the survival of Israel as a Jewish state” and a “bedrock concern for securing Israel’s existence.”⁷ If we subscribe to this definition, then it is difficult not to highlight the important role played by the American labor movement in helping establish U.S.–Israel relations. Study of Labor Zionism in America has mostly been relegated to the period prior to the founding of the state and especially to President Harry Truman’s historic decision to recognize Israel in 1948, while neglecting the more formative decades afterward when U.S.–Israel strategic ties were cemented.⁸ “Most American labor leaders never considered themselves

²“Meany Lauds Israeli Progress on Nation’s Tenth Anniversary,” *AFL-CIO News*, May 3, 1958, 8, https://archive.org/details/sim_afl-cio-afl-cio-news_1958-05-03_3_18/page/n7/mode/2up?q=standards. All online sources hereafter were accessed on Dec. 19, 2023.

³Alex Kane, “How Palestinian Resistance Inspired a New Generation of Labor Activism,” *972 Magazine*, Aug. 31, 2021, <https://www.972mag.com/labor-unions-bds-us-palestine/>.

⁴See Natan Aridan, “Israel Lobby,” *Israel Studies* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 128–43; Walter Hixson, *Israel’s Armor* (New York, 2019); Doug Rossinow, “‘The Edge of the Abyss’: The Origins of the Israel Lobby, 1949–1954,” *Modern American History* 1, no. 1 (2018): 23–43; and Dov Waxman, “The Pro-Israel Lobby in the United States: Past, Present, and Future,” in *Israel and the United States: Six Decades of US-Israeli Relations*, ed. Robert O. Freedman (London, 2012), 79–99.

⁵For instance, see Walter Russell Mead, *The Arc of a Covenant: The United States, Israel, and the Fate of the Jewish People* (New York, 2022); and Daniel Hummel, *Covenant Brothers: Evangelicals, Jews, and U.S.–Israeli Relations* (Philadelphia, 2019).

⁶See Jeffrey Herf, *Israel’s Moment: International Support for and Opposition to Establishing the Jewish State, 1945–1949* (New York, 2022); Leon Fink, *Undoing the Liberal World Order* (New York, 2022), ch. 3; Michael Fischbach, *The Movement and the Middle East* (Stanford, CA, 2020); and Ronald Radosh and Allis Radosh, “Righteous among the Editors: When the Left Loved Israel,” *World Affairs* 171, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 65–75.

⁷Waxman, “The Pro-Israel Lobby,” 81.

⁸Adam M. Howard, *Sewing the Fabric of Statehood: Garment Unions, American Labor, and the Establishment of the State of Israel* (Champaign, IL, 2017); Peter Hahn, “Organized Labor and U.S. Policy Toward Israel,” in *Empire and Revolution*, ed. Peter Hahn and Mary Ann Heiss (Columbus, OH, 2001), 154–77; Robert Parmett, *The Master of Seventh Avenue: David Dubinsky and the American Labor Movement* (New York, 2005); Mark Raider, “From Immigrant Party to American Movement: American Labor Zionism in the Pre-State Period,” *American Jewish History* 82, no. 1/4 (1994): 159–94.

Zionists, but they saw in Histadrut a progressive labor organization that shared its global vision of an international labor movement. Therefore, Histadrut was worthy of substantial support,” labor historian Adam Howard once wrote.⁹ Howard and the handful of scholars who have broached this relationship have primarily focused on the Jewish-led garment unions, such as David Dubinsky’s International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) and Sidney Hillman and Jacob Potofsky and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA), or umbrella organizations such as the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC) and the American Trade Union Council for Histadrut (ATUCFH). While the story of Jewish Labor Zionism is an important one, it is incomplete, as it overlooks the decades-long commitment to Israel displayed by national industrial unions that made up the AFL-CIO, like auto, steel, railway, electrical, radio and communications workers, even seafarers and teamsters—the majority of whose members were non-Jewish and working class, often residing far from the cosmopolitan metropolitan clusters and coastlines.

This article seeks to supplement the rich historical narrative of the pro-Israel lobby and its role in fostering U.S.–Israel relations by demonstrating how the AFL-CIO, one of the most influential social, economic, and political organizations in postwar America, contributed to consolidating the special relationship from its onset. Engaging archival materials in English and Hebrew in the United States and Israel, as well as the internal discourses within the federation, I offer a fresh assessment of the AFL-CIO’s profound, yet not unproblematic, impact on U.S.–Israel relations during their initial decade. In doing so, I combine two ostensibly separate historical discourses—of U.S.–Israel relations *and* of organized labor within the United States—and weave them into one narrative that demonstrates how they mutually reinforced each other. I do so in a two-part argument: in part one, I offer the first comprehensive critical account of the AFL-CIO’s support of Israel during the crucial transition period when, despite an initially aloof and at times even hostile Eisenhower administration, the strategic and ideological foundations of the special relationship were forged.¹⁰ It was during this critical decade of the fragile relationship that the AFL-CIO came to Israel’s defense by offering unwavering support at a time when the White House mostly offered admonition and rebuke,¹¹ and the American Jewish community was not yet organized or unified enough to effectively advocate on Israel’s behalf as it would in later years.¹² While the AFL-CIO may not have always influenced policy directly, it did help lay the groundwork among large segments of American society for long-term popular support of Israel, cementing Israel as a leading left-liberal cause.

In part two, I argue that organized labor’s support of Israel and Histadrut should be understood not only from an international perspective but through the lens of its own *domestic* needs. Turning the lens inward, therefore, to explore how foreign and domestic policy converge to reinforce each other, as transnational scholars of U.S.–Israel relations have increasingly been doing, this article reveals the subtle manner in which Israel and Histadrut, actively and passively, also “served” organized labor in America.¹³ By reassessing the AFL-CIO’s support of Israel in the context of its growing domestic challenges, and couching this study in the

⁹Howard, *Sewing the Fabric of Statehood*, 4.

¹⁰See Shaul Mitelpunkt, *Israel in the American Mind* (New York, 2018); Michelle Mart, *Eye on Israel: How America Came to View Israel as an Ally* (Albany, NY, 2006); and Avi Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition: Eisenhower, Kennedy and the Origins of the American-Israeli Alliance* (New York, 1998).

¹¹David Tal, *The Making of an Alliance: The Origins and Development of the US-Israel Relationship* (New York, 2022), chs. 3–4; Yaacov Bar-Siman Tov, “The United States and Israel since 1948: A ‘Special Relationship’?” *Diplomatic History* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 231–62; Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition*, chs 2–3.

¹²Hixson, *Israel’s Armor*, ch. 3; Zvi Ganin, *An Uneasy Relationship: American Jewish Leadership and Israel, 1948–1957* (Syracuse, NY, 2005).

¹³See Kenneth Kolander, *America’s Israel: The US Congress and American Israeli Relations, 1967–1975* (Louisville, KY, 2020); Amy Kaplan, *Our American Israel: The Story of an Entangled Alliance* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); and Keith Feldman, *A Shadow over Palestine: The Imperial Life of Race in America* (Minneapolis, 2017).

historiography of organized labor alongside that of U.S.–Israel relations, I suggest that its relationship with Israel was often reciprocal and mutually advantageous. In Israel, the AFL-CIO constructed an idealized model for social democracy that was anticommunist and ostensibly democratic, onto which it could project its own longings for power and influence and find inspiration and validation. Israel and its vibrant labor movement effectively offered American labor a romanticized foreign space for reimagining social democracy cleansed of its own troubled record on civil rights and human rights.

This argument runs counter to the prevailing narratives that exclusively locate organized labor's support for Israel in the Cold War's exigencies of communist containment and "labor imperialism," central to much of the scholarship about American labor and the Cold War, or alternatively, in the so-called "shared values," such as liberalism, social-democracy, Judeo-Christian heritage, and the pioneering experiences of settler-colonial nations, to which scholars of U.S.–Israel relations traditionally point.¹⁴ While critics have argued that "the Zionism of these [American] labor officials was closely linked to their support for U.S. imperialism, anticommunism," and considered Histadrut pawns in America's imperialist ventures, this article suggests that rather than only serving American or Israeli *foreign* policy interests, organized labor's support of Israel also served its own *domestic* ones.¹⁵

Although scholars of U.S.–Israel relations often invoke "shared values" as an explanation for what binds the two nations, they disagree as to what exactly those values are. Speaking at an AFL-CIO convention in San Francisco in 1959, Pinhas Lavon, Histadrut's influential secretary-general, observed that American labor's special relationship with Israel was built on principles of "faithfulness and freedom": "Faithfulness to the common principles of democracy" and to "the dignity of the worker as the backbone of the nations and as the bearer of full responsibility for its welfare." He stressed Israeli and American labor's shared destiny, explaining that "we are all ultimately in the same boat, and what happens to one affects deeply and intimately all of us."¹⁶ Lavon was right, but not merely in the inspirational manner he intended: unlike romanticized accounts of Israel as the "great democratic bastion," "workers' paradise," or David to the Arab Goliath that permeated the ranks of American labor, and more broadly, American society in those years, the United States and Israel were in the same boat also when it came to employing systematic violence against indigenous peoples, population expulsions, property expropriation, and economic exploitation associated with settler-colonial regimes. Recent scholarship has reconsidered the framework of U.S.–Israel ties through the paradigm of settler-colonialism, demanding a more skeptical view of the democratic values that connect the two countries. In doing so, it highlights the problematic role that organized labor in both countries played in facilitating these broader structures of oppression, violence, and exploitation.¹⁷ Since a

¹⁴On labor and the Cold War, see Anthony Carew, *American Labour's Cold War Abroad* (Edmonton, Canada, 2018); Robert Anthony Wise Jr. and Geert van Goethem, eds., *American Labor's Global Ambassadors* (New York, 2013); and Kim Scipes, *AFL-CIO's Secret War against Developing Country Workers: Solidarity of Sabotage?* (Lanham, MD, 2011). On labor's anti-imperial legacy, see John Bennett Sears, "Peace Work: The Antiwar Tradition in American Labor from the Cold War to the Iraq War," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 4 (Sept. 2010): 699–720.

¹⁵Michael Letwin, Suzanne Adely, and Jaime Veve, "Labor for Palestine: Challenging US Labor Zionism," *American Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (Dec. 2015): 1048.

¹⁶Pinhas Lavon, Address at the AFL-CIO Convention, Sept. 21, 1959, folder IV-219A-1-48, Pinhas Lavon Institute for Labor Movement Research [hereafter Lavon Institute], Tel Aviv, Israel.

¹⁷On settler-colonialism and Israel/Palestine, see Rachel Busbridge, "Israel-Palestine and the Settler Colonial 'Turn': From Interpretation to Decolonization," *Theory, Culture & Society* 35, no. 1 (2018): 91–115; David Lloyd, "Settler Colonialism and the State of Exception: The Example of Palestine/Israel," *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 59–80; and Patrick Wolfe, "New Jews for Old: Settler State Formation and the Impossibility of Zionism: In Memory of Edward W. Said," *Arena Journal* 37/38 (2012): 285–321. For a comparison with the United States, see David Lloyd and Laura Pulido, "In the Long Shadow of the Settler: On Israeli and US Colonialisms," *American Quarterly* 62, no. 4 (2010): 795–809.

key stage in settler-colonialism is assertion of control over resources and labor and the subordination of indigenous populations to settlers' political and economic regimes, Histadrut's ambivalent role in helping carry out some of these actions cannot be overlooked. Demonstrating how this has been expunged from the AFL-CIO's mythologized record of Israel is also a goal of this article.

