# In Support of Joint Struggle

written by Dan Fischer | March 15, 2021

Israeli Jews and Palestinians protest apartheid in Tel Aviv. (Oren Ziv, *+972 Mag*)

More than six thousand Israeli Jews and Palestinians assemble in Tel Aviv, waving Palestinian flags and denouncing Israeli policy as apartheid. Thousands of young Ethiopian-Israelis march against police brutality, blocking highways, even throwing stones at police, and some chanting, "Free Palestine." Mizrahi Jews petition Israel's High Court to reject the Nation-State Law as anti-Arab and therefore both anti-Palestinian and anti-Mizrahi. An increase in draft-dodging leads Israel's army to lament a "decreased motivation to serve" among the population.

Such incidents from the last couple years remain absent from Haymarket's anthology *Palestine: A Socialist Introduction*, published in December 2020, and from Steve Leigh's review published late last month in *New Politics*. The book's section titled "Workers of the World Unite" does not invite masses of Israeli Jewish workers to join the Palestinian liberation struggle. In fact, one of the book's contributors, Daphna Thier, even declares the Israeli working class "Not an Ally." Likewise, Leigh insists that "the Israeli working class is not a potential revolutionary force."

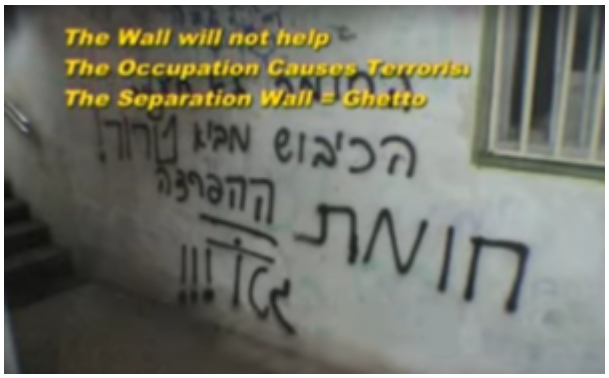
Thier, Leigh, and the Haymarket book's editors Sumaya Awad and brian bean [spelled lower-case], all based in the United States like myself, come from a position I share, that of supporting the Boycott Divest Sanctions (BDS) movement as one component of democratizing the Middle East from below. Backed by 86% of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, BDS has been called a "strategic threat" by the Israeli establishment which has spent millions combating it. The anthology's contributors, editors, and reviewer are right to insist that Israeli Jews' present opposition to BDS is not sufficient reason for the world's Left to stop supporting the movement and its demands for social equality. However, when they appear to altogether discount Israeli workers' revolutionary potential, they overlook the importance of joint mass struggle between Palestinians and Israeli Jews.

**Common Revolutionary Aims**

Thier begins the chapter "Not an Ally" by summarizing the Marxist theorist Hal Draper's argument that the working class generally has the "interest and ability to overthrow capitalism." Nonetheless, Thier argues that the Israeli Jewish working class is "an exception to this rule" and is "incapable of solidarizing with Palestinians" due to "their material conditions." It is unfortunate that the chapter does not mention what Draper wrote specifically about Israel. In 1954, Draper argued that Zionism went against ordinary Israeli Jews' material self-interest and well-being.

A Zionist state "will be a hell for the Jews," Draper argued, "as long as it insists on being a Jewish ghetto in an Arab world." Therefore, Draper proposed that Jews and Arabs could engage in "joint struggle from below, cemented by common national-revolutionary aims and common social interests." What Draper contended in 1954 is still true today; the reality is that the Zionist state has been a disaster for Israel's Jews.

Zionism has enriched Israeli elites, but it has not liberated Israeli Jewry from financial precarity. Some 18% of Israeli Jews live below the poverty line. Despite the Israeli government's frequent invocations of Holocaust history, even a quarter of Israel's Holocaust survivors live in poverty. This impoverishment is connected to Israeli militarism. As Israeli refuseniks—who choose jail time over performing their mandatory military service—point out in their 2021 open letter, Israel's high military and police spending takes away from funding on "welfare, education, and health."



