



Adam M. Howard. *Sewing the Fabric of Statehood: Garment Unions, American Labor, and the Establishment of the State of Israel.* Working Class in American History Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017. 176 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-252-08301-3.

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Today, the American labor movement is a mere shadow of its glorious past. It was once a key component of social life and a political king-maker, but decades of deindustrialization and neoliberal government have all but eviscerated labor's public clout and political muscle. Still, as Adam M. Howard reminds us in this slim and tightly argued book, there was a time when American labor, driven by its active Jewish core, played a major role not just on a national but also on a transnational scale. Between the late 1910s and the 1950s, Howard shows, labor organizations dedicated massive amounts of energy and resources to Labor Zionism and its project of building a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Simultaneously assisting a fellow labor movement and working to provide a safe haven for Jewish refugees, American labor found in Jewish Palestine a cause that closely matched its own interests and ideological inclinations.

The strength of Howard's work lies in its readjustment of the analytical framework. Instead of viewing American labor's mobilization for Jewish Palestine as a predominantly intra-Jewish story, a by-product of American Zionism, he situates it within American labor history. And so, Howard examines non-Zionist and non-Jewish ac-

tors, and explains why and how they came to support the Zionist project financially and politically.

Howard's main argument is that fundraising for the Histadrut (General Federation of Jewish Labour in Palestine, Labor Zionism's main organ) and political lobbying for the Yishuv (Jewish community in Palestine) were valued by American labor and its Zionist allies as strategic tools. However, the political route tended to be less reliably effective, except in specific, yet pivotal, instances, such as labor's role in compelling President Harry S. Truman to recognize the new State of Israel immediately after its establishment in May 1948. In contrast, Howard argues, American labor's financial support of Labor Zionism had been an invariably dependable and highly instrumental resource for Jewish nation-building in Palestine.

The narrative of *Sewing the Fabric of Statehood* generally follows a chronological trajectory. The first chapter traces the ascent of the American Jewish labor movement, its rising profile within the American political landscape, and growing ties to Labor Zionism and the Jewish cause in Palestine in general. Howard points to two milestones along this historical path, the 1917 Balfour Declaration and the establishment of the Histadrut three years later. During the final phases of the Great War, an alignment of political in-

terests, compounded by the ideological sway of President Woodrow Wilson's vision of internationally supported national self-determination, led to the symbolically significant recognition of the Balfour Declaration by a leading American labor organization. Later, the rise of the Histadrut as a cornerstone of socialist life and ideology in Jewish Palestine helped turn key figures in the American Jewish leadership, some of them nationalism skeptics, into allies of Labor Zionism.

The second chapter moves the story forward, from the seeds of the American labor support of Labor Zionism in the early years of the interwar era to its full blossoming in the 1930s and 1940s. Focusing on successful fundraising and publicity campaigns in the US and less successful efforts to affect policy change, Howard demonstrates how the cause of Labor Zionism served as a mutually beneficial tool for advancing political interests in the domestic American sphere. As the situation of European Jews increasingly deteriorated over the course of the 1930s and into the Second World War, American labor leaders came to see Palestine as the best solution for Jewish refugees. The dominance of socialism in Jewish Palestine, as demonstrated by the Histadrut's central role there, helped assuage non-Zionist objections. "For a growing number of trade unionists, Histadrut represented not just a pragmatic solution to a humanitarian crisis, but a paragon of labor virtue," Howard notes (p. 45).

The third chapter centers on the turbulent last years of British rule in Palestine, when the Jewish refugee question loomed large in international politics and Palestine's security situation deteriorated. Against the backdrop of redefining global alliances and power structures, American labor leadership boosted its efforts to support Jewish Palestine both politically and financially. Howard describes how over the years 1944 to 1947 the Jewish homeland idea all but trampled anti-nationalist opposition in American labor circles, capturing even avid Communists who came