A few clarifications and qualifications are in order. First, my focus is primarily the AFL-CIO (rather than its affiliated unions) and leading non-Jewish officials like its president George Meany and vice president Walter Reuther. This does not imply that they had a unified stance. On the contrary, Meany and Reuther differed, sometimes bitterly, on many issues, to the effect that such mounting disagreements eventually drove Reuther's United Auto Workers (UAW) to split from the AFL in 1968.¹⁸ But given the host of contentious issues dividing them, Israel, ironically, remained a rare popular cause around which they could rally and cooperate. Second, while the AFL-CIO represented the largest and most powerful union bloc in America, other unions, like the Detroit-based League of Revolutionary Black Workers and Arab American labor activists, remained highly critical of Israel.¹⁹ Third, I have chosen to mostly focus on a limited time frame during Eisenhower's first term, considered the nadir of U.S.–Israel relations, which witnessed the AFL-CIO merger (1955) and the formation of a single, uniform labor front on behalf of Israel.²⁰ Given Eisenhower's disavowal of Jewish political support (he went so far as to pledge on the eve of the 1956 elections that “We would handle our affairs exactly as though we didn't have a Jew in America”), the role of the AFL-CIO as an alternative source of pro-Israel advocacy makes a study of this crucial period especially fecund.²¹ Later developments, important as they may be, remain beyond the scope of this study. Finally, this article does not imply that Jewish organizations and their Christian Zionist allies were not the central force behind the pro-Israel lobby—they usually were. Rather, it seeks to highlight how, at certain moments and under certain conditions, the advocacy of organized labor was an important supplement that had considerable, albeit forgotten, influence in mobilizing popular support for the special relationship in its early years.

Part I: Present at Creation

Long before AIPAC and other pro-Israel Jewish organizations refined and institutionalized their lobbying operations, organized labor already had an influential voice in American politics. Walter Hixson has shown that as early as the late 1940s, immediately following the founding of Israel, Jewish-American lobbying groups committed to becoming “Israel's Armor.”²² Yet despite their vigorous advocacy, organizations like AIPAC (and its previous manifestations) remained in their early years, in the words of another scholar, “a single, small, and weak organization, with minimal support among American Jews, let alone from American policy makers.”²³ Other Jewish organizations, like the influential AJC, had yet to commit to the Zionist cause.²⁴ The AFL-CIO, on the other hand, was at the apex of its power during the 1950s: at a time when one out of four workers in non-agricultural employment was unionized and with 15 million members, the AFL-CIO's membership was nearly three times that of the entire

¹⁸Kevin Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism 1945–1968* (Ithaca, 1995), chs 9–10.

¹⁹See Letwin et al., “Labor for Palestine”; and Pamela Pennock, *The Rise of the Arab American Left: Activists, Allies, and Their Fight against Imperialism and Racism, 1960s–1980s* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012), ch 6.

²⁰The story of organized labor's relationship with Israel prior to 1948 and in its immediate aftermath has been told elsewhere. See Howard, *Sewing the Fabric of Statehood*.

²¹Yagil Henkin, *The 1956 Suez War and the New World Order in the Middle East: Exodus in Reverse* (Lanham, MD, 2015), 225.

²²Hixson, *Israel's Armor*. See also Doreen Bierbrier, “The American Zionist Emergency Council: An Analysis of a Pressure Group,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (Sept. 1970): 82–105.

²³Waxman, “Pro-Israel Lobby,” 82.

²⁴Ganin, *Uneasy Relationship*, ch 5.

Jewish population in the United States and was far more widely spread.²⁵ Its political influence was accordingly broad and felt at the national, state, and local levels. “The AFL-CIO is often called the ‘people’s lobby’ and I believe that is true,” Meany declared, calling the federation “the single most effective political organization in this country.”²⁶ Looking at the AFL-CIO’s pivotal role in elections, especially through fundraising and its Committee on Political Education (COPE), scholars of postwar politics have concluded that “labor is the best organized, best-funded lobbying machine on Capitol Hill.”²⁷ This was true both in organizational terms and through extensive networks of interpersonal relations cultivated by Meany, Reuther, and other union leaders with policy makers in Washington. “For thirty-five years, from the end of World War II through the 1970s, the labor movement had occupied a preeminent place in national politics, providing one of the most important voices within the liberal New Deal order that dominated national discourse,” historian Kevin Boyle opines. “Union leaders enjoyed easy access to the White House and Capitol Hill, union activists filled Democratic Party councils, and union dollars financed political campaigns and legislative lobbying efforts.”²⁸ While the AFL-CIO’s impact was predominantly felt within the Democratic Party, Republicans also understood, as even Richard Nixon conceded, “No program works without labor cooperation.”²⁹

It was amid this favorable political climate that the AFL-CIO established its adamant political support of Israel. Since both the AFL and CIO staunchly supported the creation of a Jewish state prior to 1948, it is not surprising that, after merging in 1955, a strong pro-Israel stance remained a staple of the federation’s foreign policy. Frequent fundraising drives, philanthropic campaigns, and investments in Israel and in Histadrut’s business ventures and infrastructure (both directly and through purchase of Israel Bonds) were notable ways that organized labor helped the burgeoning state in its early years. It founded hospitals, schools, community centers, factories, and athletic stadiums across Israel, stamping the physical landscape with its legacy: there was a stadium in Nazareth named after Meany, a street in Holon and an endowed chair at the Weizmann Institute of Science named after Reuther, a hospital in Beer-Sheba named after Dubinsky, a community center in Eilat honoring CIO president Philip Murray, and an orphanage near Jerusalem founded by the teamster boss Jimmy Hoffa.³⁰

But philanthropy was only the tip of the iceberg. From its beginnings, the AFL-CIO actively lobbied the White House and Congress on behalf of Israel’s strategic needs. Scholars of U.S.–Israel relations debate whether realism (“hard factors”) or idealism (“soft factors”) drive support for Israel.³¹ The AFL-CIO’s lobbying efforts offer a more nuanced explanation that demonstrates the interconnectedness of both; in making the case for supporting Israel, it often pointed to America’s strategic needs to contain Soviet encroachments in the Middle East. Yet to justify Israel’s strategic value as a dependable ally, the federation also pointed time and again to Israel’s democratic norms and institutions rather than its (still limited) military capacities as a major selling point. A short time before the AFL-CIO merger, Reuther called Israel “this great democratic bastion of the Middle East” and warned the Eisenhower administration from arming its enemies. “To supply arms to Israel’s enemies in

²⁵Harry Cohany, “Membership of American Trade Unions,” *Monthly Labor Review* 84, no. 12 (Dec. 1961): 1299–308; Alvin Chenkin, “Jewish Population of the United States, 1960,” *American Jewish Year Book* no. 62 (1961): 53–63.

²⁶Harry Holloway, “Interest Groups in the Postpartisan Era: The Political Machine of the AFL-CIO,” *Political Science Quarterly* 94, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 118–119.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 127, 130.

²⁸Boyle, *UAW*, 1.

²⁹Jake Rosenfeld, *What Unions No Longer Do* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 2.

³⁰For an overview, see Howard, *Sewing the Fabric of Statehood*, 104–14; “Hoffa Home for Israeli Children,” *The Teamster* (Sept. 1956), 31.

³¹Bar Siman-Tov, “The Special Relationship?”

the face of their declared objective of wiping her from the face of the earth, is to seriously weaken the cause of democracy in the Middle East,” a CIO resolution declared.³² This complementary but dual realist–idealist approach would become rooted in the AFL-CIO’s Israel policy for decades to come.

Already in its inaugural convention in New York City in 1955, the AFL-CIO’s founding resolutions echoed the three most urgent goals of Israeli foreign policy at the time:³³ guaranteeing its territorial integrity by urging the United States and its allies to reaffirm the 1950 Tripartite Declaration, enabling Israel “to obtain arms and all other means necessary for the maintenance of its territorial integrity,” and establishing a mutual security pact with the United States.³⁴ Framing Israel as a reliable strategic ally for containing Soviet communism and a lone democratic bastion in a volatile authoritarian region, the AFL-CIO called on the administration to sign “a mutual assistance pact with Israel which might serve as a model for similar agreements between the U.S. and the Arab countries.”³⁵ The AFL-CIO’s early embrace of Israel and concern for its national security were all the more important during this period of tense relations. Although historian David Tal recently demonstrated a surprising continuity, in substance if not style, between Eisenhower and Truman administration policies toward Israel, Eisenhower did consciously seek to distance himself from the vocal support his predecessor offered and promised a more “balanced” approach, declaring in 1954 that “we should continue our present policy of impartiality and should not be deterred by political pressures which might generate in connection with the forthcoming elections.”³⁶ Eisenhower’s first term is still considered a low point in U.S.–Israel relations that included temporary suspension of aid to Israel due to the Jordan River crisis, its reprisal raids, attempts to extract territorial concessions from Israel and a right of return for Palestinian refugees under the Alpha Plan, and the threat of sanctions in the wake of the Sinai War.³⁷ Even if the business-friendly Eisenhower and Secretary of State John F. Dulles were no allies of labor, the AFL-CIO appears to have retained more public influence under the administration than “the Jewish nuisance factor” (i.e., pro-Israel Jewish groups), which, in the words of Natan Aridan, “Dulles was determined to neutralize.”³⁸

While the United States pursued rapprochement with Nasser and Arab regimes, arguably at Israel’s expense, because of the strategic necessity to prevent Soviet encroachments into the energy-rich region, the AFL-CIO consistently made the opposite point: that only a strong and secure Israel was a reliable ally that could help fend off communist penetration and contain the destabilizing effects of Arab nationalism. In making the case for unequivocal support of Israel, the AFL-CIO made it difficult for observers to determine where Israeli public diplomacy (officially called *Hasbara*) ended and its own policy began. Its reactions to the initial crises between Israel and the Eisenhower administration serve to demonstrate the rather *uncritical* attitude it exhibited from its inception and a tendency, at times, to echo verbatim, official Israeli policy. After Israel began construction in September 1953 on a project to divert the waters of the Jordan River in the demilitarized zone on its border with Syria, in what was

³²“Arming Arabs Hit by CIO as a Threat to Israel” and “Israel Praised by Reuther as ‘Great Democratic Bastion,’” *CIO News*, Dec. 12, 1954, 12, <https://archive.org/details/mdu-labor-057501/page/n599/mode/2up?q=israel+border+>.

³³On Israel’s strategic dilemma, see Avi Shlaim, “Israel between East and West, 1948–1956,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 36, no. 4 (Nov. 2004): 657–73.

