

Understanding and Combating Antisemitism

New England Jewish Labor
Committee



Who is the New England Jewish Labor Committee?

We are a group of Jews committed to a world in which workers are entitled to all that we create. We draw on our religious and historical legacies. In Egypt, we were a group of oppressed laborers who found freedom by marching together. In the United States, we were key builders of the early American labor movement. Both Jewish tradition and the Labor Movement have taught us that liberation is realized through collective organizing against oppression — an organized oppression that continues to target the Jewish community and communities of workers alike — and that we can out-organize persecution when we stand and work together in solidarity.

We are a social justice organization dedicated to building the power of workers through educating, mobilizing, and organizing the Jewish community, both inside and outside of the established labor movement, to effectively advocate for collective liberation and economic justice.

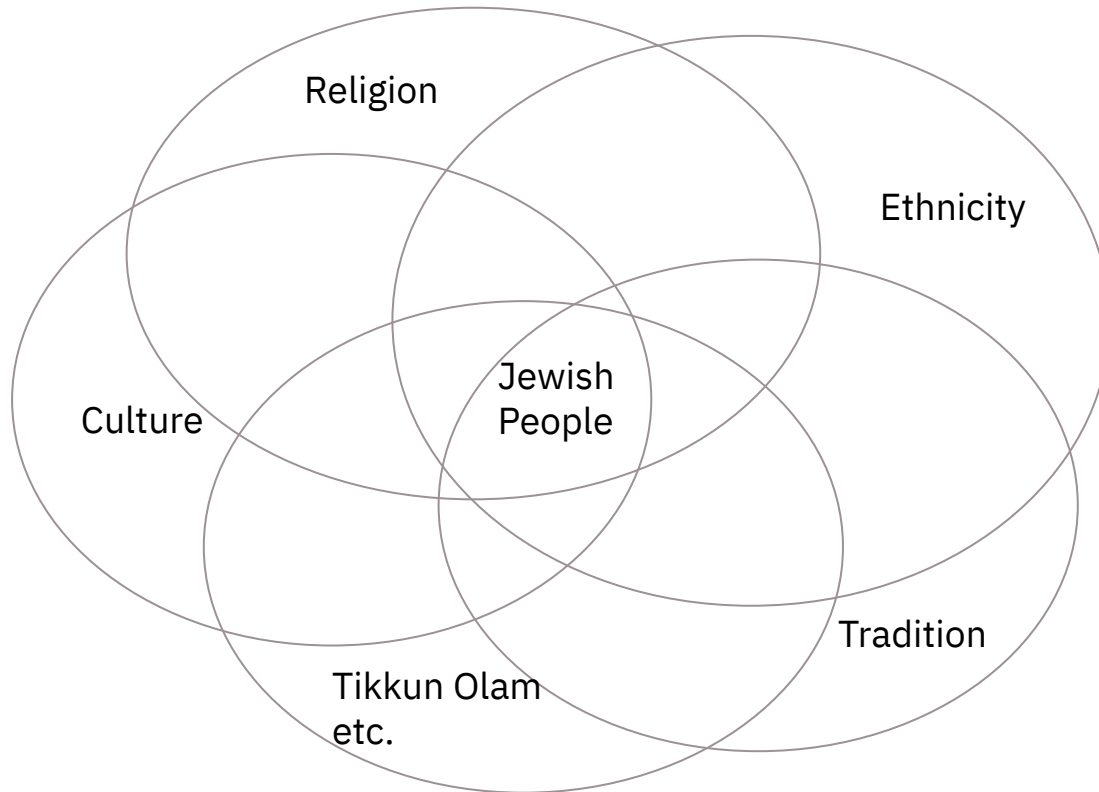
Goals of this workshop:

1. Understand what antisemitism is and how it operates to divide people
2. Learn how to recognize antisemitism
3. Briefly touch on the ongoing crisis in Israel/Palestine in the context of antisemitism
4. Think through next steps as individuals and as members of unions to combat antisemitism and build a stronger movement for collective liberation
5. Leave with the skills to identify and interrupt antisemitism

Who are the Jews?

