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August 2019

"Immigrants All": The Jewish Labor Committee, the McCarran-Walter Act, and Labor's Struggles over Immigration Policy, 1951-1955

On June 27, 1952, the Immigration and Nationality Act, known as the McCarran-Walter Act after its lead sponsors Senator Pat McCarran (D—N.V.) and Representative Francis E. Walter (D—P.A.), became the United States' principal law concerning immigration policy over President Harry S. Truman's veto. Truman supported the bill's provisions overturning the prohibition on people of Asian descent becoming U.S. citizens, but was deeply concerned that McCarran-Walter perpetuated other racial inequities in the immigration system, namely the national origins quota system by which immigration visas were provided to the residents of other countries based on the number of people of that nationality present in the United States in 1920.

The passage of the McCarran-Walter Act was seen as a clear victory for the restrictionists who had controlled the nation's immigration laws for decades over an emerging coalition favoring liberalization. But this reading obscures what was a lively debate about the proper ways to govern entry to the United States. Among the fiercest proponents of liberalization were ethnic and religious groups, particularly American Jewish organizations. Jewish groups became staunch anti-restrictionists as a result of overlapping interests in combatting anti-Semitism, responding to the plight of Jewish refugees after World War II, and promoting civil rights. In doing so, they developed relationships with other religious, ethnic, and professional organizations. As Maddalena Marinari has shown, the battles over McCarran-Walter trace the rise of liberal interest group politics and professionalized legislative advocacy in the post-war era.[1]

[1] Maddalena Marinari, "Divided and Conquered: Immigration Reform Advocates and the Passage of the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 35, no. 3 (2016), 9–40.

The McCarran-Walter Act also tracks an important shift in the immigration politics of the U.S. labor movement. Traditionally, the labor movement had supported immigration restriction, believing that immigrants would compete with native-born Americans for jobs and push down wages. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) had advocated for all manner of restrictionist policies in the first half of the twentieth century, including literacy tests and the national origins quota system.[2] But after initially expressing support for McCarran-Walter, the AFL moved toward a position first of quiet neutrality and, by 1954, of criticism and calls for revision.

Historical treatments of the McCarran-Walter Act have largely explained this shift in labor's position on immigration in terms of changing leadership in the national unions and the evolving priorities of the Democratic Party.[3] They have thus overlooked the transformations occurring in state federations and local unions, where there had long been heterogeneity in opinions on immigration policy. Additionally, they have given insufficient attention to how the labor movement's position on immigration was affected by its place in broader liberal and New Deal coalitions. Specifically, historians have missed the connections between, on the one hand, the role of the organized Jewish community in leading the charge against the McCarran-Walter Act and, on the other, the labor movement's drift away from restrictionism.

American Jews were engaged not only in Washington-based legislative advocacy but also in educational and political programming around immigration within the labor movement. My focus here is on one particular organization: the Jewish Labor Committee (JLC), which served as a nexus between the pro-liberalization Jewish community and the immigration-ambivalent labor

[2] Brian Burgoon et al., "Immigration and the Transformation of American Unionism," *The International Migration Review* 44, no. 4 (2010), 940-942.
[3] See, for example, Vernon M. Briggs, *Immigration and American Unionism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects : Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

movement. I argue that the JLC played an important role at the state and local levels in moving organized labor to oppose the national origins quota system and McCarran-Walter by the mid-1950s.

The JLC emerged from the milieu of the Jewish immigrant left. Working-class Jewish immigrants, mainly from Russia and Eastern Europe, came to the United States in large numbers at the turn of the twentieth century and became deeply involved in the U.S. labor movement and in leftwing politics. Jews were especially well-represented in the garment industry and its associated unions, chief among them the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACWA). Historian Aristide Zolberg notes that Jewish unions—powered by immigrant labor—were among the early supporters of liberalizing American immigration laws. But given their relative lack of power, they had little influence in shaping the national conversation, or even the conversation within the labor movement, early in the century.[4]

The Jewish Labor Committee was created in New York City in 1934 in order to represent the interests of Jewish workers and the Jewish-dominated unions within the wider labor movement. It was also designed to bring together the various organizations that existed on the noncommunist Jewish left, including those engaged in socialist and working-class organizing.[5] From its beginning, the JLC had an internationalist vision that linked the status of Jewish laborers in the United States with the ongoing plight of the Jewish and working-class

[4] Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 276.

