

Backgrounder



How Teachers Unions and Associations are being radicalized

By Mika Hackner

The American Jewish community has long been committed to unions—and particularly teachers unions. Many Jews have a deep appreciation for learning and the indispensable role of teachers in our children’s lives. They want teachers to be adequately compensated and held up as role models in society. This is why it is so bewildering for many to see teachers unions, which many of us have seen as a force for good, be captured by radical actors and become vehicles for the spread of illiberal ideology and anti-Israel activism.

This backgrounder provides information on the radical actors within teachers unions and how they’re using unions to advance their political agendas at the expense of teachers and students alike.

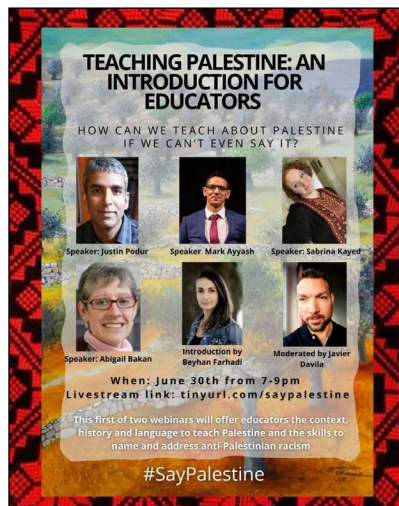
It’s not that bad! Is it?

On February 16, 2024, the National Education Association (NEA) along with fifty-five other teachers unions and federations across the country announced they were part of the [National Labor Network for Ceasefire](#) (NLNC). The goal of the NLNC is to “end the death and devastation” in the Middle East, and to expand support for the ceasefire among unions nationally.

NEA’s president, Becky Pringle, made the following [statement](#):

“As educators, we believe strongly in our professional and moral responsibility to teach and model inclusion and respect for differences, and we must speak out against injustices and violence towards innocent people, especially children. Many educators feel a deep connection to the children in Israel and Palestine. We know that our children are watching, hurting, and in need of a lasting peace.”

Pringle also [tweeted](#), “We join our partner organizations along with Jewish and Muslim leaders across the globe in an urgent call for an end to the violence.” The Minneapolis Federation of Teachers went so far as to decry “the system



Promotion for a webinar in 2021 on methods for educators to bring Palestine lessons into the classroom.

of Israeli occupation and apartheid” before a [union](#) vote to apologize for the language was passed.

Both the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (the second largest teachers union) have made anti-Israel resolutions central to their 2024 conventions. In early July, the [NEA](#) was to hold votes on several resolutions regarding Israel - including educating members that there is a difference between antisemitism and anti-Zionism, providing educational resources about the Nakba (the so called “catastrophe” of the founding of Israel), educating members about the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel, and calling for the United States to stop sending military aid to Israel that is allegedly committing “genocide” in Gaza. These efforts were

only stymied by an NEA staff [strike](#) which brought the convention to a halt. The resolutions were publicized by “educators for Palestine,” a group within the NEA using its position as union members to advocate for pro-Palestine measures which would delegitimize the Jewish right to sovereignty. A similar group has formed within the American Federation of Teachers.

At the AFT convention, which began on July 22nd, members will vote on a total of seven [resolutions](#) regarding Israel including a resolution against the “weaponization of antisemitism” to defend Israel. The resolution regarding the war in Gaza uses debunked Hamas figures and blames Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu for prolonging the war for his own interests. The resolution further states that the way that Israel is conducting the war is “unjust.” These resolutions were brought forward by local AFT unions.

On the state level, in just one example, the Massachusetts Teachers Association’s (MTA) Anti-Racism Taskforce held a webinar in March on “the struggle against Anti-Palestinian racism,” which was replete with [antisemitic](#) tropes. The MTA followed that debacle with a seminar on antisemitism, which ignored antisemitism on the left and characterized the main issue of antisemitism as stymying the progressive movement. The workshop worked to provide “context for how [antisemitism](#) is used to divide

Backgrounder

How Teachers Unions and Associations are being radicalized



and weaken movements for justice.”

Why the preoccupation with Israel?

To understand how teachers unions have become radicalized, it's important to examine the network of anti-Israel organizations that have worked in and through unions to realize their agendas and some of the larger radical ideological trends afoot within Unions that have moved them away from their traditional agendas.

