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“Immigrants All”: The Jewish Labor Committee, the McCarran-Walter Act, and Labor’s
Struggles over Immigration Policy, 1946-1955

In 1952, over President Harry Truman’s veto, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, more commonly known as the McCarran-Walter Act. The passage of the McCarran-Walter Act was seen at the time – and has been regarded by historians since – as a victory for the restrictionists who had controlled the nation’s immigration laws for decades over a growing, bipartisan coalition that supported immigration liberalization. The overwhelming congressional support for the legislation certainly seems to suggest that restrictionism remained the dominant position on immigration policy in the early 1950s. But the lopsided votes to overturn Truman’s veto obscure what was a lively debate about McCarran-Walter and the proper ways to govern entry to the United States. Among the fiercest proponents of liberalization were ethnic and religious groups, and particularly the emerging constellation of organizations representing the interests of American Jews.

The McCarran-Walter Act also tracks an important shift in the immigration politics of the American labor movement. Traditionally, the labor movement had supported immigration restriction, believing that immigrants would compete with native-born Americans for jobs and thus push down wages. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) had been a staunch advocate for all manner of restrictionist policies in the first half of the twentieth century, including literacy tests and the national origins quota system. But after initially expressing some support for McCarran-Walter, the AFL moved quickly toward a position of quiet neutrality. And by 1954, it was criticizing the law and calling for its revision in a more liberal direction.

Scholars have explained this shift as a matter of transformations in the American economy or changes in AFL leadership. In doing so, they have overlooked the work occurring in state federations and local unions to build support for liberalization and have also paid insufficient attention to labor’s coalitional relationships with entities besides the Democratic Party. In this paper, I trace these other historical factors, showing that Jewish organizations were deeply 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). Drawing on the JLC’s archival records, I argue that it served as an important nexus between the pro-liberalization organized Jewish community and the immigration-ambivalent labor movement. Through its educational work and its ties to labor leaders and politicians, the JLC played a major role in winning organized labor over to the cause of revising the McCarran-Walter Act by the mid-1950s. In the aftermath of World War II and at the dawn of the Cold War, JLC staff understood their work to bring the labor movement on board with immigration liberalization as dovetailing with their larger projects of rescuing Jewish refugees from the horrors of European fascism, advancing civil rights, and combatting the evils of both communism and McCarthyism.