

Written Testimony of

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Thank you, Subcommittee Chair Allen, Subcommittee Ranking Member DeSaulnier, and Members of the Subcommittee. I wish to share my perspective as a labor historian on the question that you consider today. Let me be clear that I am here not as a representative of a union, but rather as a scholar of the American labor movement, arguably the oldest democratic, multi-cultural, racially, regionally, and religiously diverse institution that the United States has produced in its nearly 250-year history. I have studied organized labor for over 30 years and written, co-written, or edited nine books and dozens of articles and book chapters on its history.¹ I have taught at Georgetown University since 1999, and I currently serve as the president of the Labor and Working-Class History Association. I wish to speak today of the character of the American labor movement, Jewish members' important place in its history, and about how the movement, historically wrestled with and addressed such issues as racism, sexism, and of course anti-Semitism.

My brief opening remarks, I will make two points about the American labor movement.

¹ Melvyn Dubofsky and Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor in America: A History*, 10th edition (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2025); Melvyn Dubofsky and Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor in America: A History*, 9th edition (Malden, Mass.: Wiley Blackwell, 2017); Luís Aguiar, *Purple Power: The History and Global Impact of SEIU* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, January 24, 2023) Leon Fink, Joan Sangster, and Joseph A. McCartin, eds., *Workers in Hard Times: Nineteenth-Century Panics to the Twenty-First Century Great Recession in International Perspective* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Jennifer Luff, Stephanie Luce, and Ruth Milkman, and Joseph A. McCartin, eds. *What Works for Workers: Public Policies and Innovative Local Strategies for Low Wage Workers* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2014); Joseph A. McCartin, *Collision Course: Ronald Reagan, the Air Traffic Controllers, and the Strike that Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Michael Kazin and Joseph A. McCartin, eds., *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Melvyn Dubofsky, eds., *American Labor: A Documentary History* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2004); Melvyn Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World*, Abridged edition, edited and introduced by Joseph A. McCartin (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor's Great War: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy and the Origins of Modern American Labor Relations, 1912-21* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

The first is that the movement is a uniquely diverse and pluralistic entity and American Jews have historically played and continue to play an important role in its development and leadership. Labor has been one of the most important forces counteracting anti-Semitism in America even as it often found its opponents framing their attacks on it in anti-Semitic terms.

The pluralistic and inclusive labor movement that emerged in modern America, and within which Jews became an important influence, was a hard-won thing. It was built in a hostile environment, where most workers could not count on the law to protect their efforts to organize and bargain collectively until 1935. It was also built by a uniquely diverse working-class – the most diverse of any industrialized nation. And it was built in a nation in which divisions and inequalities among workers were hardened into law and custom by centuries of slavery, Chinese exclusion, segregation, and endemic employment discrimination. The early organizations workers built to some degree inevitably reflected the racial, ethnic, gender, and religious divisions that were so evident in 19th century America. Religious tensions among workers periodically erupted within the movement, as when Scotch-Irish Protestant weavers attacked Irish Catholics in Philadelphia’s Kensington Riots of 1844.² Racial tensions among workers occasionally exploded, as when Irish Catholic dockworkers attacked and lynched free Blacks during New York City’s draft riots of 1863.³ Ethnic and racial prejudice found its way

² David Montgomery, “The Shuttle and the Cross: Weavers and Artisans in the Kensington Riots of 1844,” *Journal of Social History* (1972): 411-446. For more background on Catholic – Protestant conflict among workers in the nineteenth century, see: Kevin Kenny, *Making Sense of the Molly Maguires* (1998); Harold W. Aurand, *From the Molly Maguires to the United Mine Workers: The Social Ecology of an Industrial Union, 1869-1897* (2018).

³ Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War* (1990). For more on conflict between Irish and African American workers in the nineteenth century, see: David Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (1995).

into union policies, as when unions defended the exclusion of Chinese immigrants on the theory that “coolie labor” would undermine white workers, and most unions organized by whites in the 19th century initially excluded Black members.⁴

In this context, marginalized workers often initially built their own separate unions. Blacks excluded from unions on the railways, for example, formed their own brotherhoods, the most important being A. Philip Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, whose centenary we recently marked.⁵ Similarly, many Jewish workers first opted to form unions of Yiddish-speaking workers, founding the United Hebrew Trades in 1888. UHT unions ultimately affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, though the UHT persisted as its own organization, ultimately giving birth to the Jewish Labor Committee in 1934, whose explicit purpose was to fight Nazi anti-Semitism. It exists to this day as a presence in labor.⁶

⁴ Alexander Saxton, *Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (1971); Charles Williams, “Labor Radicalism and the Local Politics of Chinese Exclusion: Mayor Jacob Weisbach and the Tacoma Chinese Expulsion of 1885,” *Labor History* 60, no. 6 (2019): 685-703; Henry White, “Immigration Restriction as Necessity,” *American Federationist* 4, no. 4 (June 1897): 67-70.

⁵ Eric Arnesen, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (2001); William H. Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton P. Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925-1937* (1977); Larry Tye, *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class* (2005); Jack Santino, *Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle: Stories of Black Pullman Porters* (1989). On the sleeping car porters’ leader, Asa Philip Randolph, see Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (1972).

⁶ Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in USA: An Industrial, Political and Cultural History of the Jewish Labor Movement, 1882-1914* (1950) looks at the United Hebrew Trades. Irving Howe’s *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (1976) discusses the impact of the Haskalah and the General Jewish Labor Bund (The Bund) on those Jewish immigrants who streamed into the United States after the failed 1905 revolution in Russia and went on to play a key role in shaping the American union movement. Hadassa Kosak, *Cultures of Opposition: Jewish Immigrant Workers, 1881–1905* (2000), provides a nuanced view of Jewish labor activism at the dawn of the twentieth century, and Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (1990), provides a sense of Jewish women’s role in labor and labor activism in that period. Tony Michels’s *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialists in New York* (2005), looks at

Remarkably, out of the fraught crucible of a working-class of vast diversity – and despite employers’ conscious efforts to pit one group against another to undermine union organizing drives or break strikes – a union movement arose that became ever more inclusive over the course of the late 19th and the 20th centuries. Unlike some countries where Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish workers each ended up in separate unions of workers who shared their religion, in the United States, workers ultimately built organizations that brought people together across lines of race, religion, gender, and ethnicity. Indeed, among all American institutions – governments, churches, civic organizations, etc. – the union movement did the most to pioneer inter-racial, inter-religious cooperation.⁷

Jewish workers have played a vital role in that history. At its founding in 1886, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was headed by a Jewish immigrant, Samuel Gompers, who was elected to his post even though Jews then were far outnumbered by Protestants and Catholics within the AFL.⁸ Nor was Gompers unique: Jewish leaders such as Sidney Hillman, and Bessie Abramowitz of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, Rose Schneiderman, David Dubinsky, and Clara Lemlich of the International Ladies Garment Workers, Jerry Wurf of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, and Albert Shanker, Sandra Feldman, and Randi Weingarten of the American Federation of Teachers, helped build inclusive,

the Arbeiter Ring and other manifestations of early twentieth century radical Jewish labor activism. On the Jewish Labor Committee’s origins and development, see: Catherine Collomp, “The Jewish Labor Committee, American Labor, and the Rescue of European Socialists, 1934-1941,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* No. 68 (Fall, 2005); 112-133; Arieh Lebowitz, “The Jewish Labor Committee: Past and Present,” *Shofar*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Spring 1994): 96-99.

⁷ This is a central theme of Melvyn Dubofsky and Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor in America: A History*, 10th edition (2025).

⁸ Stuart Kaufman, *Samuel Gompers and the Origins of the American Federation of Labor, 1848-1896* (1973); Bernard Mandel, *Samuel Gompers: A Biography* (1963); Philip Taft, *The A.F. of L. in the Time of Gompers* (1957).

multi-racial, pluralistic unions that have fought for American workers of every race, religion, and color over the decades and into the present day.⁹ It would not be an exaggeration to say that each of those leaders contended at times with anti-Semitism. But the anti-Semites they fought were typically opponents of the union movement who used their very prominence within it as evidence that it was somehow foreign, un-American, or even part of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy.¹⁰

In part because of their minority status America's Jewish labor activists have always understood the importance of building bridges across lines of difference, creating an union of worker organization from the pluribus of the varied American working class around the concept of *solidarity*. Jewish influence remains strong in labor today. Anti-Semitism has not gone away, of course. No one can certify that there are simply no anti-Semites in the labor movement, just