³⁴“Texts of Key AFL-CIO Resolutions,” *AFL-CIO News*, Dec. 17, 1955, 9, https://archive.org/details/sim_afl-cio-afl-cio-news_1955-12-17_1_2/page/9/mode/2up?q=israel.

³⁵“Peace, Freedom, Security, Foreign Policy Goals,” *AFL-CIO News*, Dec. 10, 1955, 5, https://archive.org/details/sim_afl-cio-afl-cio-news_1955-12-10_1_1/page/n3/mode/2up?q=israel.

³⁶David Tal, “United States—Israel Relations (1953–1957) Revisited,” *Israel Studies* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 24–46; Hixson, *Israel’s Armor*, 100.

³⁷For an overview of tensions, see Peter Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East: U.S. Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1945–1961* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005), chs 11–16.

³⁸Natan Aridan, *Advocating for Israel* (Lanham, MD, 2017), 114.

deemed a violation of the armistice agreements, the United Nations (UN) Security Council called on it to halt, while the administration went a step further and suspended \$26 million in much needed aid.³⁹ A few weeks later, the Israeli military, as part of its reprisal operations, raided the Jordanian-controlled West Bank village of Qibya in retaliation for a Palestinian Fedayeen attack that killed an Israeli woman and her two children. By one account, the deadly raid, blamed by Israelis on “Arab provocation,” demolished forty-five homes, killing sixty-nine people, many of them women and children.⁴⁰ The condemnations were nearly universal. In addition to another UN Security Council resolution that “strongly censured” Israel for violating the armistice that was advanced by an outraged Dulles, the U.S. embassy counselor in Israel, Francis Russell, sharply criticized the raid, telling Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett, it “created revulsion among American people [and] was [a] violation of every moral standard.”⁴¹ Similar disapprobation was voiced after Israel’s reprisal raids against Egypt in Gaza City and Syria in Lake Kinneret in 1955. In response to the former, Dulles reprimanded Sharett: Israel “works clearly and progressively against her own interests,” he said, warning Israel against the “mistaken belief that she can shoot her way ... into a peace treaty with her neighbors.”⁴²

In the AFL-CIO’s initial response to escalating violence, we can locate the imaginary construct of Israel as, in the words of Amy Kaplan, an “invincible victim.”⁴³ Despite its growing military strength, capability, and prowess demonstrated by the deadly toll that its reprisal raids took, Israel was still cast by the AFL-CIO as a perpetual underdog and was rarely, if ever, criticized, even when it blatantly transgressed international law or human rights.⁴⁴ Unlike the Eisenhower administration, which took great pains to retain what it considered to be a policy of “true impartiality,” American labor viewed the deteriorating situation differently. In reaction to Dulles’s decision to suspend aid during the Jordan River crisis, the CIO’s executive committee issued a strong condemnation of *the administration*, rather than of Israel itself. Calling it “shockingly strong action” and “an affront ... to the cause of world democracy,” the CIO demanded “that our government take steps not to penalize the government of Israel, but to develop a constructive program for Arabs and Jews alike.” The CIO further warned that such policies “will lead to a strengthening of the arrogance and belligerence of the reactionary undemocratic leaders of those Arab nations—and, consequently, will tend to encourage them to further aggression against Israel.”⁴⁵

Their response to the reprisal raids was similar. Unlike some of the mainstream Jewish-American organizations that voiced concern and criticized what they considered a disproportionate use of force, the record does not indicate similar outcry among labor officials over the deadly raids in Qibya and Gaza City.⁴⁶ Placing blame on “marauders” for provoking such acts, organized labor presented Israeli raids as acts of self-defense.⁴⁷ “I do not know what all the

³⁹Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East*, 170–4; United Nations Security Council Resolution no. 100, Oct. 27, 1953, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/112072?ln=en>.

⁴⁰Uri Ben-Eliezer, *War Over Peace: One Hundred Years of Israel’s Militaristic Nationalism*, trans. Shaul Vardi (Oakland, CA, 2019), 92–3. On Israel’s reaction, see “Ben Gurion Blames Qibya Provocation on ‘Arab States’ War Policy,” *JTA*, Oct. 21, 1953, <https://www.jta.org/archive/ben-gurion-blames-qibya-provocation-on-arab-states-war-policy>.

⁴¹Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East*, 161; United Nations Security Council Resolution no. 101, Nov. 24, 1953, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/112073?ln=en>.

⁴²Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East*, 164; United Nations Security Council Resolution no. 106, Mar. 29, 1955, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/112079?ln=en>.

⁴³Kaplan, *Our American Israel*, ch 3.

⁴⁴Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East*, 189; Ben-Eliezer, *War Over Peace*, ch 4.

⁴⁵“Israel Rapped by CIO,” *CIO News*, Nov. 2, 1953, 3, <https://archive.org/details/mdu-labor-057500/page/n507/mode/2up?q=israel+reprisal+raid>.

⁴⁶For instance, see Ganin, *Uneasy Relationship*, 191; and Aridan, *Advocating for Israel*, 93.

⁴⁷Frank Winn, “CIO, Histadrut Dedicate Murray Memorial,” *CIO News*, Sept. 12, 1955, 3, <https://archive.org/details/mdu-labor-057502/page/n405/mode/2up?q=gaza>.

shouting and excitement was about, but the enemies of Israel, striving to scuttle and throttle that infant state and that greatest stronghold of democracy in the Middle East, have successfully created an instrument that might result, in a short time, in a cruel and bloody attack against the population of this state,” explained Michael Quill, president of the Transport Workers Union, who had recently returned from Israel, to a CIO convention. “We saw the young men and women in the settlements using schedules, having to go out night and day to protect those borders. They came back day after day, bringing their dead and wounded as a result of the attacks and raids of the marauders from the Jordan side.” Quill was enraged at Dulles for his criticism of the Qibya raid. “For the American government to chime in and line up in the United Nations on the side of Jordan, and issue a condemnation resolution against the people of Israel is something that labor cannot take sitting down,” he said.⁴⁸ CIO secretary-treasurer, James Carey, added:

There is a large element of justice missing from the UN’s censure of Israel, just as there was a large element of justice missing in the action of Sec. of State Dulles last month when he suddenly suspended the American grant of \$60 million in aid to Israel. ... We do not contend that two wrongs can make a right—if indeed two wrongs were involved here—but we do contend that justice can and should be fair and equal.⁴⁹

The AFL-CIO’s binary understanding of the conflict in terms of a Cold War dichotomy helps explain its reaction to the 1955 Czechoslovakia–Egypt arms deal, which threatened to overturn the balance of power in the region. Rather than contemplate the domestic political pressures Nasser faced, exacerbated by Israel’s deadly raid in Gaza City in February 1955, American labor leaders considered the dramatic arms deal, which aimed to furnish the Egyptian army with a wide range of modern Soviet armaments, as proof of Nasser’s Soviet tilt and aggressive intentions.⁵⁰ Meany protested the deal, calling it a “most dangerous threat to world peace and freedom.”⁵¹ From the AFL-CIO’s perspective, “This deterioration is the result of the Soviet imperialist drive to exploit Arab–Israel friction and of the Communist expansionist policy in the Middle East.”⁵² This led the federation to demand that the administration arm Israel. Meany’s four-point program for “blocking Soviet–Russia’s war-mongering,” published in March 1956 on the front page of the AFL-CIO’s flagship publication, *AFL-CIO News*, insisted that “only if Israel is equipped to defend herself effectively can the forces of aggression arrayed against her be deterred.” Unless the “free world” acted immediately, Meany warned, it “may be embroiled in another Korea.”⁵³ In August 1956, as tensions mounted after Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal Company and closed the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping, Meany personally sent Dulles a resolution that put the onus on Moscow for “fanning the flames of war throughout the Arab world,” warned against appeasement, and called on the United States to “assure uninterrupted free navigation in the canal for all nations.”⁵⁴

⁴⁸*Proceedings of the CIO’s Fifteenth Constitutional Convention*, Cleveland, OH, Nov. 16–20, 1953, 524, https://archive.org/details/sim_proceedings-congress-of-industrial-organizations_1953/mode/2up?q=israel.

⁴⁹“Carey Criticizes Dulles, UN for Censure of Israel,” *CIO News*, Dec. 7, 1953, 7, <https://archive.org/details/mdu-labor-057500/page/n571/mode/2up?q=israel+reprisal+raid>.

⁵⁰Ben-Eliezer, *War Over Peace*, 96. On the connection between Israeli raids and Nasser’s Soviet tilt, see Hixson, *Israel’s Armor*, 103; and Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East*, ch 14.

⁵¹“Soviet Arms Aid to Egypt Protested,” *CIO News*, Nov. 21, 1955, 5, <https://archive.org/details/mdu-labor-057502/page/n519/mode/2up?q=israel+>; “Reuther Warns of Arms Race in the Middle East,” *CIO News*, Oct. 10, 1955, 2, <https://archive.org/details/mdu-labor-057502/page/n449/mode/2up?q=israel>.

⁵²“Council Recommends Middle East Action,” *AFL-CIO News*, Feb. 18, 1956, 14, https://archive.org/details/sim_afl-cio-afl-cio-news_1956-02-18_1_11/page/n13/mode/2up?q=israel.

⁵³“Labor Asks U.S. Arms for Israel,” *AFL-CIO News*, Mar. 17, 1956, 1, 15, https://archive.org/details/sim_afl-cio-afl-cio-news_1956-03-17_1_15/page/n3/mode/2up?q=israel.

⁵⁴George Meany to John F. Dulles, Aug. 30, 1956 and AFL-CIO Statement, “Crisis in the Suez,” Aug. 28, 1956, folder 415/1, Israel State Archives, Jerusalem [hereafter ISA]. All ISA files cited are from the foreign ministry files.