"The Occupation Causes Terrorism" graffiti (pictured in the documentary *Anarchists Against the Wall of Israel* by It's All Lies Production)

Although Thier claims that Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza has been "beneficial to the Israeli capitalists, state, and workers," the occupation has been the main cause of terrorist violence against ordinary Israelis. The West Bank settlements, consistently expanded throughout decades of Left and Right Zionist administrations alike, have been a common complaint in Hamas's public statements. The repeated bombings of Gaza, also supported across Israel's political establishment, have actually boosted popular Palestinian support for Hamas.

Overall, Zionism has failed to provide a situation of safety and well-being for Israeli Jews, creating instead what Draper called a "hell for the Jews." The refuseniks' letter declares that "Zionist policy" is "poisoning Israeli society–it is violent, militaristic, oppressive, and chauvinistic." The endlessly militarized atmosphere has been a cause of major distress for Israeli teenagers, some 73% of whom report mental health problems. Increasing numbers of Israelis are discharged from the army due to mental illness. The age-adjusted suicide rate for Israeli Jews is 2.4 times higher than it is for Israeli-Palestinians.

Israel's Mizrahi (ethnically Middle Eastern) Jews, who have faced persistent racism from Ashkenazi (ethnically European) Jews throughout Zionism's history, have even more reason to support revolutionary change. Israeli Mizrahi scholar Smadar Lavie has gone so far as to describe "intra-Jewish apartheid" within Israel. Most infamously, Israeli authorities in the 1950s kidnapped Mizrahi children and gave at least some of them to Ashkenazi Jewish families to raise. As the *New York Times* reports, this horrific episode of Israeli history has been corroborated by DNA tests and acknowledged by an Israeli cabinet member.

Israeli Black Panthers hold a sign telling Prime Minister Golda Meir, "Fly away / We've had enough of you" (*Electronic Intifada*)

In downplaying Mizrahi Jews' potential to turn against Zionism, Thier minimizes the powerful legacy of the Mizrahis' 1970s group the Israeli Black Panthers. Thier writes that "they too subordinated the question of Zionism to the economic issues they faced." In fact, as Jaclyn Ashly reports in *Electronic Intifada*, the Israeli Black Panthers "took a clear stand against Zionism." Protesting the 1972 World Zionist Congress, the group believed that the "Zionist movement was the cause of their socioeconomic conditions in Israel." They were the first Israelis to meet with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

**"The Nature of a Settler Working Class"**

In arguing that Israeli Jewish workers form a necessarily reactionary class, Thier and Leigh point out characteristics that also apply to U.S. non-Indigenous workers. Thier writes, "[I]t is the nature of a settler working class and its unique relationship to the state that distinguishes the Israeli proletariat from other working classes." Leigh describes "the overwhelming privilege of the Israeli working class in relation to the Palestinians." As these authors surely know, the U.S. working class is also settler-colonial and has overwhelming privilege in relation to Native Americans.

Sadly, despite the editors' location in the United States, Native Americans are barely mentioned in *Palestine: A Socialist Introduction* and appear only twice in the index. One of these mentions correctly points out, "the Nakba [displacement of Palestinians] is reminiscent of the United States' dispossession and erasure of indigenous Americans." The United States has been more successful so far at eliminating the native population than Israel has, but does that somehow give U.S. workers *more* potential to be revolutionary?

Shrinking Indigenous lands in USA and Palestine (*US Campaign for Palestinian Rights*)

Leigh, Thier, Awad, and bean lack consistency when they deny the revolutionary potential of Israeli Jewish workers but advocate revolutionary class struggle here in the United States. In a previous *New Politics* article, Leigh wrote that Americans "need to stress both a united front approach and the need to build revolutionary organization." Awad and bean title the book's conclusion "Revolution Until Victory," and they center U.S. workers in their proposed revolution. They even propose

organizing American “workers involved directly or indirectly in the military industrial complex.” But when it comes to Israel, Thier writes, “Israeli workers are now rewarded through the arms economy.” If U.S. workers in the military-industrial complex can be revolutionaries, then why can’t Israeli Jewish workers in the military-industrial complex? And while Thier is right to criticize Israel’s 2011 tent protests for ignoring Palestinian rights, perhaps opposing it outright is a step too far. Didn’t our own Occupy Wall Street also fail, at least initially, to advance a decolonial platform? Didn’t the very name gloss over the fact that Wall Street existed on stolen Lenape territory? Living in somewhat of a glass house, U.S. leftists should be careful not to apply a standard to Israelis that we wouldn’t apply also to ourselves. Perhaps with a leftist intervention of critical support rather than dismissal, Israelis’ protests against elites could have developed robust demands for Palestinian freedom.

