

New Hampshire Rabbis Stand With Workers and Oppose “Right to Work”

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Judaism has a strong tradition of supporting the right to employment with dignity. The Torah teaches, “You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer” (Deut. 24:14-15). Jewish activists and workers historically played key roles in the labor movement, improving the lives of workers for more than a century.

Manual labor and social justice were often stressed in rabbinic writings. Labor was considered a blessing in itself, and it was held that the Bible required the state to concern itself with its citizens during unemployment, old age, and illness. These benefits were to be granted as a matter of legal right and in a manner which was not offensive to the recipients' sense of dignity.¹ Workers' right to organize into unions was upheld by the rabbis, and it was viewed as an extension of the dictum that “townspeople may inflict penalties for breach of their regulations.”² Workers' right even to strike was justified.³

The mass Eastern European emigration which began during the 1880s and continued through the 1920s brought great numbers of Jewish workers to the United States. In 1888, several small Jewish labor organizations formed the United Hebrew Trades as their central body. Many of the Jewish garment workers, specifically, became active in the American labor movement. They organized the United Garment Workers of America (1891); the women afterwards left this union and formed the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (1900); the majority of the men still a part of the UGWA left and formed the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (1914).

The most prominent early Jewish trade unionist was Samuel Gompers, who helped establish the American Federation of Labor in 1886, and served as its president for 38 years. Rabbis early became active in labor mediation in the United States, serving on both general and Jewish mediation boards. Rabbi Morris Adler of Detroit, for example, served as the chairman of the Public Review Board of the United Auto Workers from 1957–66.

The right to organize has long been a part of Jewish law and tradition – beginning with the Torah, continuing with the Rabbinic texts of the first millennium, during medieval times, and into modernity. During this week of Passover, as Jews celebrate our deliverance from Egyptian slavery, we also celebrate what that deliverance means. It is our right to live and make a living in dignity and freedom. We need to look no further than the Bible's story of the creation of human beings, created in image of God and endowed with infinite worth and dignity.⁴ A part of that dignity involves organizing and raising our collective voices.

As Faith in Public Life wrote in an *amici curiae* brief in the Supreme Court case *Janus v. AFSCME*, “labor unions are critical components of a just society.” They added, “religious authors have long recognized that effective bargaining requires an effective means for unions to collect the funds that they need to operate.”

The “right to work” bill, S.B. 61, is an attempt to weaken the ability of working people to organize. It would divide workers wherever unions exist so that their collective voice is substantially diminished. As Jews, we stand with all working people and oppose S.B. 61.

¹Simon Federbush, *The Jewish Concept of Labor* (1956), 50–51; Z. Warhaftig (ed.), *Osef Piskei Din Rabbaniiyyim*, 45.

²BB 8b; Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook cited in Katriel Tchorsh, *Keter Efrayim* (1967), 160–171; cf. Moshe Feinstein, *Iggerot Moshe: Hoshen Mishpat*, 108–9.

³Shillem Warhaftig, bibl., 982, 984; *Iggerot Moshe*, 110–111.

⁴Genesis 1:27.