For the progressive left, Israel is a manifest symbol of all the ills of Western society - capitalism, occupation, colonialism, even climate change. For radical ideologues on the left to fight injustice, it is necessary to take an uncompromising stance against Israel. Teachers unions are preoccupied with Israel because the unions have been influenced by progressive left activists. This has happened for two reasons: first, Schools of Education, which nearly all teachers attended, are largely a political [monolith](#) that inculcate would-be teachers in critical theory and pedagogies. This means that higher education is creating the conditions whereby future teachers commit to a leftist political [orthodoxy](#) to gain entry and then succeed in [education programs](#). Teacher training programs are primed to churn out true believers to go forth and transform the education system in their image.

In recent years, teachers unions such as the NEA and AFT have jumped on the “anti-racism” bandwagon, seeking to impose a specific ideological agenda in the schools. The [NEA](#), for example, adopted [Tema Okun’s White Supremacy Culture framework](#), which holds, for example, that “[white supremacy culture](#)” upholds “negative” values of “objectivity,” “worship of the written word,” “perfectionism” and, hilariously, “either/or thinking.” One way to challenge “white supremacy culture” is to defer to the “lived experience” of marginalized communities as the best way to understand the world. This means that extreme groups, like [Teaching While Muslim](#) discussed below, can influence teachers associations by claiming to be able reliably to explain the world as it really is because of their “lived experience” as an oppressed group.

It is no surprise that in such an ideological environment, in which teachers have been primed to embrace all manner of ideological claims of oppressed versus oppressors as irrefutable truths to pass on to their students, that this same logic would be applied to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, whereby Israel is labeled the perennial oppressor and the Palestinians the perennially oppressed.

The Anti-Israel Network in Teachers Unions

While most teachers want their unions to dedicate themselves to improving working conditions and the

educational outlook for students, others, like the [Caucus of Rank and File Educators](#) in [Chicago](#) or [Educators for Palestine](#), use the unions as a vehicle to push for a political agenda. These groups are organized and highly motivated. And they are supported by a cadre of activist organizations outside of the teachers unions.

Groups like Educators for Palestine rely on these far left organizations to help them formulate and promote their agendas and to provide resources to their teachers unions. These organizations then have a greater influence on the resources available for teachers to use in the classroom. If it is NEA-endorsed and shared on their union’s website, it must be a legitimate resource for the classroom, right?

For example, the Portland Association of Teachers landed itself in hot water when [Christopher Rufo](#) shared its publicly available documents on how to ‘teach Palestine’ to students from pre-K and up. PAT used materials from an organization called [Teaching While Muslim](#).

[Teaching While Muslim](#) purports to work “to actively include social justice, anti-racist, and anti-Islamophobic curricula and educators in our schools.” Its website provides classroom resources and lesson plans for teachers. However, its suggested curriculum and resources contain troubling elements. Take, for example, its collaboration with CAIR-NJ on a “[Muslim Studies Curriculum](#),” which covers the “impact of 9/11 on Muslims.” The lesson plan appears to justify the September 11th terror attacks: “A group self-identifying as AlQaeda hailing from the mountains of Afghanistan, launched separate plane hijackings that ended up in different cities, causing the death of almost 3,000 people and the resulting debris from the fallen towers caused lasting health issues in first responders. They launched the attacks in response to America’s support of Israel, their involvement in the Persian Gulf War, and the vast presence of the US military in the Middle East.” The suggested curriculum for High School Social Studies or English goes on to say that “How a country treats other people is an extension of their values and beliefs.”

[Teaching While Muslim’s](#) website provides a [link](#) for those who wish to donate to the Palestine Children’s Relief Fund, an organization which operates in Gaza and collaborates with [Hamis](#) entities. In its [school and educator resources on Palestine](#), [Teaching While Muslim](#) shares an infographic on “why schools should reject the ADL.” Throughout the document, Israel is surrounded in quotation marks or otherwise only referred to as the “Zionist entity.”

While PAT hurriedly deleted these materials from its website and the president of the Association, [Angela](#)

Backgrounder

How Teachers Unions and Associations are being radicalized



[Bonilla](#), pleaded ignorance as to the materials' contents, there still remain plenty of 'problematic' associations for PAT. A "Know your Rights" [guide](#), which gives teachers advice on how to 'teach Palestine' without falling afoul of state standards is still up on their website (teachers are asked to refer to PAT or to the controversial [Council on American-Islamic Relations](#) if they have concerns). On May 28th, PAT co-hosted a "know your rights" event for teachers who want to "teach, advocate and organize for Palestine."