- There are Jews of every race, and in every country (the majority in the US and Israel).
- Major Jewish ethnic groups: Ashkenazi (European), Black Jews, Sephardic Jews (origins in Spain, N. Africa), Mizrahi Jews (from Arab countries,) Ethiopian Jews, Latinx Jews, Crypto Jews, Chinese Jews, etc
- 5.7 million Jews in USA (2.2% of the population). 10 to 20% are people of color.
- 6.3 million Jews In Israel. 52% are Jews of color.
- Worldwide Jewish population 15-16 million or .2%

Who are Jews? A people.



What is the Jewish Religion?

Judaism is an Abrahamic religion that predates Christianity and Islam.

Characterized by a belief in one god, matrilineal heritage, and central texts of the Torah and the Talmud, which are written in ancient Hebrew and Aramaic.

Introduced the Sabbath (weekly day of rest), celebrated from Friday night to Saturday night.

Religion emphasizes the collective over the individual, and action over faith.

Lunar Calendar

Diasporic people, expelled multiple times from an ancient homeland, Jews now live all over the world.

Some Jews are religiously observant, some are atheists, some combine faith practices and some focus on cultural practices instead of on religious ritual. Some people are born Jewish while other people convert to Judaism.



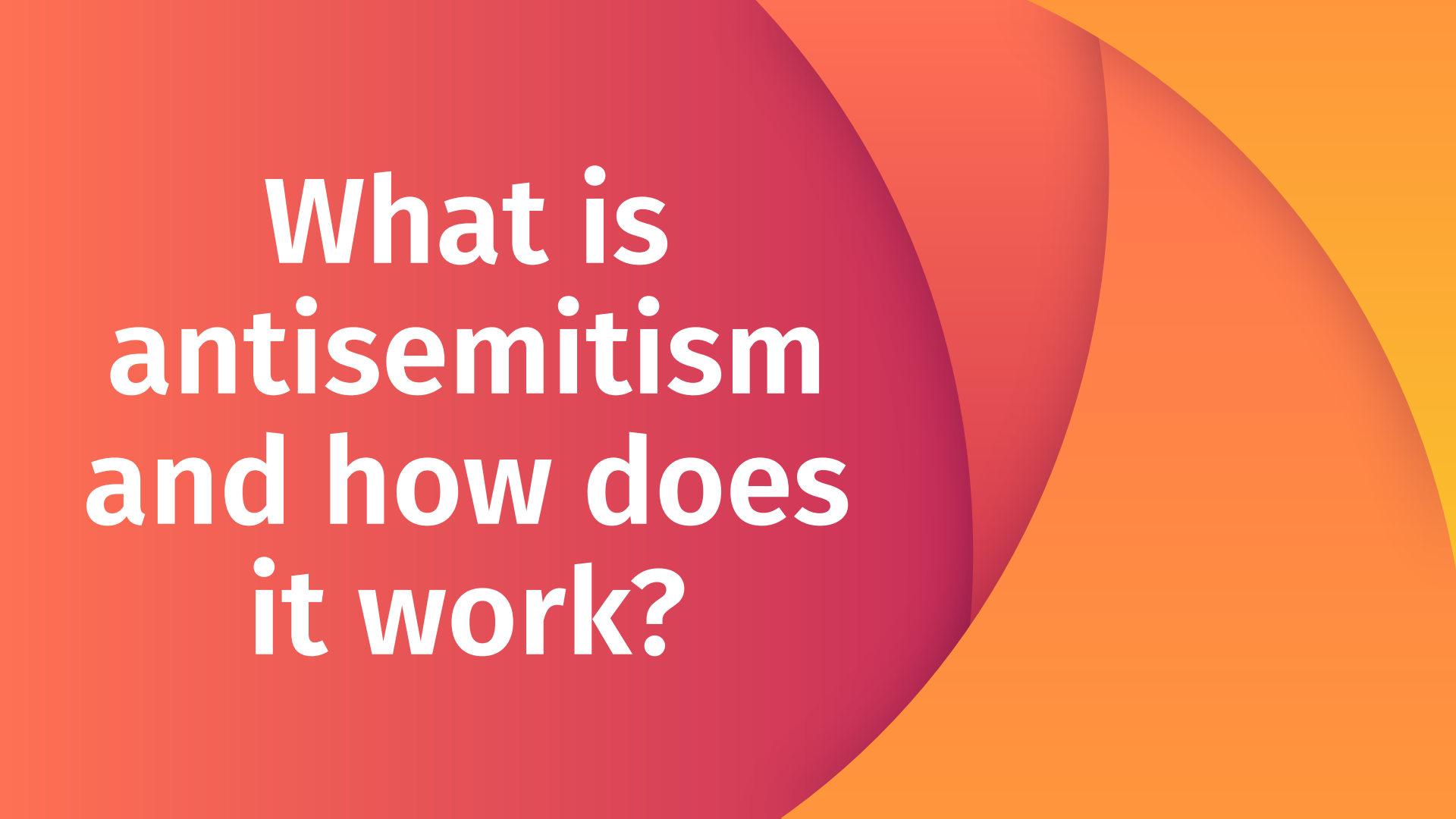
Jews and the Labor Movement