In the AFL-CIO party platform statement submitted to the Democratic and Republican Party conventions that summer, Meany noted that “the free world must thwart this immediate threat to peace by supplying Israel at once with the defensive weapons it needs.”⁵⁵ This demand found its way that year into both the Democratic Party and, in a more limited manner, the Republican Party platforms.⁵⁶ While it is difficult to ascertain any direct causal link between the federation’s support and subsequent government policy, Meany seems to have insinuated that his words mattered. “It should be pointed out at the outset that the AFL-CIO today is the largest single organization in the United States,” he wrote in the press release with his platform recommendations. “It represents more than 15 million American working men and women,” he warned, before adding “we earnestly urge you to say what you mean and to mean what you say. For we, and millions of other Americans will be basing our personal decision as voters equally upon the platform and the candidates and the record in this year’s national election.”⁵⁷ Members of Congress listened: advocating for the sale of weapons to Israel, Senator Herbert Lehman (D-NY) read into the Congressional Record Meany’s appeal to arm Israel by reminding his colleagues that, “These remarks, by the spokesman for 16 million Americans, are worthy of the most careful consideration by the Congress and by the State Department.”⁵⁸

The federation’s response, or lack thereof, to the Palestinian refugee problem was telling of its broader approach. Despite paying what appears to have amounted to lip service when addressing what it referred to as “the plight of the Arab refugees,” it is not clear the extent to which American labor officials sought to understand why the plight came about in the first place.⁵⁹ When one considers how passionately the AFL-CIO advocated for universal refugee rights as a leading liberal humanitarian cause, endorsing UN involvement and prompting the Eisenhower administration into action, the surprisingly restrained manner in which it addressed the Palestinian issue was notable.⁶⁰ Even after Meany was appointed in 1956 to the State Department’s public advisory committee for the refugee relief program, the federation’s commitment to helping refugees was mostly focused on those fleeing communist countries—a phenomenon that intensified considerably after the Soviet invasion of Hungary that year, which sparked a formidable campaign on behalf of Hungarian refugees.⁶¹ The AFL-CIO further insisted the administration express an “unequivocal rejection of every form of colonialism,” here criticizing French treatment of Algerian refugees who had fled to Morocco.⁶² But when the administration tried to advance a regional political solution that would facilitate resettlement of most of the 1948 Palestinian refugees in neighboring Arab states (rather than repatriate them in Israel, to which Israel was adamantly opposed), the AFL-CIO was opaque on the issue and seldom held Israel to the same standards that it did other colonial powers. While it urged the administration to “take a lead in the United Nations for bringing about a peace treaty ... that would end border

⁵⁵Natan Bar Yaacov (NBY) to Israel Foreign Ministry (IFM), Excerpts from Meany’s Platform Statement, Aug. 10, 1956, folder 415/1, ISA.

⁵⁶1956 Democratic Party Platform, Aug. 13, 1956, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/1956-democratic-party-platform>; Republican Party Platform of 1956, Aug. 20, 1956, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/republican-party-platform-1956>.

⁵⁷AFL-CIO News Release, Aug. 10, 1956, folder 415/3, ISA.

⁵⁸Herbert Lehman, “Address by George Meany on Israel Independence Day,” *Congressional Record—Senate*, 84th Cong., 2nd sess., Apr. 19, 1956, 6605.

⁵⁹“Texts of Key AFL-CIO Resolutions,” 9.

⁶⁰For instance, see “Labor Makes Donation to UN Refugee Fund,” *AFL-CIO News*, May 19, 1956, 14, https://archive.org/details/sim_afl-cio-afl-cio-news_1956-05-19_1_24/page/n13/mode/2up; and “UN Stirred to Action on Refugees,” *AFL-CIO News*, Nov. 16, 1957, 1, 11, https://archive.org/details/sim_afl-cio-afl-cio-news_1957-11-16_2_46/mode/2up.

⁶¹“Admit More Hungarians, Asks Meany,” *AFL-CIO News*, Dec. 15, 1956, 1, https://archive.org/details/sim_afl-cio-afl-cio-news_1956-12-15_1_54.

⁶²“Council Hits Communism, Colonialism,” *AFL-CIO News*, Feb. 9, 1957, 14, https://archive.org/details/sim_afl-cio-afl-cio-news_1957-02-09_2_6/page/n13/mode/2up; “UN Stirred to Action on Refugees,” 11.

disputes and assure humane and fair treatment for Arab refugees,” it effectively curtailed the range of possibilities for addressing the refugee problem by emphasizing that “the UN cannot turn back the clock to the situation before the Arab-Israeli conflict.”⁶³

When war broke out in October 1956, after Israel allied itself with France and Britain and conquered the Sinai Peninsula, the AFL-CIO stood firmly by Israel’s side, even in the face of sweeping international condemnations, including from the Eisenhower administration. In the immediate aftermath of Israel’s invasion, organized labor’s reaction was ambivalent. Israeli diplomats reported that on one hand there was “understanding” and “appreciation” among the labor leadership (“That is the way to handle dictators,” one official quoted Meany’s initial reaction), while on the other hand, Israel’s cooperation with the colonial powers caused alarm that they were becoming the “imperialists’ cat’s-paw.”⁶⁴ When Israel’s labor attaché to the United States, Natan Bar-Yaacov, met with Meany following the cease fire in an attempt to assuage concerns regarding Israel’s collaboration with the colonial powers, he requested the AFL-CIO issue a statement favorable to Israel. But as his notes reveal, Meany took a different stand, preferring instead that for the time being, no official response would be preferable for two reasons: it would allow the federation to refrain from having to criticize Israel (“even indirectly,” through its association with Britain and France), and it would unnecessarily draw attention away from the Soviet invasion of Hungary.⁶⁵

Within weeks, the AFL-CIO silence was broken as it returned to supporting Israel unequivocally. “While the invasion of Egypt was in violation of the UN Charter, the executive committee of the AFL-CIO recognizes that it was a direct consequence of years of provocation on the part of Egypt,” a cautious news release stated in early December. Carefully distinguishing Israel’s actions from “Soviet butchery in Hungary” and downplaying Israeli military aggression in Sinai, it blamed “Soviet intrigue” and arming of the Arabs, Fedayeen raids, “Nasser’s arbitrary and unilateral” actions, and the blockading of Israeli shipping “in violation of all UN decisions” for instigating the war. The statement called on the United Nations to occupy the territories being evacuated, pursue a peace treaty between the warring states, and ensure free shipping for all nations in the Gulf of Aqaba.⁶⁶ In a taped address he sent in to Histadrut’s convention a few days later, Meany reaffirmed American labor’s solidarity and reiterated support for a mutual defense pact with Israel, calling on the administration to extend the recently secured Baghdad Pact to Israel. He said, “We are with you in unbreakable determination to halt the tides of communist subversion,” he promised his Israeli colleagues. “Rest assured that you are not alone.”⁶⁷ So committed had Meany appeared that week to advocating on Israel’s behalf (he also participated in a fundraising dinner *and* hosted a luncheon for Israeli Foreign Minister Golda Meir) that one Israeli diplomat called it Meany’s “Israel week” (Figure 1).⁶⁸

During the diplomatic crisis that ensued, culminating in the threat of international sanctions if Israel did not withdraw from the conquered territories, the AFL-CIO bolstered its support. In December it held a testimonial dinner for David McDonald, president of the United Steel Workers, to raise money for Israel: with admissions set at a \$1,000 Israel bond, more than \$1 million dollars were netted.⁶⁹ When Eisenhower committed a few weeks later to defending

⁶³“Council Hits Communism, Colonialism.” On Eisenhower’s approach, see Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East*, 176–8; and Deborah Gerner, “Missed Opportunities and Roads not Taken: The Eisenhower Administration and the Palestinians,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 1/2 (Winter/Spring 1990): 67–100.

⁶⁴NBY to IFM, Memo on the Reactions in the American Labor Movement [Hebrew], Nov. 2, 1956, folder 415/1, ISA. All translations below are by the author.

⁶⁵NBY to IFM, Memo on Meeting with George Meany [Hebrew], Nov. 9, 1956, folder 415/1, ISA.

⁶⁶AFL-CIO News Release, Dec. 1, 1956, folder 415/3, ISA.

⁶⁷George Meany Address to Histadrut’s Convention, Dec. 5, 1956, folder 415/1, ISA.

⁶⁸NBY to IFM, Memo on Developments in the Labor Movement [Hebrew], Dec. 7, 1956, folder 415/1, ISA.

⁶⁹“McDonald Dinner Nets \$1 Million for Israel,” *AFL-CIO News*, Dec. 3, 1956, 12, <https://archive.org/details/mdu-labor-026261/page/n775/mode/2up?q=golda+meir>.



Figure 1. Golda Meir and Meany seen together at one of their many fundraising events. Courtesy of AFL-CIO Still Images, Photographic Print Collection, University of Maryland Libraries.

any country in the Middle East resisting communist aggression, Meany was quick to back him—but demanded security guarantees for Israel. “It is, therefore, imperative that the Eisenhower Doctrine should include a clear-cut affirmation that the United States considers Israel an indispensable force for peace, freedom and social progress in the Middle East and would not permit any attempt to destroy Israel as an independent nation,” the AFL-CIO announced.⁷⁰ After Israel was given an ultimatum to withdraw or face sanctions, another front-page headline in the *AFL-CIO News* declared: “Meany Asks Guarantees for Israel.”⁷¹ Reporting at length on Meany’s remarks at a ceremonial banquet in New York, during which he received the Histadrut’s prestigious Humanitarian award, the article called on the United States to guarantee Israel’s security and reframed Israel as the victim rather than the aggressor. “Was there any doubt that the Israelis were forced to take up arms in protection against ‘Fedayeen’ raiders and against the blocking of Israeli shipping in the Gulf of Aqaba in the Suez Canal?” Meany asked, voicing strong opposition to imposing sanctions on Israel, which, in his words, “seeks only an undisturbed opportunity to build a better life for its people.”⁷²

Conveying solidarity directly through UAW channels, Walter Reuther sent Lavon a personal cable in which he blamed Egypt for the outbreak of hostilities and promised to “use all our influence” to persuade the administration to pursue direct negotiations. “The growing

⁷⁰AFL-CIO Executive Council Resolution on the Middle East, Jan. 31, 1957, folder 415/3, ISA.

⁷¹“Meany Asks Guarantees for Israel,” *AFL-CIO News*, Mar. 2, 1957, 1, 11, <https://archive.org/details/mdu-labor-026262/page/n115/mode/2up?q=israel+histadrut>.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 11.

belligerence and increased terroristic activities against Israel by Dictator Nasser's Fedayeen raiders, encouraged by Soviet scheming and arms, finally made defensive military action on the part of your nation inevitable," Reuther wrote him.⁷³ He was not alone: during the diplomatic crisis, many unions within the AFL-CIO lobbied the administration and Congress independently on behalf of what they considered Israel's right to self-defense.⁷⁴ After the 1,250,000-member United Steelworkers passed a resolution a year later strongly endorsing Israel's security demands, the Jewish Labor Committee wrote to Israel's ambassador in the United States, Abba Eban, to suggest that this was "especially significant" because it "shows grassroots support," and stressed that "this is not one of the unions generally considered a 'Jewish' union."⁷⁵ Moshe Bar-Tal, Histadrut's representative in the United States, summed up the diverging attitudes that American workers and policy makers harbored toward Israel during the Sinai crisis: "The American labor movement continues to be loyal to us, and I wish we could say the same thing about the U.S. government."⁷⁶

Personal Relationships and the Special Relationship

The frequent personal interactions and close friendships that developed between Israeli diplomats and AFL-CIO officials raise a delicate question regarding boundaries: how coordinated was organized labor's pro-Israel advocacy? Unlike Israeli diplomats' dealings with Jewish-American organizations, which saw them regularly consult with, coordinate, and even direct the agencies' political maneuvers, their relationship with the AFL-CIO was more circumspect.⁷⁷ Closely monitoring the internal politics within the American labor movement and acutely aware of the challenges it was facing at home, Israeli diplomats regularly produced lengthy reports about the AFL-CIO and appeared to be informed of every minor development within its ranks.⁷⁸ It was this knowledge that made them cognizant of the potential roadblocks to the relationship and led them to pursue a cautious approach. Although Meany, described by his Israeli counterpart Histadrut chief Yitzhak Ben-Aharon, as "a household word in Israel," was well-known and much admired by Israelis, Israeli labor representatives in the United States recognized that he was "very sensitive to outside pressure" and approached him with trepidation and respect.⁷⁹ Accordingly, they sought to avoid the appearance of overconfidence in their dealings with American labor officials, going so far as to caution Israeli diplomats from meddling in the federation's internal affairs, "lest we lose the support of the entire movement toward Israel and its problems."⁸⁰ Ronnie Fraser has highlighted the diplomatic role that Histadrut's foreign representatives played, often serving as an extension of the official state apparatus. His study of Histadrut's relations with the British Trade Union Congress (TUC) revealed a systematic cultivation of close interpersonal ties and a strategy of inviting politicians and union

⁷³Walter Reuther to Pinhas Lavon, Nov. 29, 1956, folder 415/1, ISA. For a critical account of Israel's role, see Ben-Eliezer, *War Over Peace*, 103–6.