⁹ Steve Fraser, *Labor Will Rule: Sidney Hillman and the Rise of American Labor* (1991); Karen Pastorello, *A Power Among Them: Bessie Abramowitz Hillman and the Making of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America* (2008); Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States* (1995); Robert D. Parmet, *The Master of Seventh Avenue: David Dubinsky and the American Labor Movement* (2006); Richard D. Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles Over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy* (2007); Joseph Berger, "Sandra Feldman, Scrappy and Outspoken Labor Leader for Teachers, Dies at 65," *The New York Times*, September 20, 2005; Randi Weingarten, *Why Fascists Hate Teachers* (2025).

¹⁰ For an overview on how anti-Semitism threatened organized labor, see Charles Bezael Sherman, *Labor's Enemy: Anti-Semitism* (1945). Sherman wrote this publication while serving as the Director of Labor Relations of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. In an important passage in the publication, he wrote: "In more modern countries, the propaganda technique of anti-Semitism must be changed. The union movement is too strong to be attacked frontally; it must be outflanked. Anti-Semitism is therefore used to create hostility toward unions in the community at large, and at the same time to weaken the unions from within by spreading the poison of mistrust and dissension" (p.8).

For a sampling of anti-union attacks that utilized anti-Semitic tropes, see: Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (1988), 113-114, 157; and Dubofsky and McCartin, *Labor In America: A History*, 310-311, for discussion of the infamous "Clear it with Sidney" slander and the anti-Semitic campaign slogan "It's *Your* Country. Why Let Sidney Hillman Run It?" that was used by organized labor's opponents in the 1944 election.

as no one could certify that regarding corporate America, our religious institutions, academia, or other major institutions. Where Anti-Semitism does rear its head, it must be combatted. On that score, the historical record clearly shows that the labor movement has been a bastion of opposition to anti-Semitism through its modern history and remains so today.

The second feature of the union movement that pertains to this discussion is its *democratic* nature. Organized labor is arguably the nation's oldest and most effective democracy movement, seeking not only a democratic voice for workers in their workplaces, but to deepen democracy beyond the workplace. From its efforts to remove property qualifications for voting in pre-Civil War America through its advocacy of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts in the 1960s, the union movement has been a consistently democratizing force.¹¹

Unions not only seek to give their members a democratic voice in shaping the terms and conditions under which they work, they embody democracy in their structures. Unions have constitutions. Their members get to vote on their leadership; they possess rights. Indeed, as members of this Subcommittee know, the Landrum-Griffin Act of 1959 specified a bill of rights for union members, which guarantees them freedom of speech and assembly; the right to challenge their leaders; protection from retribution, including due process in matters of internal union discipline; and more. Most unions have vibrant internal caucuses of members who hold diverse and even contending views on pressing issues. This is a hallmark of their democratic culture.¹²

¹¹ The literature on organized labor's role in fighting to expand democracy is vast. A sampling of work includes Joseph A. McCartin, "U.S. Labor and the Struggle for Democracy," *New Labor Forum* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2023): 24-31; Clayton Sinyai, *Schools of Democracy: A Political History of the American Labor Movement* (2006); Milton Derber, *American Idea of Industrial Democracy, 1865-1965* (1970).

¹² Herman Benson, "Union Democracy and the Landrum-Griffin Act," *Review of Law and Social Change* XI (1982-83): 153-186; Clyde W. Summers, Joseph L. Rauh, and Herman

The twin characteristics of the movement that I have highlighted – its pluralistic diversity and its democratic culture – make it possible to cherry pick examples of individual members, caucuses, or locals advancing a wide range of views on almost any question. It would be unjust, however, to characterize the movement based a few snapshots that highlight isolated pockets of transient opinion within it. Labor does not create solidarity by enforcing a uniformity of opinion in its ranks. Rather the movement should be evaluated on the basis of its policies. In that regard, the record clearly contains little evidence that organized labor condones or harbors anti-Semitism.

Thank you. I'm happy to answer your questions.

Benson, *Union Democracy and Landrum Griffin* (1985); *Sus Derechos en el Trabajo y en la Unión: Cómo Presentar un Agravio y Conseguir Representación de la Unión* (2011).