to see British policy in Palestine as a manifestation of oppressive imperialism. Palestine was increasingly accepted in the US as the only viable solution to the Jewish refugee crisis, in part since it allowed labor leaders to take an anti-immigration stance while still presenting themselves as champions of freedom and justice. However, this galvanizing consensus also drove a wedge between the American labor movement and its British counterpart, as the Labour government in Britain refused to alter its decision to effectively disallow Jewish immigration to Palestine. The failure of Jewish and non-Jewish labor actors' efforts to bring about policy changes in the UK, despite labor's longstanding relationship with British socialists and the central place it held within President Franklin D. Roosevelt's political coalition, points to the limits of labor's ability to translate domestic power into foreign relations achievements. Yet this setback also underscores labor's success on the financial front. While political battles were waged and lost, proponents of Jewish Palestine organized massive fundraising campaigns that bankrolled the establishment of Histadrut's institutions, such as hospitals and trade schools in Palestine. Since these institutions were affiliated with the Histadrut, they were presented as not just aiding Jewish nation-building in Palestine but also helping the socialist cause overseas, along established patterns of transnational American labor involvement.

Howard suggests that labor's consistent lobbying regarding the Palestine question, despite not yielding immediate results, contributed to Britain's eventual decision to leave Palestine. While this point would have benefited from further elaboration, the argument that labor's pressure was significant in shaping Truman's policy in 1948, which the fourth chapter covers in depth, is more developed. Here, Howard shows how electoral politics, specifically in New York, influenced Truman to swiftly recognize the new State of Israel in spite of the pro-Arab stance of his oil-conscious foreign policy advisors. The fact that

Howard looks at 1948 from an American perspective, as a presidential election year, and not only from the Palestine Jewish perspective of civil war and independence, allows him to discern historical patterns that thus far have been largely overlooked.

The fifth and final chapter covers the reinforcement of American labor's commitment to Israel after the establishment of the State of Israel and into the 1950s. In this period, Howard contends, as the Cold War was redefining international politics, Israel—despite its initial waver between the West and the Soviet Union spheres of influence—was presented by labor leaders in the US as a crucial social-democratic ally in the Middle East. Fundraising projects and material support, including textiles for Israeli army uniforms, sent directly from local New York garment unions, solidified the transnational bond between American labor and the political and social apparatus of the now-ruling Labor Zionism. This bond, maintains Howard in the short epilogue, continued well into the 1980s.

Sewing the Fabric of Statehood is a substantial contribution to a number of scholarly fields, including American labor history, American Jewish history, and the history of Zionism. A work of political history, it is largely populated by high-level organizational actors, obscure acronymic-named committees, and institutional correspondence. It could have been interesting, and historiographically significant, to also delve into the story's social history aspect, by considering the perspective of rank-and-file members of Jewish and non-Jewish American labor unions. A thorough contextualization of American labor's place within the broader phenomenon of American support to Jewish Palestine and young Israel would have been welcomed as well. Finally, the issue of anti-immigration sentiment among labor leaders, which pushed them to prefer advocating for open borders in Palestine over lobbying for the welcoming of Jewish refugees into the US, is only

briefly discussed. Was it shared by Jewish American labor leadership? Is it possible that there was a kernel of truth in the idea that New York Jews, as per Howard's quote of the British politician Ernest Bevin, "did not want too many Jews" in their city, despite their predictable vociferous protests at his words (p. 67)? The reader is left to wonder. These points, however, do not impinge on Howard's well-established main arguments, in which he skillfully stitches together foreign policy and domestic politics.

Sewing the Fabric of Statehood presents Labor Zionism as it was seen by its propagandists and viewed by American eyes. This curated, idealized image of the Histadrut as the champion of utopian social-democracy was (I refer here to the historical actors' views, and not to Howard's presentation of the subject, hence the past tense) partial at best, since it omitted major fissures and shortcomings, particularly the orientalist and exploitative attitudes of Labor Zionist leadership toward Middle Eastern Jews and local Arabs. The rosy lens through which many Americans have tended to look at Israel, with active encouragement by Israeli state agents, is one of the defining features of contemporary Israeli-American relations. In that sense, Howard's book tacitly gestures to a historical continuity that transcends its temporal boundaries. The American blind spot regarding Israel's darker sides and inner tensions, which Howard implicitly traces back to one of its roots, is still very much with us, even if labor's political dominance, in the US as well as in Israel, is long gone.

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