⁷⁴See also Transport Workers Union, Resolution on Israel, Nov. 14–16, 1956, folder 415/1, ISA; Wisconsin State Industrial Union Council to John F. Dulles, Feb. 11, 1957, folder 415/1, ISA; John F. Kennedy to Gregory Bardacke, Mar. 1, 1957, folder 415/1, ISA; Wayne Morse to Gregory Bardacke, Feb. 18, 1957, folder 415/1, ISA; Jack Jorgensen to Hubert Humphrey, Jan. 13, 1957, folder 415/1, ISA.

⁷⁵United Steelworkers, Resolution on Foreign Policy, Ninth Constitutional Convention, Sept. 1958, folder 414/16, ISA; Jacob Pat to Abba Eban, Oct. 24, 1958, folder 414/16, ISA.

⁷⁶Moshe Bar-Tal to S. Levenberg [Hebrew], Jan. 6, 1957, folder III-70-73-1-93, Lavon Institute.

⁷⁷Hixson, *Israel's Armor*, chs 3–4; Aridan, *Advocating for Israel*, 102, 119, 136–57.

⁷⁸For instance, see Moshe Bar-Tal, Report no. 28 [Hebrew], Jan. 14, 1955, folder 415/1, ISA; and NBY, Memo on Developments in the American Labor Movement [Hebrew], Dec. 7, 1956, folder 415/1, ISA.

⁷⁹Bar-Tal, Report no. 28; *Proceedings of the Ninth Constitutional Convention of the AFL-CIO*, Nov. 18–22, 1971, 370, <https://archive.org/details/proceedingsexecu0009unse/page/n375/mode/2up?q=israel>.

⁸⁰NBY, Memo on American Labor's course of action in Asia and Africa [Hebrew], Nov. 29, 1957, folder 415/2, ISA.

officials to visit Israel, concluding that both movements “were dedicated supporters of their respective Socialist Governments who unashamedly used them to promote national interests.”⁸¹

A similar pattern played out in Histadrut’s relations with organized labor in the United States. It is evident that there was cooperation, even coordination, with Israeli officials in many areas. This included the sharing of sensitive information about the AFL-CIO’s activities in international labor forums and their confidential meetings with officials from the Arab world. After sending the foreign ministry confidential reports received from Victor Reuther (who was in charge of international affairs for the UAW) about meetings held with officials from Egypt, Tunisia, and Lebanon, Bar-Yaacov explicitly instructed colleagues not to reveal the source of his information.⁸² Irving Brown, AFL-CIO representative in Paris, not only promised that American labor officials would “do everything in their power” to prevent anti-Israel resolutions at an International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) conference in Casablanca, but immediately afterward shared with an Israeli colleague what he labeled a “strictly confidential report” about the proceedings.⁸³ Israeli ministers of labor and Histadrut’s secretary-generals were often invited to speak at AFL-CIO conventions, and the records indicate that senior AFL-CIO officials, like general-counsel Arthur Goldberg (prior to being appointed Secretary of Labor), Walter and his brother Victor Reuther helped lobby for, amend, and occasionally insert passages into AFL-CIO resolutions or appealed directly to senior U.S. government officials at the request of their Israeli associates.⁸⁴ Goldberg even received confidential materials from Israel’s embassy in Washington, DC, as part of its Hasbara campaign.⁸⁵ So supportive of (and compliant with) Israeli requests had AFL-CIO officials appeared that Israel’s labor attaché had to reprimand colleagues for complaining after they apparently did *not* get the attention or exact phrasing they sought at one of the federation’s conventions. “For some reason there exists an illusion among some of our people that the American labor movement will agree to and accept everything we request of it,” Bar-Yaacov wrote the foreign ministry. He cautioned, “The convention proved again that this assumption is false, and that if, indeed, there is support for us, we can preserve it only through constant work and lively relations with all elements within the movement.”⁸⁶

Despite the close relations, there were still occasional spats and notable disagreements, usually regarding Cold War dynamics and collaboration with unions from countries in the developing world affiliated with the Soviet bloc. After Eban, acting deputy prime minister, endorsed integrating the People’s Republic of China into the UN, he received a harsh rebuke from Jay Lovestone, head of the federation’s international affairs department, who suggested acerbically that Eban had “studied how to irritate friends and undermine friendships.” This resulted in Eban registering a complaint with Meany and Walter Reuther over such “discourteous” behavior.⁸⁷ Other moments of discord, usually mild in nature and limited in effect, occurred over Israeli involvement in international organizations like the International Labour Organization

⁸¹Ronnie Fraser, “The TUC and the Histadrut, 1945–1982: A Problematic Relationship” (PhD diss., Royal Holloway College, 2014), 24, https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/22728404/The_TUC_and_the_Histadrut_1945_1982_a_problematic_relationship_final.2.pdf.

⁸²NBY, Memo on Conversation with Victor Reuther [Hebrew], Aug. 1, 1956, folder 415/1, ISA.

⁸³Irving Brown to Ezra Hayut, May 10 and June 5, 1961, folder IV-219A-1-48, Lavon Institute.

⁸⁴See NBY to IFM [Hebrew], Sept. 13, 1956, folder 415/1, ISA; NBY, Memo on AFL-CIO Convention in Atlantic City [Hebrew], Dec. 16, 1957, folder 415/2, ISA; NBY to IFM, Memo on the Algerian Problem in the AFL-CIO Convention [Hebrew], Dec. 16, 1957, folder 415/2, ISA; NBY to Reuven Barkat [Hebrew], Jan. 6, 1958, folder 415/2, ISA; and NBY to IFM [Hebrew], Oct. 22, 1959, folder 414/16, ISA.

⁸⁵Embassy of Israel, Washington, DC, “Analysis of U.S. Editorial, Feature and Magazine Comment on Israel and Middle East,” Apr. 25–May 1, 1960, folder 1, box 184, part 1, Arthur Goldberg Papers (MSS65670), Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁸⁶NBY, Memo on AFL-CIO Convention in Atlantic City.

⁸⁷Jay Lovestone to Ben-Zion Ilan, May 26, 1964, folder 2054/1/4, ISA; Aba Eban to George Meany and Walter Reuther, June 12, 1964, folder 2054/1/4, ISA.

(ILO) and the ICFTU, where they cooperated with trade unions from communist countries to the chagrin of Meany and Lovestone, who fiercely opposed any collaboration with communists.⁸⁸

Israel's own leaders, many of them former Histadrut officials, cultivated close friendships with senior AFL-CIO figures like Meany, Reuther, and Goldberg, who all enjoyed the affectionate label "our close friend" in official Israeli records.⁸⁹ David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founding prime minister, hosted Meany and Reuther (separately) at his desert retreat in Sde Boker and described them in endearing terms. In a letter to Meany, Ben-Gurion thanked the AFL-CIO for its "loyal support" and "trusted friendship," and commended Meany that under his leadership "that friendship has grown steadily stronger."⁹⁰ Meany wrote back conveying gratitude for the "personal privilege" of meeting him and hailed "that magnificent progress that you and your courageous people are making."⁹¹ On the pages of *Davar*, Histadrut's popular daily newspaper that served as Israeli labor's mouthpiece, Meany was a familiar figure, whose nearly every word and action were regularly reported.⁹² Upon his visit to Israel in 1961, a flattering profile appeared under the headline "Leader, Fighter, Innovator," which hailed Meany as one of the most successful labor leaders in American history, portraying him as a staunch anticommunist and defender of civil rights.⁹³ For his eightieth birthday, *Davar* ran an article specifically wishing him good health, and after Meany passed away in 1980, his friend, Yeruham Meshel, who had served as secretary-general of Histadrut, described Meany in a moving eulogy as "one of the greatest and most dedicated friends" Israel ever had.⁹⁴

Reuther, too, was a household name in Israel. Described on the pages of *Davar* as an "old and loyal friend of Israel," he was celebrated for his advocacy on behalf of workers. Reuther's frequent visits to Israel were covered exhaustively by the press, with his itinerary reported on in a daily manner.⁹⁵ "The name of Walter Reuther has great significance to all labor movements in the free world," Ben-Gurion wrote to him in 1961. "For us in Israel, you have been a symbol of friendship, progress and understanding."⁹⁶ After Reuther's untimely death in a plane crash in 1970, *Davar* published a eulogy that stressed his commitment to civil rights and labor rights: "Reuther was an avowed friend of Israel and a friend who well understood the spirit of the Jewish nation and the character of our labor movement." It read, "With the death of Reuther, the global labor movement lost one of its greatest leaders, Israel lost a loyal friend, and American workers lost the leader with the most forward-looking vision they had."⁹⁷

During her tenure as foreign minister, Golda Meir's staff made the unusual request from Israel's labor attaché in the United States to be copied on his correspondences, explaining that she was "very interested" in the affairs of American labor.⁹⁸ Meir, who had grown up in

⁸⁸For instance, see NBY to Ezra Hayut [Hebrew], June 18, 1959, folder 414/16, ISA; and NBY to Ephraim Evron [Hebrew], Oct. 29, 1958, folder 414/16, ISA.

⁸⁹NBY to Shmuel Ben Zur [Hebrew], June 12, 1957, folder 415/2, ISA; Ben-Gurion to Walter Reuther, May 16, 1961, correspondence file, 119164, Ben-Gurion Archive, Sde Boker, Israel [hereafter BGA]; Golda Meir, *My Life* (Jerusalem, 1975), 330.

⁹⁰David Ben-Gurion to George Meany, May 9, 1961, correspondence file, 115170, BGA.

⁹¹Meany to Ben-Gurion, Sept. 17, 1961, BGA.

⁹²*Davar's* electronic archive locates hundreds of mentions of him, <objidref><https://www.nli.org.il/he/newspapers/?a=q&hs=1&r=1&results=1&txq=%D7%92%27%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%92%27+%D7%9E%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%99&dafyq=&datyq=&ssnip=img&oa=1&e=-----he-20-dav-61--img-txIN%7CtxTI-%D7%95%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%98%D7%A8+%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%AA%D7%A8-----1&req=&laq=&puq=dav>.

