

Why is the American Federation of Teachers Promoting Israeli Apartheid?

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Global Research, March 27, 2015

[Electronic Intifada](#) 26 March 2015

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten led a propaganda tour to Israel and uses her union to push J Street's anti-Palestinian-rights agenda. ([Flickr](#))

The Israel lobby group J Street has just wrapped up its [annual conference](#) in Washington, DC.

The prevailing mood of alarm and despair in the wake of [Israel's election](#) was captured by [keynote speaker](#) Randi Weingarten, president of the 1.5 million-strong American Federation of Teachers (AFT) trade union.

"This is a difficult moment for those of us who believe in the ideal of Jews and Palestinians living side by side, in two states, with real rights, and with security," Weingarten lamented.

She lambasted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's "last-ditch effort to retain power." It was, she said, "both painful and pitiful – just days after thousands of us went to Selma to honor those brutally beaten fighting to exercise the right to vote – to watch Netanyahu renounce the two-state solution and demonize Israel's Arab citizens for exercising their basic democratic rights."

Weingarten fretted about a *status quo* that "threatens the future of the State of Israel." She posited herself as a representative of the reasonable middle in a "vast chasm between those who believe: Israel, right or wrong, and never mind the occupation or democracy; and those who believe: Israel is evil and doesn't have a right to exist, which then justifies BDS, or worse, violence or terrorism."

Fighting BDS

Her attack on BDS – the Palestinian-led campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions – and her attempt to associate it with "violence" and "terrorism," echoes her earlier [condemnation](#) of the [American Studies Association](#) for [endorsing](#) the Palestinian call to boycott Israeli institutions complicit in occupation and human rights violations.

Weingarten then began to speak about a delegation of AFT officials earlier this year to "Israel and the West Bank" that she traveled on along with J Street executive director [Jeremy Ben-Ami](#).

Liberal Zionism

Weingarten is one of the most influential and high-profile union leaders in the country. But at a time when inner city public school teachers are battling against education cuts and privatization, she is spending her time on advocacy for Israel that has nothing to do with that agenda.

Without consulting her constituents, she is using her union platform to push a Zionist agenda informed by her view that the Israeli occupation army is the sacred and miraculous answer to the Holocaust.

Her address to J Street represented precisely the kind of liberal Zionism that Israeli journalist Noam Sheizaf [condemned](#) when he appeared on the same stage: full of easy potshots at the bogeyman Netanyahu, but total silence about Israel's siege and massacres in Gaza.

Union funds

The AFT president's speech was not the only involvement of a US teacher's union in the conference. The [J Street program](#) lists the Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) as a major donor to the conference.

IFT, which represents more than 100,000 educators and public employees in Illinois and is affiliated with the AFT, ignored repeated requests for comment about the amount of the donation and its purpose.

But here's a clue: IFT president Dan Montgomery, who serves as a vice-president of the AFT, also went on the junket with Weingarten and Ben-Ami.

Israel lobby's kinder face

J Street poses as the kinder, gentler face of the Israel lobby, the alternative to hardline [AIPAC](#). But it is just as adamantly opposed to fundamental Palestinian rights.

Its insistence on a "[two-state solution](#)" is motivated by a desire to rescue Israel as a "Jewish state" by hiving the Palestinians off into [bantustan-like](#) reservations where they can pose no "[demographic threat](#)" to Israeli Jewish power.

For the same reason, J Street opposes the right of return of Palestinian refugees.

It has unyieldingly supported recent Israeli massacres of Palestinians, [including](#) the attack on Gaza last summer that killed more than 2,200 people. It has [endorsed](#) the Obama administration's campaign to end all efforts to bring Israeli war criminals to justice.

J Street has regularly [hosted and honored](#) Israeli leaders implicated in war crimes. At the same time, it [staunchly opposes](#) the nonviolent BDS movement.

Normalizing apartheid

Neither Weingarten nor Ben-Ami responded to requests for comment about the AFT/J-Street visit to "Israel and the West Bank."

But we can gain much insight into the delegation and its pernicious politics from this ten-

minute video released by AFT to coincide with Weingarten's appearance at the J Street conference.

Bearing Witness: AFT Leaders Mission to Israel and the West Bank

It opens with Weingarten standing against the backdrop of occupied East Jerusalem and waxing poetic about looking out over "four thousand years of history."

