

Earl Raab

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LABOR UNDERSTANDS

George Meany, AFL-CIO President has refused to accept his usual post as labor chairman for the U.S. Olympics Committee, saying:

"My conscience will not allow me to help raise money to send American athletes to Moscow at a time when the KGB is trying to 'cleanse' that city of dissidents prior to the Olympic games. I will not be moral complicity in Mr. Brezhnev's attempt to destroy the lives of courageous individuals who seek to advance the cause of human rights."

His action points up again that, in the political arena, labor movement has been the Jewish community's most constant and potent friend. It's as simple as that.

In 1933, when most Americans still felt that we should not become involved, the AFL Convention unanimously condemned the new Nazi regime in Germany, and the "atrocities perpetrated on the Jewish population." It was not left at that. The resolution included an appeal to boycott German goods and services as long as these Nazi atrocities continued.

That boycott was fairly successful, as these things go. Germany's share among total U.S. imports dropped from about 6 per cent in 1932 to about 3 per cent by 1937. It did bother the Germans, and drew complaints from Goebbels. The boycott would undoubtedly have been more effective if the Jewish organizations had pulled together. *The American Jewish Congress started another;* The Jewish Labor Committee started one boycott campaign; *as did the Jewish War Veterans, and The* American League for the Defense of Jewish Rights. And so it went in that period of astonishing fragmentation among Jewish organizations. The initiative of the AFL was all that more important.

Not coincidentally, contemporary labor and Jewish journals noted that Communist Party

leaders "boycotted the anti-Nazi boycott", because it did not serve their purposes. The Forverts angrily called them "Communist Nazis". And the ILGWU, at its 1934 Convention, complained that when organized labor asked workers to walk off their jobs and attend an anti-Nazi protest meeting at Madison Square Garden, the meeting was "disrupted by a horde of Communists who invaded the Garden and, by sheer violence, succeeded in destroying the chief purpose of the demonstration."

The Soviet Jewry movement and American began in the 1930^s, with the effort to spotlight the plight of Soviet Jews and to save them. This effort began within the American labor movement, which has politically supported that effort ever since. Meany's refusal to serve the U.S. Olympic Committee is only the most recent piece. The Jackson-Vanik Amendment ^{was} at least as much a political victory for organized labor as for organized Jewry. The chances are good that the Jewish community could not have won that one with ^{out} the labor movement.

Nor could Israel have fared as well in American politics without the unfailing support of organized labor. At times when major political figures faltered in their support of Israel, as did various traditional religious and ethnic allies of the Jews, the labor movement remained steadfast. That stiffened the spine of many a Congressman.

One might be tempted to call this a long love affair between the labor movement and the Jewish community-but that would be putting the wrong face on the matter. The hard fact is that certain fundamental self-interests of organized labor and of the Jewish community have run-and still run-on the same course. Totalitarianism is the ultimate enemy of the labor movement, as it is of the Jews. There were no labor unions or workers' rights in Nazi Germany; and there are none in the Soviet Union. Labor leaders know what the Jews are talking about.

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"Labor Undersands"

page 3

Labor unions are not always right - any more than are Jewish organization. But all this is something to think about, next time one contemplates a labor picket line.