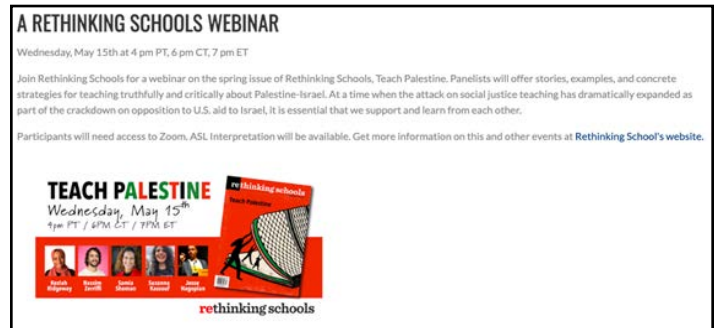
Portland Association of Teachers' "Know Your Rights" event

Still accessible on its website is a PowerPoint slide of a meeting held for Association members on May 29th. At the end of the meeting, the 'Know your Rights' information session is discussed, with links to a typically incendiary Angela Davis piece on Israel as well as to a "teach Palestine" webinar held by [Rethinking Schools](#) with [Samia Shoman](#) of [Teach Palestine](#).



PAT slide presentation of resources on Palestine from meeting

[Rethinking Schools](#) describes itself as a "a nonprofit publisher and advocacy organization dedicated to sustaining and strengthening public education through social justice teaching and education activism. Our magazine, [books](#), and [other resources](#) promote equity and racial justice in the classroom. We encourage grassroots efforts in our schools and communities to enhance the



Promotion for a Rethinking School's "Teach Palestine" Webinar

learning and well-being of our children and to build a broad democratic movement for social and environmental justice. Our [Zinn Education Project](#) — coordinated with [Teaching for Change](#) — has more than 100,000 educators who have registered to access our "people's history" materials."

[Teaching For Change](#) is a non-profit which runs workshops for K-12 teachers on anti-bias education and networking opportunities for "social justice educators" among other things.

Teach Palestine is a blog which describes itself as "a resource by and for K-12 teachers and teacher educators focused on bringing Palestine into our classrooms and schools." The Teach Palestine blog includes curricula and resources for teachers. [Teach Palestine](#) is a product of the [Middle East Children's Alliance](#). The [Teach Palestine](#) resource for teaching about [Gaza](#) emphasizes that "The events that have unfolded in Gaza since October 7th, 2023 are part of the longer history of Palestine/Israel and should be contextualized as such to give students the best understanding; even if that context is summarized. Hamas' actions on October 7th should not be the starting point."

PAT is not the only teachers association which touts Teach Palestine, Rethinking Schools or the Zinn Education Project as key sources for their teachers. Indeed, the MTA webinar

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.jfrcj.org/campaigns/antisemitism](https://www.facinghistory.org/)
- [Facing History & Ourselves \(https://www.facinghistory.org/\)](https://www.facinghistory.org/), A nonprofit organization that provides resources to promote students' historical knowledge through critical thinking & empathy.
- [Zinn Education Project \(https://www.zinnproject.org/\)](https://www.zinnproject.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=MrgNFcrI_6l8&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"](https://politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/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>

Resources shared during the Massachusetts Teachers Association webinar on antisemitism

Backgrounder



How Teachers Unions and Associations are being radicalized

on antisemitism included the Zinn Education Project as an important resource to understand antisemitism.

The **California Teachers Association** was a proud [co-sponsor](#) of the legislation that made ethnic studies a required course for High School graduation in California – even while issues with the inflammatory [curriculum](#) persisted. The curriculum used **Rethinking Schools** and the **Zinn Education Project** as resources.