Jewish legal tradition dating back thousands of years includes strong protections for workers, including the right to organize a union. Also the idea of the day of rest for all workers, the Sabbath, was a revolutionary idea that came out of Torah, the Hebrew Bible..

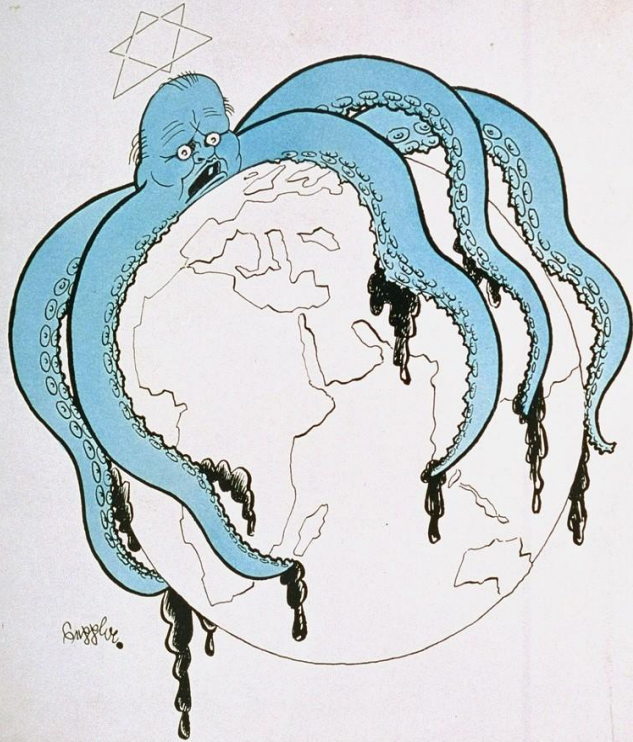
Jews have been integral to building the US labor movement—salts, key leaders, organizers, garment factory workers, food workers, trades people, educators, and more.

The Jewish community and the labor movement have a shared goal of working together to build a better world for everyone— in Judaism, this is called Tikkun Olam, or repairing the world.





**What is
antisemitism
and how does
it work?**



Nazi propaganda cartoon by Seppla (Josef Plank)

The Myth

The myth states that Jews run the banks, own all the businesses, and are in a worldwide network that takes money from working people. Or that Jews are secret communists sowing upheaval among other groups.

The myth says Jews are to blame for economic injustice and other problems in society.

The myth says Jews are not loyal to wherever we are from, but instead owe their allegiance to an international conspiracy, to each other, to Israel, or simply to money.

Other myths include that Jews murdered Jesus, that Jews have horns, that Jews steal Christian blood, or kidnap children and grind their bones into flour, and other demonizing claims.