She enthuses about Israel's "Declaration of Independence" as a document that embodies Israel's supposed egalitarian, open and democratic spirit. (This is the same document that historian [Ilan Pappé](#) describes [in the current issue of *The Link*](#) as "window dressing aimed at safeguarding Israel's future international image and status" from the reality of ethnic cleansing and apartheid.)

With uplifting music playing throughout, the video reproduces almost every conceivable trope of what Palestinians condemn as normalization.

There is a relentless insistence on "dialogue" and heart-warming singing groups and schools bringing Arab and Jewish children together. There is constant chatter about "both sides," obscuring the enormous power imbalance between a nuclear-armed, US-backed military occupation engaged in industrial-scale colonization, and a nearly defenseless, impoverished, occupied and dispossessed people.

The American delegates are presented as caring innocents who just want to make a difference.



J Street director Jeremy Ben-Ami (far right) with AFT president Randi Weingarten and Illinois

Federation of Teachers president Dan Montgomery (fifth and sixth from right, respectively) with other members of the AFT delegation and Dalia Rabin (center) at the Yitzhak Rabin Center in Tel Aviv. (via Facebook)

[PACBI](#), the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, [defines normalization](#) as: “cultural activities, projects, events and products involving Palestinians and/or other Arabs on one side and Israelis on the other ... that are based on the false premise of symmetry/parity between the oppressors and the oppressed or that assume that both colonizers and colonized are equally responsible for the ‘conflict.’”

Such activities, PACBI states, “are intellectually dishonest and morally reprehensible forms of normalization that ought to be boycotted.”

PACBI is not opposed to all contact between Israelis and Palestinians, but says context and politics are critical.

It welcomes “co-resistance” activities in which “the Israeli party in the project recognizes the comprehensive Palestinian rights under international law” corresponding to the rights set out in the Palestinian [call](#) for boycott, divestment and sanctions: an end to occupation, full equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel and full respect of the rights of Palestinian refugees.

Obscuring reality

But even when the AFT video documents delegates being shown some of the most brutal aspects of the occupation, it is overlaid with an anesthetizing, normalizing fog.

The delegates are seen on a tour of [Hebron](#), led not by Palestinians who live there but by an Israeli Jew from the group Breaking the Silence. They witness the emptiness of [Shuhada Street](#), once the bustling heart of the Old City, but forbidden to Palestinians by the occupation army.

One AFT delegate says the situation in Hebron is “symbolic of the distrust on both sides.” But what former UN Special Rapporteur and international jurist John Dugard has [documented in Hebron](#) is an Israeli-imposed regime he explicitly likens to the apartheid that existed in his native South Africa.

The [forcible closure of much of Hebron to Palestinians](#) is the direct act of a [brutal](#) colonial occupation, done solely for the benefit of a few fanatical settlers.

This episode, like the rest of the video, deceptively presents occupier and occupied as equally vulnerable and equally responsible.

Erasing Gaza massacre

The only exception is when Israelis are shown as the victims of Palestinians.

“We went to a community right along the Gaza Strip,” Illinois Federation of Teachers President Dan Montgomery explains.

He talks about how “when fighting broke out in Gaza,” Israelis living in the area got fifteen-

second warnings of rocket strikes. “And you’re frantically trying to find out where your small kids are,” he adds.

As he speaks, the video lingers on *Israeli* elementary school children. It then shows how many “safe places” – bomb shelters – they have.

This Israeli-centric view regularly instilled in participants of *hasbara*, or propaganda, tours completely ignores the 900,000 children – half the total population imprisoned in the Gaza Strip under Israeli siege – who have no shelters.

There is no mention of the [UN schools repeatedly bombed](#) during Israel’s attack, as they served as makeshift shelters, killing children and their families.

Montgomery does not fret about the more than 500 children killed – [many wiped out with their entire families](#) – and more than 3,300 injured, during Israel’s 51-day bombardment of Gaza last summer.

Neither is there any mention of Israel’s relentless ceasefire violations and attacks on Gaza, [before](#) and [after](#) the summer massacre.

Palestinians in Gaza are invisible, not a subject of concern for AFT or for J Street.

Weingarten made no mention of them in her speech, except, like the video, as a threat to Israelis.

Palestinians: visible but absent

The AFT delegates, however, do remind us repeatedly that they met and spoke to Palestinians in many places in the West Bank – an assertion meant to deliver an impression of even-handedness.

But in the film *all* the analysis and framing is given by Israeli and American Jews. No Palestinian is seen or heard providing analysis or bearing witness to Israeli crimes.

