

Jewish Alternatives to Zionism

The large demonstrations against the war in Gaza saw a participation of progressive young Jews. DAVID ROSENBERG welcomes the renewed interest in the traditions of Jewish socialist internationalism

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Last Saturday's huge demonstration against the war on Gaza and for justice for Palestine was remarkable. Overwhelmingly young, multicultural, energetic and united, it had another striking phenomenon, missing from mainstream media reports.

Despite the rhetoric of politicians, media commentators and Jewish community "leaders" claiming that a pro-Palestine march through central London would be a huge affront and danger to Jews, right there among the marchers was a large Jewish bloc, mobilised by several different groups.

This wasn't the first time that Jews from different organisations were marching for Palestinian rights and justice, but the scale, demography, and spirit was different.

The bloc comprised people from their twenties to their eighties, with the balance tipped much more towards the younger age group.

There was an assertiveness and self-confidence in their political views expressed on hand-made placards:

"Jews Against Genocide,"

"Jews against War Crimes,"

"Not in our Name" (with a star of David),

"Jews Stand for Palestine."

It took place in a period when Israel has officially declared itself at war, and there is tremendous pressure within the Jewish community to keep any dissent safely behind closed doors.

Two days earlier, though, Na'amod (Hebrew for "We will stand") UK Jews against the Occupation, held a solemn event in Parliament Square mobilising 400 Jews.

They condemned both the horrific Hamas action against Israeli civilians on October 7 and the continued revenge attacks by Israel's military that within a few days exceeded those numbers, with many deaths of children, the toll from which is still rising.



Source: [Democracy Now!](#)

Na'amodniks held banners that plainly said:

"UK Jews demand: Stop the Genocide. End the Siege."

Knowing that Israel's government and self-proclaimed "leaders" of Britain's Jews do not speak for you is one thing. Saying so publicly and so starkly, is much harder. And it's not just here. In the US, thousands of young Jews have mobilised around the message:

"We refuse to let our grief be used as a justification for further bloodshed and a second Nakba."



Jewish activists call for Gaza ceasefire in DC. October 18, 2023 (JVP Twitter)

Younger Jewish radicals are crossing lines that go beyond criticising the occupation with its daily human rights abuses, towards a broader critique of zionism as a whole.

Before WWII, zionism was a minority opinion in most Jewish communities around the world. The Holocaust and its aftermath changed that, irrevocably it seemed.

Large numbers of survivors languishing in Displaced Persons (DP) camps had no wish to return to countries where the Nazis had murdered their families but the doors to Western nations were hard to prise open.

Many in the DP camps looked towards Palestine as a place of refuge. Jewish minorities in Western countries, unable to help those refugees, became emotionally drawn towards zionism, and didn't question what Israel's creation would mean for people already living in Palestine.

Especially from the 1960s onwards, zionism became a dominant ideology in Jewish life in Britain. This coincided with a relative improvement in the material lives of many Jews who became more suburbanised and middle-class.

In Jewish educational institutions, synagogue Sunday schools, summer camps and Jewish schools, pro-zionism and Hebrew culture became the norm during the 1950s and '60s.

The "Jerusalem Programme" adopted in 1968 sought to turn a generalised sympathy towards Israel among ordinary diaspora Jews into an imperative. It promoted a political stance asserting the "centrality of Israel" in Jewish life and the "unity of the Jewish people" through "its bond to its historic homeland Eretz Yisrael (the Land of Israel)."

Official zionist bodies, resourced by the Israeli state, set up cultural programmes to reinforce

this identification within diaspora communities.

The first Jerusalem Programme of the early 1950s had spoken mainly of “ingathering the exiles” (regarding Jews in the diaspora as “exiles” rather than fully fledged citizens of their countries). It encouraged emigration to the new state, “aliyah,” which means “ascending,” and spoke of fostering Jewish consciousness “by propagating the Zionist idea,” stressing “Hebrew education” and “Hebrew language.”

The 1968 programme went much further, declaring Zionism to be “the National Liberation Movement of the Jewish people.”

The Zionist project in Palestine had set about the erasure of Palestinian history through building on and renaming Palestinian villages, ethnically cleansed in the wars of 1948 and beyond.

More widely the Zionist project began to downgrade and ideologically erase longstanding Jewish diaspora cultures and languages and powerful Jewish alternatives to Zionism that rose within them.

The self-confident challenge to Zionist imperatives, epitomised by the Jewish bloc last week, was an expression of the growing interest in reviving those alternatives.

From political Zionism’s inception in 1897 until WWII, Zionists struggled to make headway in overwhelmingly working-class Jewish communities. This was the case both in the US and Europe, especially in inter-war Poland, home to Europe’s largest Jewish community.

Activists who rejected Jewish nationalism in favour of class politics joined communist and socialist parties in different countries, and largely became less attached to Jewish identity.

But the most powerful secular left-wing alternative to Zionism, born in the very same year as the conference that proclaimed political Zionism, was Bundism – a Jewish socialist workers’ movement with an internationalist and anti-nationalist outlook.

Its philosophy of *doykayt* (here-ness), stated in Yiddish, was:

“Dortn vu mir lebn, dort is undzer land” — “There where we live, that is our country.”

It saw a Jewish future as minorities in the diaspora, not in a fortress-style Jewish nation state.

The Bund promoted a sophisticated multicultural model for ensuring that minority rights were enhanced as fully as possible within the states where they and other minorities lived.

More than an orthodox political programme for winning a better future, Bundism specifically advanced a modern secular Jewish cultural identity, especially through Yiddish language, libraries, sports clubs, schools, newspapers, discussion circles, children’s and youth movements, a women’s movement, in which they gave agency to the grassroots.

Within the socialist movement they put great stress on inner democracy and clashed with advocates of more centralist models, including communists, not just with Lenin in 1903, but in Poland in the 1930s and other arenas.

In Britain, before WWI, anarchists and Bundists, who opposed Jewish nationalism, were the beating heart of progressive campaigns, especially in Britain's largest Jewish community in London's East End.

Between the wars, the Communist Party attracted many Jewish members there. Despite sharp differences, the ABC of Anarchists, Bundists and Communists shared an emphasis on class politics and rejection of Jewish nationalism.

The Bund was decimated in the Holocaust, during which its members played a key role in ghetto resistance. Its postwar remnants were scattered in several countries and continued activities within their means, including in Britain, but were politically marginalised by the dominance of Zionism.

Bundists in New York issued a statement in 1947 against partition of Palestine:

"The peaceful coexistence of Jews and Arabs must be brought about by the renunciation of the Zionist goal of an independent Jewish state on the part of the Jewish community (and)...by the Arabs' recognition of the democratic principle that a country belongs to its entire population.

"Palestine should thus be regarded as belonging both to the Arabs and the Jews. Palestine should become an independent state. Its freedom and equal rights of its two communities should be internationally guaranteed."

The Jewish Socialists' group has recently published a pamphlet: *The Jewish Workers' Bund Past, Present Future* which includes articles by individual Bundists who were members or close to our group, and combines these with those of present-day activists influenced by Bundism. It also includes rare documentation on the terrible treatment by Zionists of Bundists in the DP camps who were resisting pressure to become part of the war in Palestine.

Today in Israel, Mesarvot — the Refuser Solidarity Network — operate as a support network for Israeli conscientious objectors.

It is heartening that Bundist ideas are attracting renewed interest and providing an anti-nationalist frame of reference among Jewish radicals today.

Older and more progressive ideas are finding a renewed life and relevance and a new audience in our dangerous and unpredictable times.

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Featured image: NOBLE ASPIRATIONS: (Left) 'Where we live, there is our country! Vote List 9, Bund' and 'A democratic republic! Full national and political rights for Jews!,' Bund election poster in Kiev, 1917; (below) Group portrait of the first-grade class of the Bundist school in Kalisz, central Poland, 1930-1934
Photo: Public Domain

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