Antisemitism Disempowers the Working Class and Progressive Coalitions by:

1. **Dividing** the people into “us” and “them”, reinforced with restrictions on housing, jobs, etc
2. **Distracting** people's valid criticism of social conditions with an easy solution
3. **Diverting** real anger at moments of crisis away from the people who are really to blame

Antisemitism’s job is to divide and conquer, make ruling classes invisible.

Jews have historically been seen as a foreign presence, distinct because of their lack of a homeland. Often could not own land or join craft guilds, restricted to middle-man roles like money-lending and tax-collecting, particularly in Europe. This public position allows the ruling class to shift criticism, blame, and retribution for social ills onto a foreign “other”, often turning to violence, expulsion, or genocide.

“Because the point of anti-Jewish oppression is to keep a Jewish face in front, so that Jews, instead of ruling classes, become the target for peoples’ rage, it works even more smoothly when Jews are allowed some success and can be perceived as the ones in charge by other oppressed people.” - April Rosenblum, *The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere* (2007)

What is antisemitism?

“Antisemitism” was coined by mid-19th century race scientists to replace the term *Judenhass* (lit. Jew-hatred)

- Interpersonal discrimination (slurs, no Jews allowed)
- Legal discrimination (immigration quotas)
- Expulsion (Spanish inquisition)
- Blame (scapegoating)
- Isolation (ghettos)
- Terror (fear of violence, pogroms)
- Genocide
- Shows up across the political spectrum

“Antisemitism is discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as Jews (or Jewish institutions as Jewish).”

- Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism

And how does it work?

Jews are repeatedly, even cyclically, scapegoated to protect the interests of people in power.

Antisemitism is a part our society just like misogyny and racism, and shows up across the political landscape, unions, and social movements.

Interpersonal Antisemitism

Prejudice, scapegoating, stereotyping, denial or minimization of oppression. Jews can also be mistreated for having “Jewish” qualities like being argumentative, asking questions, urgency, etc.

Institutional Antisemitism

Throughout history, institutional antisemitism has looked like forced self-identification, immigration and college admittance quotas, red-lining, ghettoization, expulsion, scapegoating, and state-sponsored violence.

Internalized Antisemitism

Intergenerational trauma gets handed down. The fears, anxieties, and wariness of being othered, scapegoated, and attacked do not simply go away. Like with other forms of oppression, Jews can begin to blame themselves for these feelings and characteristics.

Antisemitism is reaching historic levels in the US.

2022 FBI Hate Crime Report:

Jews are the most targeted group for religion based hate crimes, making up **78%** of the total, a 28% increase over 2021.

Boston:

56% increase in antisemitic incidents 2021-2022 over 2020-2021; highest since FBI began tracking these incidents in 1991.

Antisemitism is reaching historic levels

Recent Examples:

- Swastikas and violent language spray painted on public property and Jewish communal institutions
 - Bomb and arson threats to Synagogues, schools, community ctrs
 - Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting– 11 people killed October 2018
- Increase in violent attacks on Jewish people in NYC, NJ, MA, CA, and others
- Student groups at schools and universities that do not allow Jewish students to participate, or demand Jewish students first identify their relationship with Israel

Antisemitism is reaching historic levels

Recent Examples Internationally:

- France: 588 antisemitic incidents have been reported to police, resulting in 336 arrests in 2023.
- Germany: 240% increase of reported antisemitic incidents since Oct 7, compared to the same time last year. 91% are directly related to Israel (we will explore this more later)
 - Celebrities making public comments about Jews controlling the media, questioning whether the holocaust happened, etc
- Donald Trump: “I think any Jewish people that vote for a Democrat, I think it shows either a total lack of knowledge or great disloyalty.” He also refers to Israel as “your country.” (dual loyalty)

How is antisemitism affecting Jewish young people?

Many younger Jewish kids are asking their parents, “Why do people hate us?”

Many are people of color. The binary doesn't apply to them.

Some high school and college kids are going “into hiding.” They don't want to show that they're Jewish.

Racism and Antisemitism

People of color and Jews have a long history of being allies and fighting for each other's liberation; we are a powerful united front. That's why the ruling class has stoked division and mistrust between these groups:

Note: Jews of Color are often subject to both racism and antisemitism, and these experiences are often neglected or erased from public narrative.