[5] At its founding, it incorporated representatives from the ILGWU; the ACWA; the United Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers' International Union; and the United Hebrew Trades as well as the Workmen's Circle, the Jewish Socialist Farband, the Forward Association, and the Jewish National Workers' Alliance (Poale Zion). Robert D. Parmet, *Master of Seventh Avenue: David Dubinsky and American Labor Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 96.

communities still in Europe. In the words of its founding constitution, the goals of the JLC were to "give aid to Jewish and non-Jewish labor institutions overseas; to assist the democratic labor movement in Europe; provide succor to victims of oppression and persecution; and to combat anti-Semitism and racial and religious intolerance abroad and in the United States."[6]

The JLC's initial work was concentrated on the growing threat of Nazism to European Jews and labor unions.[7] After the surrender of the Axis powers, the JLC turned its attention to securing passage to the United States or other safe havens for the war's Displaced Persons (DPs). Its early successes were facilitated by its relationships within the U.S. labor movement. Many of its high-profile supporters, namely ILGWU president David Dubinsky and ACWA head Sidney Hillman, were important figures in the leaderships of the AFL and the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO).[8] The JLC also maintained ties with local unions and state labor federations in major metropolitan areas. By 1951, it had established offices in fifteen cities—including Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York, and Minneapolis—and employed twenty-two local staff members.[9] Often, these staffers were affiliated with one of the local unions, and their dual role made it easier for the JLC to exercise its influence.

As the war wound down and Jewish refugees were resettled in the United States or in the newly created state of Israel, the JLC began to shift its focus from international rescue operations to domestic programs in the United States and Canada to promote civil rights and address

[6] Quoted in Catherine Collomp, "The Jewish Labor Committee, American Labor, and the Rescue of European Socialists, 1934-1941," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 68 (Fall 2005), 117.
[7] Catherine Collomp has shown that, in the 1930s and 1940s, the young organization was instrumental in rescuing hundreds of labor and socialist leaders across the continent and in supporting Jews living in Poland and Russia. Ibid.; Catherine Collomp, "'Relief is a political gesture:' The Jewish Labor Committee's interventions in war-torn Poland, 1939-1945," *Transatlantica. Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal*, no. 1 (July 9, 2014).
[8] Collomp, "The Jewish Labor Committee, American Labor, and the Rescue of European Socialists, 1934-1941," 117–18.
[9] "Over-all Facts About the JLC Committee to Combat Anti-Semitism," 1951, WAG.025.003, Box 289, Folder 43, Jewish Labor Committee Records Part III, The Tamiment Library & Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York, NY (hereafter, JLC III).

various forms of discrimination within the labor movement. Through what were called Committees to Combat Intolerance, the JLC would host workshops and film screenings, distribute informational literature, compose draft resolutions for adoption at local and state conventions, and encourage union members to engage in legislative advocacy. The JLC's work on immigration arose from and helped to define this move in institutional priorities from international refugee assistance to domestic civil rights, and from a focus on the interests of Jewish workers to a broader effort to link the concerns of American Jews with the priorities of the labor movement. The JLC became particularly interested in efforts to abolish the national origins quota system, perceived by American Jewish leaders to be antithetical to the political and cultural pluralism on which they relied to live safely and comfortably in the United States.

While the U.S. immigration debate in the late 1940s had largely centered on what to do with the war refugees, growing concerns about communist infiltration and the threat posed to white supremacy by immigrants of color put the matter of comprehensive immigration reform at the top of the political agenda by early 1951. Anti-labor and anticommunist Senator Pat McCarran introduced a restrictionist immigration reform bill and promised to act on it.[10] This was joined by a similar proposal in the House from Rep. Francis E. Walter. Meanwhile, House Judiciary Chairman Emanuel Celler (D—N.Y.) offered an alternative bill that, while sharing certain features with the McCarran and Walter legislation, provided more flexibility in immigration quota distribution and was regarded as a liberal alternative.[11]

The JLC mobilized to oppose the McCarran and Walter bills along several fronts, operating within and beyond the Jewish community. Under agreements reached with its Jewish

[10] Associated Press, "M'Carran to Seek Strict Alien Laws," *The New York Times*, January 1, 1951.
[11] Murrey Marder, "Cellar-M'Carran Clash Opens Hearing on Immigration Laws," *The Washington Post*, March 7, 1951.