At one point, J Street director Jeremy Ben-Ami is seen lecturing to the group. In the background is a slide showing relative population figures of Arabs and Jews – the “demographic threat” supposedly posed by Palestinian births is a particular obsession of liberal Zionists.

Palestinians only appear as a smiling, harmless backdrop, eagerly welcoming their American guests and grateful for [tokenistic and depoliticized training programs](#) provided by AFT in collaboration with the Palestinian Authority.

Scholars Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock have termed AFT’s US-funded teacher training programs in the Middle East “[labor imperialism](#)” that serves “US government foreign policy interests in maintaining and extending American control and influence over the region.”

At the same time, the video suggests AFT is encouraging normalization between Palestinian and Israeli teachers’ groups.

Selective amnesia

Towards the end of the video, there is a sanitized segment on how the [Nakba](#) – the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestine – is commemorated at Jerusalem’s Hand in Hand School, one of a tiny number of mixed Jewish-Palestinian schools.

Jewish and Palestinian students and teachers briefly speak about how difficult it is. A Palestinian teacher talks about how she teaches the history from “both sides.”

A Palestinian girl says that Nakba Day “reminds us that we need to move on and not just stick to the past and all the bad things that happened.”

The message is clear: forget about the past, and forget about its present – the unfulfilled rights of millions of Palestinian refugees.

But forgetting is only a prescription for Palestinians, never for Jews.

After the visit to Palestine, Weingarten and the rest of the AFT delegation went to Auschwitz, the Nazi death camp in Poland – and this is featured in the video.

The lesson of Auschwitz, Weingarten explains, is “Never forget. You can’t combat hate and prejudice if you forget.”

Using the Holocaust

The inclusion of Auschwitz in a video on the situation in Palestine seems calculated to send the not so subtle message that whatever is happening to Palestinians is dwarfed morally and in scale by the Holocaust.

In her address to J Street, Weingarten made the connection clear, using the Holocaust – or Shoah – as a rhetorical device to justify Zionism and whitewash and elevate the Israeli state to a sacred principle and manifest destiny.

She intersperses this passage with “*dayenu*” – a word taken from the Passover ritual meaning roughly “it would have sufficed for us”:

For our ancestors, if we had said: There will be a Jewish state – for the 6 million who died in the Shoah, there is now a homeland where more than six million Jews live – they would have said, “Dayenu.” A state with a powerful military. Dayenu. A vigorous economy. Dayenu. A proud democracy. Dayenu.

Here, Weingarten really lays out her cards. Her interactions with and ostensible concern for Palestinians are nothing but a liberal cover for Jewish nationalism. In the end she represents the Israeli army as the answer to the Holocaust – a classic Netanyahu talking point.

In addition to Weingarten, Montgomery and Ben-Ami, the [delegation included](#) Ted Kirsch, president of AFT Pennsylvania; Dennis Kelly, president of United Educators of San Francisco; Melissa Cropper, president of the Ohio Federation of Teachers; Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, leader of Congregation Simchat Beit Torah in New York; Louis Malfaro, an AFT vice-president and an officer of Texas AFT; Ruby Newbold, an AFT vice-president and vice-president of AFT Michigan and Patricia Keefer, AFT’s director of international affairs.

AFT's sordid history

A little history is useful to put the AFT's support for Israel and for the anti-Palestinian rights agenda of J Street in perspective.

The union had a long and sordid history of zealous participation in McCarthyist purges, [expelling members and affiliates](#) accused of communism.

During the decades of the Cold War, AFT functioned as an arm of US imperialism and foreign policy, particularly in Latin America.

The union's leaders, foremost among them Albert Shanker, its president from 1974 to 1997, formed close alliances with the CIA and other US government agencies. Their mission was to stem the influence of communism by creating politically amenable US-sponsored international labor organizations. In the process they helped divide and destroy the trade union movements in many countries.

AFT was central to a nexus of organizations doing such work, including the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), the US-financed organization sponsored by the AFL-CIO labor federation. AIFLD notoriously worked closely with the CIA and the US embassy to [destabilize Chile](#) and instigate Pinochet's 1973 coup.

A [pamphlet on the AFT's relationship with the CIA](#) by George N. Schmidt, a long-time Chicago Teachers Union activist and publisher of [Substance News](#), includes a letter from David Selden, who preceded Shanker as president of AFT.