⁹³"George Meany—Leader, Fighter, Innovator," [Hebrew] *Davar*, Sept. 7, 1961, 11.

⁹⁴"To George Meany: Until 120," [Hebrew] *Davar*, Aug. 16, 1974, 11; Yeruham Meshel, "A Lover of Man, a Lover of Israel," [Hebrew] *Davar*, Jan. 25, 1980, 17.

⁹⁵"Walter Reuther Has Arrived," [Hebrew] *Davar*, Dec. 8, 1963, 2.

⁹⁶Ben-Gurion to Reuther, May 16, 1961.

⁹⁷Meir Bareli, "Walter Reuther—Builder of Auto Workers Union," [Hebrew] *Davar*, May 12, 1970, 10.

⁹⁸IFM to NBY, Feb. 25, 1958, folder 415/2, ISA.

the working-class immigrant neighborhoods of Milwaukee, and whose father had been a union carpenter there, remained committed to organized labor throughout her life, and her decades-long friendship with Meany helped anchor the AFL-CIO's support of Israel. As foreign minister, Meir nurtured a friendship with Meany rooted in what they perceived as shared goals, values, and mutual respect.⁹⁹ Once she became prime minister, their own special relationship bore diplomatic fruit: in October 1969, during Meir's first formal visit to the United States, she postponed her trip back home due to "an invitation I couldn't refuse" from "a dear old friend of mine."¹⁰⁰ Staying an extra day in the United States to appear at the AFL-CIO's convention in Atlantic City, Meir addressed more than 1,000 union delegates. "I have been looking for the Carpenter's sign. That is the one my father belonged to," she told the enthusiastic crowd, which, according to one witness, applauded her for fifteen minutes. "Talking to that immense audience of trade unionists," Meir recalled in her memoirs, while describing her exhausting multicity tour of the United States, "I felt for the first time since I had left Israel that I was really on home territory."¹⁰¹

Part II: "The Most Fabulous Labor Organization in the World"

While strategic Realpolitik calculations of Cold War containment remained a constant in the AFL-CIO's support of Israel, as did the increasingly romanticized "shared values" paradigm that envisioned Israel as a loyal, western-oriented, Judeo-Christian, progressive-democratic ally, this author wishes to shed light on an additional source of organized labor's support emanating from its internal need for legitimacy. A closer look at the discourse surrounding Israel within American labor in the context of its growing domestic challenges during this period reveals that Israel and Histadrut were often employed, directly and indirectly, as a foil for what was happening inside the United States by offering an alternative—and successful—model for social democracy, at a time when the AFL-CIO's aspirations for enhancing the American welfare state were fading. Amy Kaplan has argued that the mythologized version of Israel offered Americans an imaginary space onto which they could project their own anxieties, desires, and fantasies; given the host of domestic challenges it was facing, this outlet proved especially attractive for the American labor movement.¹⁰²

Despite wielding unprecedented power, organized labor's considerable influence was tenuous and far from absolute. From its heyday in the late 1940s through the 1970s, it perpetually found itself under attack on multiple fronts. Anticommunism had severely undermined its public legitimacy, neutralizing much of its progressive ambition to expand economic justice while pushing the AFL-CIO to support hawkish policies abroad and anticommunist purges at home.¹⁰³ On the domestic front, it faced a counteroffensive by corporate interests and powerful lobbies, like the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and Chamber of Commerce, that worked assiduously to roll back many of the New Deal's gains and shift the balance of power between business and labor to the former's advantage; the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act (1947) and proliferation of "right to work" laws were major steps in that direction.¹⁰⁴ In

⁹⁹"Meany Asks Guarantees for Israel" and "Israel Cited as Model for Developing Lands," *AFL-CIO News*, Feb. 26, 1966, 2, https://archive.org/details/sim_afl-cio-afl-cio-news_1966-02-26_11_9/page/n1/mode/2up?q=israel.

¹⁰⁰Meir, *My Life*, 330.

¹⁰¹Francine Klagsbrun, *Lioness: Golda Meir and the Nation of Israel* (New York, 2017), 3–4, 522; Meir, *My Life*, 330.

¹⁰²Kaplan, *Our American Israel*, 5–9.

¹⁰³Ellen Schrecker, "The Legacy of McCarthyism," in *American Labor and the Cold War*, eds. Robert Cherny, William Issel, and Kieran Walsh Taylor (New Brunswick, NJ, 2004), ch 1.

¹⁰⁴Nelson Lichtenstein and Elizabeth T. Shermer, eds., *The Right and Labor in America: Politics, Ideology, and Imagination* (Philadelphia, 2016); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade against the New Deal* (New York, 2010).

addition to struggling with the effects of automation and technological change that gradually eroded labor's strength, widespread corruption within its ranks evoked public outcry and led to the creation of the Senate's Select Committee on Improper Activities in Labor and Management (McClellan Committee) in 1957 that investigated allegations of racketeering and corruption. This resulted in the Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act (Landrum-Griffin) and facilitated the expulsion of the Longshoremen and Teamsters from the AFL-CIO.¹⁰⁵ Grassroots pressure to desegregate and endorse civil rights further rattled the ranks, fueling internal discord around racial equality.¹⁰⁶ Given unions' tainted public image, the guilt by association that McCarthyism cast, structural economic changes, and renewed workplace and racial strife, historians aptly note about these years, labor's "successes cloaked real weaknesses."¹⁰⁷

Israel and Histadrut offered an antidote of sorts by serving as an inspirational model that could be projected back onto organized labor in America to improve its image at home. After all, Histadrut was in some ways everything the AFL-CIO wished to become: overseeing the nation's political, socioeconomic, cultural, health, and educational spheres (among others), Histadrut functioned as "a would-be state-in-the-making" prior to independence that established many of the institutions upon which Israel was founded with numerous future heads of state coming from its ranks (Ben-Gurion, Meir, Levi Eshkol, and Yitzhak Ben-Zvi).¹⁰⁸ Labor scholar Jonathan Preminger once described Histadrut as "hegemonic," and noted that in some areas its symbiotic relationship to the state "made it hard to discern the boundary between the Histadrut and the government."¹⁰⁹ In stark contrast to the fledgling yet fragile trade unions in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, in Israel, American labor officials believed, a powerful and ostensibly democratic labor organization operated that was both anticommunist and—unlike counterparts in Britain or France—untainted by the legacies of colonialism, which was an important factor in appealing to the non-aligned nations. Histadrut, in the words of Zeev Sternhell, "was a unique phenomenon: an autonomous social, political, and economic institution unparalleled anywhere else in the free world."¹¹⁰ Lacking a national labor party like that which operated in Israel and dedicated to a form of business unionism far more reliant on the institutions of capital, the AFL-CIO operated as a powerful interest group—yet one among several—in the Democratic Party's New Deal Coalition. As such, it may not have sought to replicate (nor could it) Israel's social democratic model due to structural differences, but it could draw inspiration from Histadrut. Given the substantial political power that Histadrut wielded at home, enhanced through its close links to the ruling Labor Party Mapai and its overwhelming public legitimacy and social and cultural purchase, its romanticized image possibly offered AFL-CIO officials an antidote for their own thwarted hopes and, at the very least, became a potent source of pride and success to which they could aspire, as well as enlist to generate support and morale among their rank and file.

A review of the AFL-CIO's representations of Israel during these years reveals a stark dichotomy between the two labor organizations: in the United States, one under increasing pressure struggling to retain power, while in Israel, one increasingly wielding it. Israel and Histadrut garnered considerable attention and appeared frequently and favorably on the pages of the *AFL-CIO News*. In July 1956, the features section was dedicated in its entirety to celebrating

¹⁰⁵Melvyn Dubofsky and Joseph McCartin, *Labor in America: A History* (New York, 2017), 324–30.

¹⁰⁶Alan Draper, *Conflict of Interests: Organized Labor and the Civil Rights Movement in the South, 1954–1968* (Ithaca, NY, 1994); Lichtenstein and Shermer, *The Right and Labor in America*, chs 7–8.

¹⁰⁷Dubofsky and McCartin, *Labor in America*, 302.

¹⁰⁸Zeev Sternhell, *The Founding Myths of Israel*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton, NJ, 1998), 320. On the Histadrut/state symbiosis, see Yonatan Reshef, "Political Exchange in Israel: Histadrut-State Relations," *Industrial Relations* 25, no.3 (Fall 1986): 303–19.

¹⁰⁹Jonathan Preminger, *Labor in Israel: Beyond Nationalism and Neoliberalism* (Ithaca, NY, 2018), 4–6.

¹¹⁰Sternhell, *Founding Myths*, 178.

Israel's achievements. After a delegation of union leaders visited there, the magazine took the opportunity to showcase Histadrut's contribution to Israel's success in an exhaustive, page-long story, penned by Henry Fleisher, AFL-CIO publications director, under the headline "Histadrut Sparks Progress of Israel." Noting proudly that Histadrut "is one of the largest and most influential [labor organizations]—in proportion to the size of the country—of any in the world," the article surveyed the wide range of affairs it oversaw, concluding, as one official noted, "If it weren't for Histadrut, there'd probably be no country of Israel today."¹¹¹ The article subtly connected and conflated the transnational experiences to evoke sentiments of shared destiny. Recounting a strike in Israel's textile industry, for instance, it reported, "In the United States, an industrial dispute of this kind is almost 'routine.' What makes it interesting, from a distance of some 6,000 miles, is the fact that of all the Middle East countries so much now in the news, only Israel has a fully developed, democratic labor movement." The writer effectively painted Israel using American brushstrokes: noting that "Histadrut was established by Zionist-minded pioneers," he described Israel as "a tiny country—about the size of Massachusetts—in which there is too much desert and not enough water; a young country that can teach some of the older nations a few ideas about health and social welfare services for the people."¹¹²

Considerable efforts were made to showcase Israel's supposed ethno-racial equality. Reflecting the AFL-CIO's broader internal discourse that regularly emphasized Jewish–Arab solidarity, the article suggested that Palestinian-Israelis were integrated widely into Histadrut, echoing the oft-repeated belief among American labor officials that "within the State of Israel, a genuine democracy flourishes, with Jew and Arab enjoying the same rights and duties of free men."¹¹³ That a photo of delegation members having dinner in Nazareth was chosen as the lead visual, under the caption "Dinner in an Arab Village," was probably no coincidence. The story boasted that Histadrut cultivated "a growing membership" among Israel's 200,000 native Arabs and highlighted how, in the city of Nazareth, "Histadrut is operating a sizable medical center. A branch of the workers' bank operates there also to free its subscribers from usurious interest rates; and in a nearby village a new consumer cooperative has become a quick success." Offering a highly idealized account of racial harmony, it reported, "Histadrut officials assert with conviction that wages and living standards for Arab workers in Israel are better than for almost any other group of Arabs in the neighboring countries of the Middle East."¹¹⁴ Fleisher emphasized and celebrated the relative prosperity of Palestinian workers, suggesting, "Perhaps, the visitor wonders, feudal regimes are hostile to Israel because it so obviously presents 20th century social progress."¹¹⁵ Although labor officials did not directly compare or conflate America's unjust racial realities with Israel, given ongoing struggles at home over civil rights—often reflected on the same pages alongside coverage of supposed Jewish–Arab solidarity—it was not hard for readers to project America's racial battles onto Israel with one important difference: that unlike in the United States, Israeli workers were portrayed as having successfully overcome racial strife.¹¹⁶

But this, too, was hardly the case. Israeli labor officials may have praised Meany's and Reuther's stance on civil rights in America, conceived as a natural extension of organized labor's universal commitment to social justice, yet in doing so they glossed over their own shortcomings. Although Israel lacked the institutionalized racial hierarchies socially

¹¹¹Henry Fleisher, "Histadrut Sparks Progress of Israel," *AFL-CIO News*, July 21, 1956, 7, https://archive.org/details/sim_afl-cio-afl-cio-news_1956-07-21_1_33/page/n5/mode/2up?q=delegation+saw.