Draper wisely distinguished between anti-Zionism, which opposes a regime, and anti-Israelism, which opposes a country and its people. He compared being anti-Zionist to being anti-Soviet or anti-Nazi, whereas being anti-Israel is like being anti-Russia or anti-Germany. Unfortunately, some in the Palestine solidarity movement conflate anti-Zionism and anti-Israelism. Anti-Israelism is Roger Waters conjuring up a false story about Israeli concert attendees failing to applaud his call for regional peace. Anti-Israelism is the now-defunct *Socialist Worker* (then affiliated with Haymarket) declaring “unconditional” support for Hamas, a far-right group that intentionally kills Israeli civilians. Anti-Israelism is Judith Butler bizarrely remarking, “Yes, understanding Hamas, Hezbollah as social movements that are progressive, that are on the Left, that are part of a global Left, is extremely important.” Maybe more Israeli Jews would join the global Left if they felt as invited as their theocratic enemies are.

### Joint Struggle Against False Consciousness

To be fair, the Haymarket anthology is correct that Israeli Jews presently exhibit shockingly high levels of anti-Arab racism. Polls report that about 90% of Israeli Jews would be disturbed if their child befriended an Arab of the opposite sex, and about 80% think Jews should get preferential treatment over non-Jews. In both the Israeli and U.S. cases, racist nationalism can be a powerful form of false consciousness. “Since we can remember, we have been brainwashed with hatred and fear of our Palestinian neighbors,” the Israeli group Anarchists Against the Wall declared in 2004. Similar mechanisms have taken place in the United States, with Indigenous people denigrated as “savages” and “red—ns” and demeaned through sports logos and mascots across the country. Although opinions are shifting, there continues to be widespread support among U.S. workers for celebrating Columbus Day and for building dirty energy projects that further encroach on Indigenous communities’ lands.

“Return Serve,” a photograph by Hamde Abu Rahma, from a 2013 art show

benefiting Anarchists Against the Wall
(*Crimethinc*)

Whether in the United States or Israel, the best way to break through false consciousness is, as Draper suggested, through "joint struggle from below." During years of high-profile Indigenous-led joint direct action against the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines, between 2012 and 2017, the percentage of Americans opposing these pipelines doubled, from 23 to 48 percent. Starting in 2003, there were militant joint Palestinian and Israeli direct actions blocking construction of the Separation Barrier. In the first three years of these protests, Israeli opposition to the wall in principle (not just to the wall's route) also roughly doubled, from 7 to 13 percent. While that growth may not seem like much, it was large in proportion to the number of Israelis who took part in the protests, and it pointed a powerful strategic path forward. Joint struggle proved sufficiently impactful, Israeli activist Uri Gordon explains, that even more moderate Israeli peace groups began adopting the strategy and seeking out Palestinian partners.

If Thier is right that the anti-Zionist Israeli Black Panthers were "more brutally and violently suppressed than any other social justice movement in Israeli history," then it demonstrates how much of a threat Israel considered joint struggle to be. Chicago's Black Panthers also faced swift repression, including assassinations, after they tried building a Rainbow Coalition with Indigenous, Puerto Rican, and white radicals. By disrupting elites' divide-and-conquer tactics, coalitions between the Israeli Panthers and the PLO, and between the U.S. Panthers and the American Indian Movement among other groups, posed a significant threat to the status quo.

Although the current number of Israeli Jewish BDS supporters is apparently only a couple hundred, and although Israeli Jewish support for a shared, democratic country is shrinking, down from 19% in 2018 to 10% in 2020, this could change. Anarchists Against the Wall activist Yossi Bartal explains that, "In such a blatantly racist atmosphere, the most radical act is to break this separation by demonstrating together with Palestinians, living together, talking to each other, loving and caring for each other–even making love with each other." Jointly organized direct action helps tear down walls, physical and mental, between the two populations. By struggling together, the two groups can demonstrate—to each other, themselves, the world—a capacity to share a country.