partners, the JLC took the lead in education and advocacy activities to convince the labor movement to speak out against restrictionism.[12] In October 1951, the JLC published the pamphlet "Pioneers of Labor" and advertised it to local unions and state federations.[13] "Pioneers of Labor" recast the history of U.S. labor organizing and activism as a series of alliances between native and immigrant workers. Many labor leaders responded positively to the offer; one CIO Textile Union of America Vice President ordered 100 copies and wrote to his membership that, "After reading it … myself, I feel very strongly that this material should be in the hands of every active member of our union—or at least in the hands of every steward and officer."[14]

The JLC also drafted labor resolutions to ensure that unions would be on record as supporting liberalization and thereby influence pro-labor members of Congress still undecided on the immigration matter. One such resolution, sent along to the president of the United Gas, Coke & Chemical Workers, CIO, in May 1952, spoke about the need to "eliminate the racist, undemocratic and restrictive features of our present immigration laws, and to enact legislation establishing just and humane standards in relation to the admission of immigrants and the deportation of aliens."[15]

A considerable number of local unions and state federations affiliated with both the AFL and the CIO came out against further immigration restriction early in 1952. Among these were many of the unions most closely connected to the JLC, and over which it had particular power, including the ILGWU; the United Hat, Cap and Millinery International Union; and the Textile International Union. The Los Angeles AFL Central Labor Council also expressed opposition to

[12] "JLC-AJC-ADL Agreement."
[13] "Joint Memorandum: Pioneers of Labor," October 31, 1951, WAG.025.003, Box 289, Folder 17, JLC III.
[14] Letter from Sol Stetin to Jewish Labor Committee, November 7, 1951, WAG.025.003, Box 292, Folder 22, JLC III; quoted in Emanuel Muravchik, "Developments in Our Activities to Combat Anti-Semitism, Oct.-Nov. 1951 Part I," WAG. 025.003, Box 289, Folder 43, JLC III.
[15] Letter from Emanuel Muravchik to Martin Wagner, May 29, 1952, WAG.025.003, Box 294, Folder 1, JLC III.

the McCarran and Walter proposals, and the resolution it passed had among its coauthors Max Mont, the JLC staffer in Los Angeles.[16] In June 1952, JLC Field Director Manny Muravchik boasted to the JLC Midwest Conference of the success the organization had had in "the difficult task of winning the trade union movement to support of the liberal Humphrey-Lehman measure and weaning them away from their traditional anti-immigration position," although he did not specify what particular actions he had in mind.[17]

The groundswell from within the labor movement encouraged a small but perceptible shift in the position of the national AFL leadership. While the AFL initially declared its tacit approval of the McCarran and Walter bills because they continued the national origins quota system, it had by mid-1952 shifted to a position the JLC labeled "silence." [18] Still, the AFL remained unwilling to condemn restrictionism outright. And, regardless of where the AFL came down on McCarran-Walter, organized labor did not seem to have a decisive impact on Capitol Hill.[19] With the backing of a broad coalition of Republicans and Southern Democrats, large majorities of the House and Senate passed the legislation over Truman's veto.

Maddalena Marinari argues that, with passage of McCarran-Walter, the liberalization coalition "soon crumbled."[20] But anti-restrictionist advocates, including the Jewish organizations, saw failure only as a demand that they redouble their efforts, now to amend the law. In a document laying out its plans for 1953, the JLC identified "Revision of the McCarran-

[16] Emanuel Muravchik, "Developments in Our Activities to Combat Anti-Semitism, December 1951 – April 1952 Part II," WAG.025.003, Box 177, Folder 26, JLC III; Max Mont, "Combined Report for April and May, 1952," June 11, 1952, WAG.025.003, Box 186, Folder 14, JLC III.
[17] "A Report to the Chicago JLC Conference Delivered by Emanuel Muravchik," June 14, 1952, WAG.025.003, Box 294, Folder 58, JLC III.
[18] Emanuel Muravchik, "Developments in Our Activities to Combat Anti-Semitism, December 1951 – April 1952 Part II."
[19] As Marinari shows, McCarran and Walter took advantage of Congress' general apathy toward immigration reform to control the deliberative process and limit any outside input not supportive of restriction. Marinari, "Divided and Conquered," 14-17.
[20] Marinari, "Divided and Conquered," 32.