¹¹²Fleisher, "Histadrut Sparks Progress."

¹¹³*Proceedings of the CIO's Fifteenth Constitutional Convention*, 1953, 521.

¹¹⁴Fleisher, "Histadrut Sparks Progress." See also "Jews and Arabs Join in New Israel Publishing Venture," *CIO News*, Mar. 1, 1954, 8, <https://archive.org/details/mdu-labor-057501/page/n103/mode/2up?q=israel+border+>.

¹¹⁵Henry Fleisher, "King Solomon's Mines," *Press Associates-PAI*, July 23, 1956, folder 415/1, ISA.

¹¹⁶For instance, see *AFL-CIO News*, July 21, 1956, 4–7, https://archive.org/details/sim_afl-cio-afl-cio-news_1956-07-21_1_33/page/n5/mode/2up?q=delegation+saw.

constructed in the United States to subjugate and disenfranchise groups like African Americans and Native Americans, Histadrut's attitudes toward Palestinian-Israelis (as well as Mizrahi Jews) suggest a racialization of group identities far more ambiguous, fluid, and contingent than in America (for instance, many Mizrahi Jews had more in common, culturally, with Arab neighbors than with their Jewish Ashkenazi ones). This led to an ongoing and uneven process of racial social construction that was more complex and subtle than many labor officials, viewing Israel through the lens of America's racial experience, could fully appreciate.

Despite the AFL-CIO's tendency to construct an idealized Jewish–Arab solidarity, Histadrut had a mixed record on this front. On one hand, it actively sought to uplift Palestinian-Israelis by integrating them into trade unions and cooperatives, building health clinics, offering educational opportunities, and publishing Arabic-language journals. In some cases, Histadrut officials even clashed with the military establishment over Palestinian civil rights, leading Arnon Degani to conclude that “there was more to the Histadrut than the segregation and subjugation of the Arab worker.”¹¹⁷ Yet there was *also* that darker side of segregation and subjugation that hardly ever found its way into AFL-CIO narratives. Living under harsh military rule, including martial law, curfews, and strict travel restrictions, most Palestinians who remained in Israel after 1948 did not easily enjoy the benefits of citizenship or promises of solidarity; they were not allowed to enter trade unions until 1953, and only gained full membership in Histadrut in 1959, became eligible to vote in its elections in 1965, and joined the Labor Party in 1973. “The prospect of integration/assimilation, and the rhetorical claim that indigenous individuals can participate in the political life of the settler polity, are among the most powerful tools available for consolidating settler colonial projects. Indeed, settler colonialism is at its strongest when it can speak in universalizing terms, when it can claim to be ‘closing the gaps,’” opined Lorenzo Veracini in a study of Israeli settler-colonial practices.¹¹⁸ Organized labor's sentimentalized accounts of Israeli racial solidarity leave out the problematic fact that Histadrut oversaw such systems of settler-colonial domination that offered what Ahmad Sa'di termed “incorporation without integration.” This model of exploitation and exclusion systematically privileged Jewish labor over the remaining indigenous population, while reinforcing wage disparities, unemployment, and underdevelopment that ensured Palestinians could not effectively compete, relegating them to the bottom of the economic ladder.¹¹⁹ Rather than empower them, economic subordination and discrimination were meant to coopt Palestinian elites while subjugating their wider labor force and denying both the benefits of full citizenship. Michael Shalev went as far as comparing Israel's labor market to the Jim Crow South by describing it as “separate but equal.”¹²⁰

What is striking about the celebratory account by Fleisher, one of many public relations pieces about Israel published in the *AFL-CIO News* throughout the 1950s, is not necessarily the flattering portrayals, ubiquitous in the glowing coverage Israel usually received, but the contrast with the adjacent news regarding labor's domestic woes. On the opposite page appeared a cartoon lampooning Republican attempts to smear progressive forces as communist while the article below it, titled “Union Members Must Study Vital Problem of Community Relations,” lamented the disconnect between organized labor and American society, contending that “there are many, many things unions and their members can do to help bring the public to an understanding of the fact

¹¹⁷Arnon Degani, “On the Frontier of Integration: The Histadrut and the Palestinian Arab Citizens of Israel,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 56, no. 3 (2020): 422. On Histadrut's ambivalent treatment of Palestinians, see Oded Marck, “The Palestine Labor League: The History of a Palestinian Labor Union,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 59, no. 4 (2023): 609–24.

¹¹⁸Lorenzo Veracini, “The Other Shift: Settler Colonialism, Israel, and the Occupation,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 42, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 30.

¹¹⁹Ahmad H. Sa'di, “Incorporation without Integration: Palestinian Citizens in Israel's Labor Market,” *Sociology* 29, no. 3 (Aug. 1995): 429–51.

¹²⁰Michael Shalev, “Jewish Organized Labor and the Palestinians: A Study of State/Society Relations in Israel,” in *The Israeli State and Society: Boundaries and Frontiers*, ed. B. Kimmerling (Albany, NY, 1988), 111.

that a healthy union is an asset to the community.” Even if such editorial decisions regarding placement were coincidental, the stark contrast was inescapable: while coverage of Israel hailed Histadrut’s power, nearly all other articles around it told a story of domestic powerlessness. The effects of McCarthyism and redbaiting, the struggle against “right to work” laws, corruption scandals, and racial strife: readers were left with the impression that the very forces threatening to undermine labor’s prospects in the United States had been overcome in Israel.

Unlike other Cold War fronts where organized labor played an active role in undermining democracy, it seems unfair to ascribe pernicious motives to these glowing accounts of Israel.¹²¹ While contemporary scholars have claimed that Histadrut contributed to establishing a settler-colonial regime in Israel, AFL-CIO officials at the time sought to present Israel, run by their fellow labor comrades, in the best light possible, not merely because of Israel’s strategic importance or personal friendships, but because it also reflected positively upon organized labor back home. Rather than find coordinated attempts to misrepresent or elide Israel’s less-appealing traits, it is more likely that American labor officials simply described to their audiences, somewhat credulously, what they saw in Israel or heard from Israeli friends. After all, one of the main sources of organized labor’s flattering perceptions of Israel were personal testimonies of U.S. officials who travelled there and befriended Histadrut officials. Although their praise must therefore be approached cautiously, given that in most cases they were guests of Histadrut and shown a select—and unrepresentative—view of Israeli society, their sense of admiration and envy of Histadrut’s power, as well as their inclination to project it back onto their own struggles in the United States, was tangible and in keeping with a common thread among Israel’s most vocal labor advocates.

After Walter Reuther’s first visit to Israel in 1954, one of several he made, the UAW boss wrote to Israel’s president, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, a former Histadrut official, to share his impressions: “The presence in Israel of so strong and democratic a trade union center as Histadrut contributes immeasurably to the unique character and appeal which Israel holds for people everywhere who seek not only a fuller measure of personal freedom but a greater measure of economic and social justice as well.”¹²² A few years earlier Reuther had declared, “We are building a labor movement, not to patch up the world so men can starve less often and less frequently, but a labor movement that will remake the world so that the working people will get the benefit of their labor.”¹²³ The future that Reuther was reimagining for labor was, at least in the minds of American labor officials, already unfolding in Israel. Playing off an emerging public image of Israelis as citizen-soldiers and pioneers pervasive in American popular culture in the 1950s, Reuther described the Negev town of Beer-Sheba as “a pioneer city that reminds one of an American frontier town,” and considered Histadrut to be a universal model.¹²⁴ “What did surprise us, however, was the weight of influence and the role of the Histadrut in the country,” Reuther recalled. “For the first time in our experience, we came in contact with a labor organization which had been a primary force in building a country,”¹²⁵ he wrote. He endorsed U.S. support of Israel on both strategic *and* ideological grounds, stressing Israel’s commitment to economic justice and its potential role for transforming the region: “This nation has a responsibility not only to support and strengthen Israel as a democratic forward post in the Middle East, but also to find and push solutions to the social and economic problems of the whole Middle Eastern area.”¹²⁶ So enamored was he with Israel’s success that in

¹²¹For instance, see Scipes, *AFL-CIO’s Secret War*.

¹²²Walter Reuther to Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, July 20, 1954 and Oct. 13, 1955, folder 1999/24, ISA.

¹²³Dubofsky and McCartin, *Labor in America*, 317.

¹²⁴For instance, see Mitelpunkt, *Israel in the American Mind*, chs 1–2.

¹²⁵CIO Delegation to Israel, “We Saw Israel: A Report of a Visit by American Unionists,” Pamphlet no. 260 (Washington, DC, Nov. 1954), 12, 20–2.