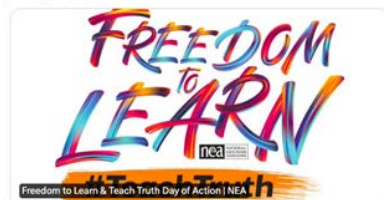
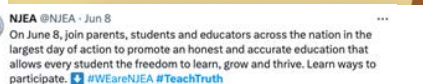
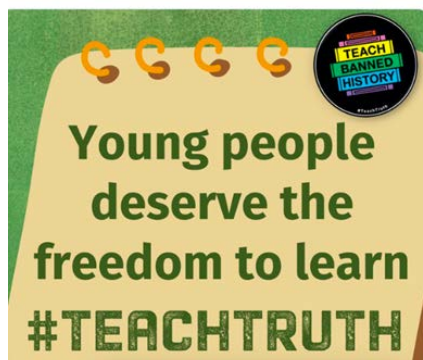
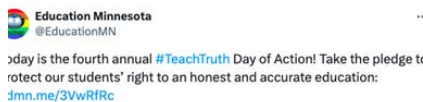
Both **Rethinking Schools** and the **Zinn Education Project** have published explicitly anti-Israel material including an article titled “Israel’s War on Gaza Is Also a War on History, Education, and Children” which claims a connection between Israel’s “settler-colonial” policies and the United States. The article calls to “free Palestine and free Palestine Pedagogy.”

Indeed, **Rethinking Schools’** Spring 2024 magazine is dedicated to “teaching Palestine” – it includes such articles as “No, anti-Zionism is not antisemitism” and “What we learned from our Oakland to Gaza K12 Teach-in” (that last piece was written by members of the Oakland Education Association for Palestine Group - an activist group within the OEA).

The top [banner](#) on its homepage cries out “[Gaza and the Growing Attack on Social Justice Teaching](#).” The article

concludes “So while being a social justice teacher right now can feel isolating, we are not alone. In December, several **Rethinking Schools** editors went to the **National Council for the Social Studies** conference and attended Amanda Najib’s session on Palestine. With standing room only, it was one of the most well-attended sessions at the conference. A growing number of teacher union locals from Seattle to Chicago to Massachusetts have called for a cease-fire. Despite intense repression, nearly 100 teachers signed up to participate in the Oakland, California, educators teach-in for Palestine. (See “What We Learned from Our ‘Oakland to Gaza’ K–12 Teach-In”) On Jan. 20, more than 90 teachers spent the day learning about and discussing how to teach about Palestine at a conference in Oakland put on by the **Middle East Children’s Alliance**. Our **Zinn Education Project** continues to average about 1,000 new registrants every month. It is clear there continues to be a growing hunger for social justice curriculum.”

The largest labor union in the country, the NEA sponsored the annual “teach truth day of action” event run by **Rethinking Schools** and **Teaching for Change** via the **Zinn Education Project** - an event which centers the CAIR-endorsed **Teaching While Muslim**. This was cheered and championed by teachers associations across the country who frequently hold events or provide resources from those groups.



All items above: Teachers associations promoting the “teach truth” day of action

Backgrounder



How Teachers Unions and Associations are being radicalized

We got here by ignoring the signs of creeping radicalization. We get out by recognizing these signs and fighting back. Put simply, activist teachers are made that way through the ideological monoliths of Colleges of Education and ongoing reinforcement in teacher professional development training and a school culture that rewards and often insists on ideological compliance. Activist teachers disproportionately get involved in their teachers associations. Using ties to groups like **Rethinking Schools** and **Teaching for Change** (themselves connected to far left [activist groups working to influence education](#) by working with school districts, teachers associations and teachers), these teachers influence the policy, activities and resources of their teachers associations.

To fight against these troubling trends, we need to develop short term and long term goals.

In the short term, we must apply pressure to stop activist efforts such as the anti-Israel resolutions, by organizing groups within teachers associations to fight back against the extreme proposals of these groups;

In the long term, we need to restore a spirit of intellectual

openness to our teachers unions.

- We need a long term project of reforming higher education and particularly teachers colleges.
- We must offer alternative resources for classroom use that promote democratic participation, pluralism and critical thinking.
- We must educate and equip a critical mass of teachers to fight against the ideological capture of their associations. There are teachers who truly care about the lowered educational standards and outcomes for our children. They should be given ongoing support to fight these ideological trends in their association and in their schools.

If we are to make up ground in the fight for our children's education and the future of our country, we must start now.

Dr. Mika Hackner is a Research Associate at JILV. She has a PhD in Politics from Brandeis University. Her research focuses on Militant Democracy and institutional threats to liberal democracy.



Jewish Institute
for Liberal
Values