Walter Bill" as a "Must"—the highest priority. It promised to "take advantage of the present situation to make an attack for the first time on the anti-immigration concepts which have been prevalent in the labor movement and seek to bring about a positive attitude toward immigration on the part of the labor movement" by designing pro-immigration educational materials.[21]

Between late 1952 and 1955, the JLC continued to produce and circulate documents on the benefits of immigration and the dangers of McCarran-Walter at a steady clip. By the spring of 1953, it had distributed 23,000 copies of "Pioneers of Labor" to 66 unions nationwide.[22] The organization had also added two new publications to its portfolio: "Immigrants All" and "What's Wrong with the McCarran-Walter Law?". "Immigrants All," citing heavily from labor leaders and politicians supportive of revision, called on "American men and women, individually and through their organizations, to turn the debate into a crusade for decent human values, for fairness and justice, for the dignity of the individual and for international understanding."[23] In April 1954, JLC staff reported that at least 45,000 copies of "What's Wrong" had been printed, with fewer than 100 remaining in the National Office.[24] The large number of publications sold suggests that many union leaders hoped to educate their members on the dangers of McCarran-Walter, and that they saw the JLC as a reliable source of pro-liberalization information.

Much of the JLC's work in this period took place on the ground through its local offices and staff. For example, in Los Angeles, Max Mont of the JLC worked closely with AFL and CIO leaders to organize support for revising McCarran-Walter. After Truman's failure to block the law, the president had established a Commission on Immigration and Naturalization to hold

[21] "Jewish Labor Committee Statement on Program Planning for 1953," WAG.025.003, Box 468, Folder 30, JLC III.
[22] Letter from Emanuel Muravchik, April 19, 1953, WAG.025.003, Box 298, Folder 5, JLC III.
[23] "Immigrants All," WAG.025.003, Box 303, Folder 38, JLC II.
[24] Memo from Betty Kaye to Emanuel Muravchik, April 21, 1954, WAG.025.003, Box 303, Folder 68, JLC III.

hearings around the country on the status of the immigration system and possible alternative paths of reform. Mont reported to the National Office that he had overseen the preparation of testimony for the AFL Central Labor Council and the State CIO Council.[25] Mont continued to strengthen his relationships with the Los Angeles AFL and CIO affiliates and with immigration reform activists in the following years, eventually serving as the Executive Director of the Los Angeles Conference on Immigration and Citizenship, a body comprised of labor, religious, and political leaders dedicated to amending McCarran-Walter.[26]

By 1954, the national AFL had adopted a resolution acknowledging the "failure of the McCarran-Walter Omnibus Immigration Act to provide a just or workable basis for handling immigration" and endorsing liberalization.[27] Then, in 1955, the newly-merged AFL-CIO joined its partners in the organized Jewish community in forcefully condemning the national origins quota system.[28] The JLC's goal—to recruit union leaders and rank-and-file members to the cause of liberalization—had been largely achieved. Over the course of only a few years, the national AFL and its local and state affiliates had for the most part turned their backs on a long history of outspoken support for racialized immigration restriction. The educational, organizing, and advocacy work of the JLC was only a small part of this shift. And yet, when examining the dynamics on the ground in the many local unions and state federations nationwide that debated McCarran-Walter, it is hard to ignore the presence of JLC staff and materials. Scores of JLC pamphlets, draft resolutions, and trainings may not have decisively won over the labor

[25] Max Mont, "September – October Monthly Report," 1952, WAG.025.003, Box 186, Folder 15, JLC III.
[26] Jewish Labor Committee Los Angeles Newsletter, February 1, 1955, WAG.025.003, Box 307, Folder 18, JLC III.
[27] AFL resolution on immigration, September 1954, WAG.025.003, Box 303, Folder 53, JLC III.
[28] Burgoon et al., "Immigration and the Transformation of American Unionism," 947.

movement, but they reinforced and further encouraged the recognition among unionists that liberalization and labor organizing could be compatible goals.

More broadly, recovering the role of the JLC in immigration politics spotlights the changing nature of liberal and left politics at mid-century. As its focus shifted to a domestic civil rights agenda, the organized Jewish community expanded its political engagement with other liberal groups. In this period of reorientation, the JLC acted as a go-between for American Jews and the labor movement, bolstering their ties of affiliation and aligning their policy agendas. The big-tent alliance the JLC worked to configure on immigration policy in the 1950s foreshadowed a style of coalition activism that would become increasingly important in liberal politics in the second half of the twentieth century.

But contra arguments that the liberalization coalition fell apart with the passage of McCarran-Walter, the history of the JLC demonstrates that, if anything, the coalition became more energized as it moved toward revising the law. The organized Jewish community in the mid- to late-1950s helped to sustain the momentum for liberal immigration reform until a more hospitable political moment could arrive in the 1960s. In this regard, the lack of immediate legislative success reflected not apathy and stagnation, but rather the slow, tedious, often behind-the-scenes work of movement-building.

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