¹²⁶Reuther to Joseph Schlossberg, Feb. 11, 1953, folder 1, box 296, UAW President’s Office, Walter P. Reuther Records, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

a heated exchange with the Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, during the latter's infamous tour of the United States in 1959, Reuther employed the example of Israel—not the United States—to persuade the Soviet leader that economic justice *and* democracy can coexist. “We think the country in the free world nearest to Democratic Socialism is Israel,” he told a “disdainful” and “agitated” Khrushchev, pressing him on Soviet hostility toward the Jewish state: “You haven't been there, I have been there, and I have seen how Histadrut, the magnificent Israeli labor movement, which owns 60% of the production, supports the nation, and aids its progress.”¹²⁷

Michael Quill, president of the Transport Workers Union, helped reinforce the myth of Israel's virtuous struggle. “I found [Israelis] had achieved their freedom after many years of long and bitter and bloody struggle and terrific sacrifice,” he said. “During our trip we met with the leaders and the membership of Histadrut, and I wish we in the CIO could boast we had done such a job in the United States, because there they have in the shops and factories and offices and upon the farm land and on the docks a great cross-section of the workers.”¹²⁸ After visiting the Haifa port, he admitted that its efficient mode of operation “might very well be adopted by those desirous of cleaning up our well established American ports of New York, Philadelphia, Boston and Baltimore.”¹²⁹ Press coverage of Joe Glazer's trip to Israel similarly conflated the destinies of American and Israeli workers. “This is not Akron, Ohio but the city of Hader [sic], Israel,” one account of Glazer's publicized 1957 trip began.¹³⁰ Glazer, education director of the United Rubber Workers in Akron, was “amazed” at what he saw, testifying to the “miracle of miracles” by which “the ancient worn-out desert land [was] being made to bloom.” He, too, was overtaken by Histadrut's public prominence. “It is much more powerful politically than the AFL-CIO in the U.S.,” he noted, going as far as to label it “the most fabulous labor organization in the world.”¹³¹ After visiting a picket line at a textile plant in Haifa, another labor official from Boston marveled at the union's ability to pay strikers from union funds as much as 80 percent of their pay. “The picket sign was in Hebrew, but the picket's face was American,” recalled William Belanger, Textile Workers Union of America's New England regional director. Noting that he was “[s]ix thousand miles from home, but feeling he had never left it,” he conveyed his sense of solidarity: “I told them we were far apart geographically, but so close in problems.” Having joined the picket-line, “as he would have done in Nashua or Providence,” Belanger was moved by the vast public support. “Israeli public opinion is so sympathetic to labor that no one scabs, whether or not there's a picket line around a struck shop,” he said. Calling Histadrut “the one big labor organization to which almost everyone belongs,” he opined that “it's a coexistence of capitalism and socialism and it works.”¹³² After his return from Israel, Albert Lunceford, a CIO official from Chicago, expressed what many of his colleagues felt, when he suggested that Histadrut “could well serve as an example not only to the Middle East but to American labor as well.”¹³³

Like many labor officials, Sam Turk, a union leader from Iowa, was especially impressed by the health benefits Israeli workers received. “I thought to myself ‘what an organizing job we could do in Polk county, if we had a benefit like this hospital-plan to offer the non-union

¹²⁷Transcript of Meeting between American Labor Leaders with Khrushchev, San Francisco, Sept. 20, 1959, folder 414/16, ISA.

¹²⁸Michael Quill, *Proceedings of the CIO's Fifteenth Constitutional Convention*, 1953, 523.

¹²⁹Michael Quill, Notes on Israel trip, folder 12, box 70, Transport Workers Union of America Records (#235), Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York.

¹³⁰“Israel Makes Tires for Trade,” *United Rubber Worker*, Sept. 1957, folder 415/3, ISA.

¹³¹Joe Glazer, “Labor Movement Builds Israel,” *United Rubber Worker*, Sept. 1957; “Glazer Sees Israel—and Is Amazed,” *Akron Beacon Journal*, Aug. 29, 1957; “A Report on Sam Turk's European Trip,” *Iowa Federationist*, Sept. 27, 1957, folder 415/3, ISA.

¹³²Irene Pave, “The Watchword Is Bevadi,” *Textile Labor*, Oct. 1957, 8–9, folder 415/3, ISA.

¹³³“Labor Does Not Support U.S. Middle East Policy, Leader Says,” *JTA*, Aug. 24, 1954, <https://www.jta.org/archive/labor-does-not-support-u-s-middle-east-policy-leader-says>.

people,” he said.¹³⁴ Reports about his visit to Israel in the local Iowa press projected what he found there back onto the United States: “Sam Turk is back from Israel, enthusiastic about the cooperation he found between labor and management there but doubtful that the same sort of relationship could be born in modern-day America.” Turk, president of the Polk County labor council, had more to say: “They’ve got the most ideal labor movement going that I ever expected to see.” He was surprised by the level of cooperation between labor and capital. “All they’ve done there is join hands,” Turk told the Iowa press. Such cooperation, he surmised, could not be replicated in America: “I’d be the last one to try to get their program into effect here. There’s not a place where capital won’t rush in to assume its responsibility.”¹³⁵ Charles Schultz, Wisconsin’s CIO president, could not get over “how labor runs Israel,” and the fact that “Histadrut headquarters surpasses anything in the United States,” noting, “If the government doesn’t build a hospital, then Histadrut steps in and does it for them.” Comparing Israel, “a small island of democracy,” to New Jersey, he envied the free healthcare workers (“including Arabs”) received, and said, “If somebody gave you a rocky hillside and told you to grow something there, I wonder how many American farmers would be able to do it.”¹³⁶

Such personal testimonies, like the wider discourse surrounding Israel within organized labor, emphasized Jewish–Arab solidarity and the ostensible material progress Palestinians were making under Histadrut’s tutelage. Often echoing Histadrut’s paternalistic, arguably racist, projection of Palestinians as primitive agrarian peoples, visiting labor officials imbibed—and in-turn helped reinforce among Americans—the Israeli narrative that Histadrut, acting as a harbinger of progress, was responsible for “liberating [Palestinians] from age-old exploitation” like feudalism and serfdom, and sharing with them the benefits of modernity to the extent that, “something the Arab worker never dared to dream of is now an accepted condition.”¹³⁷ Lost from these romanticized, self-aggrandizing accounts of Israeli benevolence voiced by visiting labor officials was the moral, human, and cultural toll that modernization, exercised under military occupation and through institutional discrimination, often entailed.

Conclusion

At an AFL-CIO fundraiser in Chicago in 1956, Golda Meir told the audience, “For many years we have looked upon the American labor movement as our main source of sympathy and solidarity.”¹³⁸ Her emphasis on labor—rather than Jewish—support might be indicative of how instrumental the AFL-CIO’s forgotten advocacy of Israel had been. Looking back years later, George Meany conveyed similar sentiments: “I do believe that there is no other single organization in the world which has supported the state of Israel more, financially and morally, than the AFL-CIO and its affiliates.”¹³⁹ Their remarks reflect what this article has sought to establish: that the AFL-CIO played an important role in forging the “special relationship” in its infant stages by molding favorable popular opinion of Israel, especially among the ranks of organized labor. Yet it was also an uncritical image that willfully ignored the many ways through which Histadrut and Israel were complicit, consciously or not, in policies that undermined the very essence of democracy, equality, and social justice that they repeatedly pointed to as the shared values at the basis of the special relationship.

Just how influential was the AFL-CIO’s support? While it is difficult to empirically assess the effects of advocacy that the AFL-CIO generated on such a large and diverse scale, it is fair to

¹³⁴“A Report on Sam Turk’s European Trip,” *Iowa Federationist*, Sept. 6, 1957, folder f415/3, ISA.

¹³⁵Walter Shotwell, “Turk Finds Israel Labor in Key Role,” *Des Moines Register*, Aug. 12, 1957, folder 415/3, ISA.

¹³⁶“Israel Made Desert Bloom, Only Democracy in the Mideast,” Extract from the *Wisconsin CIO News*, June 22, 1956, folder 415/1, ISA.

¹³⁷“A Report on Sam Turk’s European Trip,” *Iowa Federationist*, Oct. 11, 1957, folder f415/3, ISA.

¹³⁸“McDonald Dinner Nets 1 Million for Israel.”

¹³⁹George Meany to Herman Young, Sept. 19, 1967, folder 6545/20, ISA.

assume that given the power and popularity of the federation and its 15 million members, the White House, Congress, and wider public opinion were inclined to listen when it spoke on behalf of Israel. Avi Ben-Zvi asserted that during the Eisenhower years, the pro-Israel lobby was “denied informal access to top administration officials and deprived of any significant influence on core and cardinal issues.”¹⁴⁰ This may be true when looking at grand strategy—the coveted security pacts Israel sought never materialized, and supply of advanced weapons would have to wait until U.S. presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson acquiesced to sell Israel Hawk missiles and eventually fighter jets. Yet it is safe to surmise that labor’s staunch pro-Israel advocacy was at the very least a mitigating influence in the White House, particularly during Eisenhower’s presidency. While it may not have compelled the Eisenhower administration to act on behalf of Israel, it surely helped prevent it from acting too harshly against Israel in the wake of the reprisal raids and the Sinai War. More importantly, labor’s uncompromising support of Israel played a vital role in enlisting many non-Jewish Americans who had yet to “take sides” or acquire a serious stance about the Arab–Israeli conflict to support Israel in the 1950s–1960s,¹⁴¹ and served as a counterweight to efforts by non-Jewish organizations, like American Friends of the Middle East (AFME), to cultivate pro-Arab sympathy among the American public.¹⁴²

Acknowledging the extent and import of organized labor’s support of Israel and Histadrut invites the expansion of research about U.S.–Israel relations into wider historical and transnational fields that have seldom been considered: labor relations, social democracy, and neoliberalism. While the special relationship matured in the 1960s under the Kennedy–Johnson administrations and consolidated during the 1970s with the establishment of periodical memorandums of understanding and a steady supply of advanced weaponry, the decline of the New Deal order—and with it of unions—saw the dissolution of an important link between the two countries. Postindustrialism; Reaganomics and its war on unions and dismantling of the Great Society’s welfare programs; the reorientation of the Democratic Party and the American Left, more broadly, from class-based solidarity to an identity politics that arguably prized race, ethnicity, and gender over economic justice; and the commensurate demise of Israel’s Labor Party and weakening of Histadrut after Likud’s historic 1977 electoral victory all contributed to a transformation in the ideological basis of American popular support for Israel. Instead of celebrating social democracy and economic justice, real or imagined, since the 1980s the special relationship has increasingly relied upon a narrower partisan, ideological, and sectoral source of non-Jewish support, located primarily in the free-market–oriented Republican Party and its evangelical base, which have not only proven to be hostile to organized labor, but far less representative in terms of race, class, region, and religion than the more diverse American society represented by the AFL-CIO.¹⁴³

Organized labor helped cement Israel as a leading liberal cause and fixture of the mainstream Democratic agenda. The excavation of this forgotten history, this forgotten alliance, is essential for any broader understanding of why much of the Democratic Party today still supports Israel uncritically, this despite its human rights abuses and continued occupation of Palestinian territory. Since the 1970s, conservatives and evangelicals have established their own set of competing myths and romanticized accounts of Israel rooted in Protestant theology

¹⁴⁰Ben-Zvi, *Decade of Transition*, 96.

¹⁴¹Amnon Cavari and Guy Freedman, *American Public Opinion Toward Israel* (London, 2021), 56–7.

¹⁴²Hugh Wilford, “American Friends of the Middle East: The CIA, US Citizens, and the Secret Battle for American Public Opinion in the Arab–Israeli Conflict, 1947–1967,” *Journal of American Studies* 51, no. 1 (Sept. 2015): 1–24.

¹⁴³Tevi Troy, “How the GOP Went Zionist,” *Commentary*, Dec. 2015, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/tevi-troy/gop-went-zionist/>; Jacob Magid, “Dermer Suggests Israel Should Prioritize Support of Evangelicals over US Jews,” *Times of Israel*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/dermer-suggests-israel-should-prioritize-support-of-evangelicals-over-us-jews/>.

and neoliberal fantasies of the “start-up nation,” replacing some of the core social-democratic values that once undergirded the special relationship.¹⁴⁴ Revealing and reassessing the role played by organized labor in forging U.S.–Israel ties offers the opportunity to question some of these persistent myths and craft a more rigorous and sobering, some would say even-handed, approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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¹⁴⁴Cavari and Freedman, *American Public Opinion Toward Israel*, ch 6.