Boston banks and real estate professionals targeted Jewish neighborhoods, stoking white flight and selling homes at inflated prices to new black residents.



Racism and Antisemitism

Jews are targeted for being “the most racist” and BIPOC people are targeted for being “the most antisemitic” in the media and in politics, like obsession over Kyrie Irving and Kanye West’s comments.





The White nationalist movement that evolved from [the collapse of Jim Crow] in the 1970s was a revolutionary movement that saw itself as the vanguard of a new, whites-only state. This latter movement, then and now, positions Jews as the absolute other, the driving force of white dispossession—which means the other channels of its hatred cannot be intercepted without directly taking on antisemitism.

~ Eric Ward, *Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism*, 2017.



Antisemitism and Israel/Palestine

Some history

Jewish people first lived in what is now Israel and Palestine during the bronze age. Jewish political control ended with the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the 2nd Temple in 70 CE.

Zion, Israel, Jerusalem are common religious and cultural themes rooted in this ancient connection to the land.

Palestinians also have a thousands years old ancestral, spiritual, and national, connection to the land.

Significant waves of European Jewish migration beginning in the 19th century to what is now called Israel/Palestine, mostly refugees of state-sponsored violence. Organized waves of migration grew with the advent and promotion of Zionism (more below).

By the end of WWII, the realities of the Nazi holocaust and the global Jewish refugee crisis generated sympathy for the Zionist cause of a Jewish state in the ancient homeland of Israel.

Some history (cont'd)

The State of Israel was created by the new UN as the British government ceded colonial control of “Mandate Palestine”. Promises were made to both Jews and Palestinians that the new country would be theirs. Instead of fighting together against the British for a unified country, they fought each other.

For centuries until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, a Palestinian majority and mostly Mizrahi (Arab) Jewish minority coexisted in relative peace.

Israelis refer to 1948 as their war of independence, while Palestinians refer to it as the Nakba (catastrophe). Neighboring Arab countries took up arms. The ensuing regional conflict forced many Arab Jews to flee to the new country, and the Israeli military launched an offensive that permanently displaced roughly half the Palestinian population.

In the Israeli national narrative, the holocaust was the formative trauma. In the Palestinian national narrative, it is the nakba. Both modern national identities are forged in trauma.



Theodor Herzl, Founder of Zionism

What is Zionism?

Zionism is a political movement to establish a Jewish homeland.

In the late 19th century this movement came to locate that Jewish homeland in what is now called the State of Israel.

People identify as Zionists for many reasons, but a central tenet is that a separate Jewish state is the only way to ensure safety in a world filled with antisemitism.

The Zionist movement gained momentum in 1941 when the world learned about the death camps in the Holocaust. Many countries around the world, including the U.S., would not admit Jewish refugees.

There has been deep debate about Zionism in the Jewish Community since the political movement was founded. Not all Jews are Zionists, and not all Zionists are Jews - the US Christian right is an example of such a force in US politics.

There is no connection between level of religious observance and Zionism

Antisemitism in the wake of 10/7

75 years of conflict erupted in a new iteration of violence on October 7, 2023. Hamas, a Palestinian political and military organization, launched an attack from Gaza on neighboring Israeli towns. 1200 Israelis were killed and several hundred people were taken captive.

The Israeli government launched a now almost 9-month long campaign to eradicate Hamas that has led to tens of thousands of deaths, widespread destruction, and a growing humanitarian crisis with little aid entering Gaza. Both sides see their military activities as self-defense against an entrenched enemy.

We must cultivate a nuanced understanding of power and violence in the region. The Israeli government has more power than Palestinian governments, and Hamas and other Palestinian organizations are not blameless in this conflict.

The denial of the violence of 10/7 feeds into antisemitic tropes of the denial of harm to Jews. Other examples include claiming all Israelis are viable targets, celebrating the murder of non-combatants, blaming all Jews for the actions of the Israeli or American governments, and more. Understanding this can also help us understand that celebrating the murder of non-combatants or blaming all Palestinians for the actions of a government or non-government entity is also an expression of hatred.