This quotation from Selden suggests that much of the international activity undertaken by Shanker and like-minded associates was motivated by a desire to advance Israel's interests:

The whole AIFLD, CIA, AFT, AFL-CIO and Social Democrats USA web of relationships is complicated by the Israel problem. American Jews are understandably concerned for the future of Israel, and rightly or wrongly they consider the policy of the Soviet Union to be anti-Israel, at least in its effect. This in turn leads many Israeli supporters to condone activities of the interlocking defense-intelligence labor establishment which they otherwise would indignantly denounce. It is hard to take a balanced view of such an emotional problem.

[Democracy's Champion](#), a book published by the AFT's Albert Shanker Institute to honor Shanker's legacy, confirms that his Zionism was a strong motivation throughout his life and leadership, turning the union into a perfect tool for both Israel and US imperialism.

Soon after he took office, for instance, Shanker appointed AFT staffer Eugenia Kemble to join AFL-CIO delegations to the UN's International Labor Organization (ILO). One of Kemble's "main tasks," according to *Democracy's Champion*, "was to help defeat the anti-Israel resolutions that arose quite regularly at ILO conferences." Kemble received the "Israel State Medal" for her efforts.

During the 1970s, the AFT regularly adopted resolutions pledging staunch support for Israel. A 1974 resolution railed against the UN for voting to allow Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader Yasser Arafat to address the General Assembly.

“Not even the terrorists’ most ardent supporters seriously envision the wolf turning into a lamb,” the resolution states, before asserting, “We stand firm with the State of Israel and her heroic people, Jews, Arabs and Christians alike.”

Similarly, a [1976 resolution](#) called Israel “our only remaining sister democracy in the Middle East” and “a cornerstone of America’s defense against the spread of totalitarian movements and military dictatorship into the Mediterranean and the Middle East.”

Supporting Israeli and American wars

Shanker’s successors continued his legacy of serving US imperialism. AFT [supported and helped the Bush administration justify the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq](#).

In 2006, the AFT adopted a [resolution](#) fully supporting that year’s invasion of Lebanon, during which Israel killed more than 1,200 civilians and deliberately destroyed much of the country’s infrastructure.

It was not without opposition, however. “The delegates narrowly passed this resolution after heated debate,” wrote AFT San Francisco Local 2121 member and past president Allan Fisher in a letter published by the *The Boston Globe*.

According to Fisher, “half the delegates on the convention floor vigorously opposed this resolution because it does not call for a ceasefire and makes no criticism whatsoever of Israel’s unjust and brutal behavior.”

Michael Letwin, co-convenor of the solidarity group [Labor for Palestine](#), says that despite the complicity of union leaderships like the AFT’s, rank-and-file labor is playing a growing role in the Palestinians’ struggle to regain all their rights.

“That is why BDS is championed by the Congress of South African Trade Unions and numerous other trade unionists around the world, including dockworkers on the US West Coast who refuse to handle Israeli Zim line cargo, and UAW 2865 at the University of California,” Letwin told The Electronic Intifada.

“Weingarten and other US labor leaders must end their longstanding complicity with apartheid Israel, and support a free Palestine, from the river to the sea, with equal rights for all,” he added.

“Partnership”

The support for Israel may be rooted in the AFT’s history but it is also symptomatic of the approach Weingarten takes to politics and power today when it comes to the union’s core mission.

Weingarten and her leadership team have faced persistent challenges from segments of the membership for being “[too willing to partner with the corporate elite allied to the Obama administration’s attempt to ‘reform’ public education](#).”

She was criticized for [cozying up](#) to Chicago Mayor [Rahm Emanuel](#) – appearing with him on a [June 2012 Clinton Global Initiative panel](#) supporting privatization – at a time when the city’s teachers were preparing to strike.

The [strike](#) by the AFT-affiliated Chicago Teachers Union the following September was seen as a model and inspiration for educators across the US facing neoliberal “reform” and privatization agendas.

Chicago has long been ground zero for the assault on public education, especially stealth privatization through the creation of charter schools. In 2013, Emanuel announced the closure of dozens of schools, overwhelmingly in long-neglected African American neighborhoods.

Karen Lewis, the president of the Chicago Teachers Union, was tipped as a possible challenger to Emanuel for mayor, but declined to run for health reasons.

Still, for many, her grassroots leadership [offers a marked contrast to Weingarten’s approach](#).

While Chicago teachers fought for and won major concessions on the picket lines, Weingarten was there with them.

But she has been accused of [being late to come to their side](#) and then [downplaying their victory](#). Her members may ask why she has so much time to promote Israel through *hasbara* tours and so little time for teachers on the frontlines.

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