Antisemitism in the wake of 10/7

Many Israelis and especially those with family members held captive in Gaza have consistently called for a ceasefire and mutual return of captives.

Many Palestinians are calling out for a ceasefire and for humanitarian aid, even as they flee their homes.

Some pro-Israel Jews on college campuses are ostracized and isolated, and antisemitism plays a role in this.

American Jews and others organizing for a ceasefire face alienation and ostracization from their community and accusations of antisemitism (even those who are Jewish).

The US uses Israel as an outpost in the region and is more interested in pursuing their own interests than making peace. Israel is not unique in being used as a strategic outpost by the US.

Any real solution to this conflict must recognize the need for economic, political, and human rights for all people in the region, including the right to safety for both Jews and Palestinians.

The Right Wing's Weaponization of Israel

The right wing has weaponized charges of antisemitism to attack progressive forces, to weaken and divide solidarity amongst oppressed people, and to shut down conversation. They are trying to use this to stop DEI curriculum and policies.

In education, we have seen right wing attempts to define antizionism as antisemitism and to exclude histories of Israel/Palestine from textbooks and curricula.

Many Christian Zionists are antisemites and also support the State of Israel. Some give millions of dollars to fund settlements, impeding efforts for peace.

Politicians like Donald Trump claim to be “friends to the Jews” because of their policies regarding Israel while they tacitly or explicitly support violent white nationalism grounded in antisemitism. See the “Jews will not replace us” chant from the Charlottesville riots echoed in the note from the shooter at the Tree of Life Synagogue.

Like all oppressions, Antisemitism can show up anywhere. In the US, most violent incidents of Antisemitism are connected to right wing ideology or no ideology, attempts to isolate Jewish people, deny harm or experiences of harm, and the use of dog whistles and scapegoating also occur in movement spaces.

Building a Community of Allies: Do Not Let Ourselves Become Divided

Traps to avoid: tropes and dog-whistles

Dog Whistles: Words perpetuating antisemitic worldviews like: globalists, cosmopolitan elite, dual loyalty, cabal, illuminati, new world order, Rothschild, Soros, New York Values, saying Zionists when actually talking about Jews

Interrupt and counter the narrative

Labor history teaches us that we are stronger together. Jewish history teaches us that we are safest in community with our allies. Antisemitism functions by keeping us divided and suspicious of each other. If we allow the right wing monopoly over addressing antisemitism, we will only deepen the mistrust and division.

Organized labor can play a key role in combating antisemitism by calling it out, correcting the narrative, and building relationships of solidarity with Jewish organizations.

Breakout Rooms:

1. What do you think of all this?

- a. What surprised you?
- b. What makes sense?
- c. What do you want to know more about?

2. So what can we do about antisemitism?

- a. Structurally?
- b. Systemically?
- c. Interpersonally?

Panel

- Emma Rose Borzekowski
- Marya Axner
- David Waters

Further questions and resources:

Some resources for developing curriculum on antisemitism and collective liberation

- www.antisemitismcurriculum.org
- Jews for Racial and Economic Justice: Understanding Antisemitism and Discussion Guide: www.jfrej.org/campaigns/antisemitism
- Facing History & Ourselves (<https://www.facinghistory.org/>), A nonprofit organization that provides resources to promote students' historical knowledge through critical thinking & empathy.
- Zinn Education Project (<https://www.zinnedproject.org/>), Cofounded by Rethinking Schools and Teaching for Change, the project offers free resources to help educators teach a people's history.
- Webinar: Anti-Semitism and the Fight for Democracy, Rep. AOC, Amy Spitalnick of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, and Stacy Burdett
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrqNFcrL6I8&ab_channel=RepAOC
- There Could Have Been Peace: The Untold Story of Why We Failed with Palestine and Again with Israel, by Jon Kimche, The Dial Press, 1973
- The Death of an American Jewish Community, by Hillel Levine and Lawrence Harmon, Simon and Schuster, 1993
- “*Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism*”, Eric Ward, 2017
<https://politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism>