

UNDERSTANDING AND CONFRONTING ANTISEMITISM IN THE CURRENT POLITICAL MOMENT

Antisemitism plays a powerful role in contemporary US politics, in the right wing, in the general public, and in our movement spaces. For the far-right 'New Confederacy' and its increasingly public and violent white supremacist/nationalist vanguard, antisemitism is a core ideological foundation. In the general public, antisemitism has been falsely equated with taking stances against the state of Israel, and Jews are being used as political pawns. For social movements and the left, antisemitism is often confusing or difficult to see, or worse, openly unchallenged and propagated.

This piece comes out of a process to make sense of the brutal attack on a Pittsburgh synagogue by white nationalist Robert Bowers on October 27, 2018. Bowers attacked a synagogue because he believed that these congregants' refugee aid work presented a dire threat to white society. Originally setting out to convey difficult emotions and call for support and unity around the slaughter of 11 praying congregants, research and further conversation with comrades and the NEC pushed us to offer an analysis of contemporary antisemitism in our political context, and why we as FRSO should confront it.

This resource addresses the difficulties of understanding antisemitism on the Left and in movement spaces, provides working definitions for important concepts and language, situates antisemitism in our political moment, discusses how addressing antisemitism fits with our organization's strategy, and offers steps for moving forward.

We drew heavily from a handful of articles, pamphlets, and other resources – please find links and brief descriptions at the end. We highly encourage comrades to engage these resources for greater depth and further study for those interested.

In the words of poet and activist Aurora Levins Morales:

Racism is like a millstone, a crushing weight that relentlessly presses down on people intended to be a permanent underclass. Its purpose is to press profit from us, right to the edge of extinction and beyond. The oppression of Jews is a conjuring trick, a pressure valve, a shunt that redirects the rage of working people away from the 1%, a hidden mechanism, a set up that works through misdirection, that uses privilege to hide the gears.

Unlike racism, at least some of its targets must be seen to prosper, must be well paid and highly visible. The goal is not to crush us, it's to have us available for crushing. Christian rulers use us to administer their power, to manage for them, and set us up in the window displays of capitalism for the next time the poor pick up stones to throw. What is hard for the angry multitudes to see is that Jews don't succeed in spite of our oppression. We are kept insecure by our history of sudden assaults, and some of us, a minority of us, are offered the uncertain bribes of privilege and protection. Privilege for a visible sample of us is the only way to make the whole tricky business work. Then, when the wrath of the most oppressed, whether Russian peasants starving on potatoes or urban US People of Color pressed to the wall, reaches a boiling point, there we are: The Tsar's tax collector, the shopkeeper and the pawnbroker, the landlord and the lawyer, the social worker and the school administrator. And whether it's a Polish aristocrat watching the torches go by on a pogrom or the Episcopalian banker discreetly out of sight while working-class people tell each other that Jews control the economy, the trick works.

(Quoted from Understanding Antisemitism p17)

Antisemitism in our Current Political Moment

The massacre in Pittsburgh was one dramatic moment in a larger trend of growing antisemitism, which, as it has throughout history, goes hand in hand with the global rise of far-right, ultranationalist movements. In the US, rising antisemitism became more visible during the 2016 election cycle, as the emerging white nationalist right began to attack Jewish journalists and communities on social media. Violence against Jewish community centers, schools, and places of worship has increased since. In the lead up to the 2018 midterm elections, thinly veiled antisemitic tropes were often deployed by the Republican party as a dog whistle to white nationalist elements of their base. Notably the right wing use of the term “globalist” alludes to the idea of a specifically Jewish global conspiracy¹ - compared to Trump calling himself a “Nationalist”.

The demonization of Hungarian Jewish billionaire George Soros as the financier of the left (who has also been accused of being the shadowy string-puller by Trump and right wing nationalists across the world) is another clear example of ways in which age old anti semitic tropes are being deployed by the right to scapegoat Jews.²

False accusations of antisemitism are increasingly being used by the right wing to divide progressive movements. The accusations of antisemitism used against Rep. Ilhan Omar, Rep. Rashida Tlaib, Angela Davis, Tamika Mallory, and Marc Lamont Hill are a cynical ploy of the right wing to discredit progressive leaders, especially Black and Muslim progressive leaders, who support Palestinian liberation. Because of the way the right is simultaneously attacking Jews and using anti-semitism to attack left movements, it is crucial that the left have a clear analysis of what antisemitism is and is not.

What is a Jew?

“It is not the Jews who are the enemies of the working people. The enemies of the workers are the capitalists of all countries. Among the Jews there are working people, and they form the majority. They are our brothers, who, like us, are oppressed by capital; they are our comrades in the struggle for socialism.” -V.I Lenin³

Before digging more deeply into how antisemitism functions and why we must confront it, we need a basic understanding of what and who Jews are. Jews make up about 0.2% of the world population, and about 2% of the US population. As with all religious traditions, Jewish religious practice varies widely. In addition, many Jews identify strongly as Jewish yet are completely secular, with very little connection to Judaism as a religion. Instead, they may identify as Jewish through ancestry or culture.

The majority of Jews in the United States today are ethnically Ashkenazi, meaning they trace their origins to Eastern and Western Europe. Other Jewish ethnic groups include Middle Eastern, North African, Central Asian, and Balkan Jews (Mizrahi); Ethiopian and Ugandan Jews (African); and Spanish, Greek, Turkish, and Portuguese Jews (Sephardi). In addition, there are people from all racial and ethnic groups who have religiously converted into Judaism.

¹ “The Origins of the ‘Globalist’ Slur” by Ben Zimmer. The Atlantic, March 14 2018

² “Why the Right Loves to Hate George Soros” by Matt Welch. The Atlantic, October 6 2018

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/explaining-rights-obsession-george-soros/572401/>

³ “Anti-Jewish Pogroms” (Speech) VI Lenin, March 1919

There is also an immense amount of class diversity among Jews. Contrary to conspiracy theories about Jews controlling the world's wealth, the very wealthiest individuals on the planet are predominantly Christian according to nonpartisan wealth research firm New World Wealth. Of the 13.1 million people in the world who are millionaires, 56.2% were Christians, while 6.5% were Muslims, 3.9% are Hindu and 1.7% are Jewish.⁴

It is crucial to recognize that there are Jews of every race, class, and gender. In other words, there is no singular or cohesive Jewish identity or political formation - Jews come from all kinds of places, and look every kind of way.

What is Antisemitism and why is it so difficult to understand?

“Antisemitism’s job is to make the ruling class invisible. It protects ruling class power structures, diverting anger at injustice towards Jews instead...it serves the same ends, whether enshrined in law or institutionalized only in our minds; whether it is state policy, popular ‘common sense’, or acts of grassroots movements like our own.”⁵

The rising antisemitism we are seeing today is part of a larger historical process. Antisemitism tends to function cyclically, and while it shares many aspects of other forms of oppression (as well as outcomes), antisemitism has its own unique qualities and functions that can make it hard to recognize and confront.

In Christian Europe, Jews were not allowed to own land or serve in a majority of social and economic roles. Being kept on the outskirts of society, Jews were easily scapegoated by the ruling class and were never fully assimilated into the European body politic. It is worth noting that this state-sponsored separatism looked very different and was significantly less dangerous in the Muslim contexts of the Moorish empire and Arabia, where Jews were protected as Ahl Al-Kitab or “People of the Book”.

Since Jews in Europe were already separated from the rest of European society through lack of access to land and social supports, it became easy to demonize them.

Classical antisemitism claims that Jews have a disproportionate amount of social control or power. In reality, Jews have rarely held significant power at the highest levels of the state. Money lending and merchantry were roles Jews could occupy; they were not allowed to have land and these jobs were prohibited for Christian peasants. Providing money and goods in the service of the ruler kept Jews close to power without ever really holding it, and created an easy target when the elites needed to obscure social and economic contradictions. For this reason, the history of Jews in Europe was characterized by periods of acceptance, and even prosperity, which alternated with periods of intense

The cycle of antisemitism:

First, Jews are isolated, especially from other oppressed groups who may otherwise find common enemies or purpose. Second, other oppressed groups are manipulated away from identifying the real enemy, instead placing the onus of their exploitation on Jews. Third, Jews are targeted for violence. Then fourth, as an outcome of blame, isolation, and terror, Jews are pressured to cooperate with the ruling class in exchange for safety. Until that safety is no longer convenient for the ruling class.

⁴ Cited from Understanding Antisemitism, JFREJ

⁵ The Past Didn't Go Anywhere,: making resistance to antisemitism part of all of our movements (April Rosenblum, 2007) p1

violence and persecution in times when the ruling class needed a convenient scapegoat for rising popular discontent.

It was a cycle like this, with relative Jewish prosperity, acceptance, and proximity to power that culminated in the Holocaust in the middle of the 20th century. In under 10 years, Jews across Europe went from being fully integrated members of their communities to extermination camps. The speed at which this cycle has historically moved from acceptance to persecution has led to deeply held feelings of vulnerability and anxiety in Jewish communities (especially in contexts where the majority are of European descent). It also makes antisemitism difficult to recognize because Jewish communities often appear prosperous and powerful throughout extended periods of history.

The publication of the fraudulent “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” - a propaganda piece created by Czar Nicholas II of Russia to hide the reality of his exorbitant spending from the starving masses, built on the history of anti-Jewish oppression and popularized the idea of Jews as a secret global cabal running the world. Capitalist Henry Ford repackaged this book as “The International Jew” and used it to divide factory workers who were aligning around the 2-day weekend. It remains influential and widely distributed today.

These historically rooted ideas have been picked up and deployed in our own political moment. Beginning in the 1980s, neo-Nazi skinhead movements trafficked in Holocaust denial and later circulated ideas of “white genocide” that put Jews at the center of a vast conspiracy to exterminate the “white race.” The dawn of the internet greatly bolstered white-supremacist organizing, sowing the seeds for the antisemitic alt-right, which would burst into wider public view with the rise of Trumpism and the New Confederacy.⁶

Claims that George Soros is funding the left or Sheldon Adelson is funding the right, memes and campaign ads targeting the Rothschild family in connection with a secret global cabal, McCarthyism’s disproportionate targeting of Jews justified by their supposed dual loyalty and the execution of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, conspiracy theories that claim that Israel or Jews were behind 9/11 or the 2008 financial crisis, that the US invaded Iraq at Israel’s behest, etc. are all examples of ways in which historically-rooted antisemitic tropes created in Europe have taken hold in the United States and remain alive today.

Race and Antisemitism

“In part we’ve had trouble because it looks different from the oppressions we understand, which enforce inferiority on oppressed groups to disempower them. Anti-Jewish oppression, on the other hand, can make its target look extremely powerful. Antisemitism’s job is to make the ruling classes invisible.”⁷

One common source of confusion around antisemitism is that most Jews in the United States have white skin. About 85% of Jews in the US come from white European ancestry, thereby participating in and benefiting from structures of white supremacy today. This does not mean that white Jews do not face oppression, rather that the color of their skin is not a factor of that oppression.⁸

Indeed, Jewish isolation from other oppressed groups, along with a historic role as a middle agent between the elites and working classes (see the cycle of antisemitism above) has created especially complex historical relationships between Black and Jewish communities in the United States. While it

⁶ “Attacking Antisemitism” by Ben Lorber, Jacobin Magazine, November 2018

⁷ The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere, p3

⁸ Robin D. G. Kelley, Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression (1990) p27-28

is beyond the scope of this resource to discuss this relationship fully, it is important to note that Jews have been deliberately pitted against Black communities, often serving in middle agent roles such as landlords, teachers and social workers. James Baldwin discusses the myth of Jewish control in Black neighborhoods in his 1967 essay *Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They are Anti-White*: “No more than the good white people of the South, who are really responsible for the bombings and lynchings, are ever present at these events, do the people who really own Harlem ever appear at the door to collect rent.”⁹ At the same time, Jews historically have made up a disproportionate amount of the white people involved in radical social movements and movements for Black liberation. Black/Jewish alliances have historically been extremely threatening to the ruling class, which is a big part of why Black and Jewish communities continue to be set up against one another.

In modern America, many Jews benefit from white privilege yet are under attack from white supremacy. Antisemitism is difficult to see in our current political moment, when Jews still experience relative acceptance. However, as soon as it becomes more convenient for Jews to serve as scapegoats for the ruling class, history has shown that the privilege Jews were once afforded can disappear almost instantaneously. In other words, Jews are conditionally white, benefitting from this privilege until it is no longer convenient. In our context, even though Jews are racialized as white, white supremacist ideology still sees Jews as “a race – the race – that presents an existential threat because of the fact they often read as white – are a different, unassimilable, enemy race that must be exposed, defeated, and ultimately eliminated.”⁵

According to this ideology, Jews are also the hidden masterminds behind social movements including immigration, Black liberation movements, and feminist movements. We saw this clearly in the ideology of Robert Bowers, the Pittsburgh shooter, who chose the Tree of Life synagogue as his target due to the work they did with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, a refugee resettlement organization. To Robert Bowers, Jews were to blame for bringing refugees in the United States. Racist anti-Immigrant and antisemitic beliefs are inextricably bound in white supremacist thinking. The KKK in Alabama and Mississippi publicly blamed Communist Jews as a rallying point against civil rights workers and union organizers, and the idea of “passing for white” still terrorizes the Trump base and the New Confederate segregationist brand of white supremacy.

Antisemitism therefore feeds into a racist ideology that sees people of color as incapable of building their own liberation movements, instead placing the blame on a Jewish conspiracy. In this line of thinking, the fact that Jews appear white only makes them more dangerous as they are deceptively able to blend in and pollute the “purity of the white race”.

Moreover, Jews of Color, like all other People of Color, are targets of racism and white supremacy – including within the Jewish community – but can be further targeted by antisemitism. It must be a core principle in the Left and among Jews fighting for liberation of all people that we create space for each other’s divergent experiences, and at the same time remain clear on who among us faces the greatest and most immediate threats to safety.

Antisemitism and Palestinian Liberation

Israel’s occupation of Palestinian land and its oppression of the Palestinian people is a major crisis. Our movements must unapologetically support Palestinian liberation as part of a broader fight for global justice..

⁹ James Baldwin, “Negroes Are Anti-Semitic Because They’re Anti-White” (April 9, 1967) New York Times Magazine

Anti-Zionism is absolutely not equivalent to antisemitism. However, in our work for Palestinian liberation we must be careful to avoid falling into antisemitic tropes. Conflating Zionism with Jews, claiming that Jews are manipulating the US to give aid to Israel, claiming that American Jews have a dual loyalty to Israel, or ignoring the non-Jews responsible for the oppression of Palestinian people (including the US government, whose interests in the region have nothing to do with Jews) are all ways that old antisemitic tropes can slip into movements for Palestinian liberation. When this happens, it only hinders our work for Palestinian liberation.

Over the past few decades, the Jewish political right has aligned with the Christian political right to distort and redefine antisemitism as primarily criticism of Israel or Israeli government policy. As the American and Israeli right wing has repeatedly shown, this new definition has proven extremely effective at rallying the right wing and center, and driving a wedge in progressive movements. Sadly, this coalition “have sometimes seemed like the *only* people willing to discuss and call out antisemitism”.¹⁰

Progressive movements (including progressive Jewish movements) are now being silenced through what this alliance has marketed as “antisemitism of the left”. Antisemitism is a fundamentally right wing ideology, yet the right’s equation of antisemitism and anti-Zionism has become the mainstream understanding of antisemitism. If the left develops a sharper analysis and deeper commitment to interrupting antisemitism, we can much more effectively resist being smeared by the right.

When our movements fail to make a clear distinction between Jews and the Israeli government in our work for Palestinian liberation, Jews who might otherwise align with the multinational working class alliance can feel isolated and attacked. Because the right is so vocal about fighting their version of “antisemitism,” Jews who otherwise see through right-wing rhetoric may flee towards the only “protection” offered. There is a danger that many Jews will join with and falsely legitimize right wing coalitions that pose a much more urgent threat to Jewish communities and the rest of the multinational working class.

Antisemitism and the Left

“Their thoughts, emotions, outlook depend upon tradition, material conditions of life, cultural level, etc... The older half of the population was educated under Czarism. The younger half has inherited a great deal from the older... Despite the model legislation of the October Revolution, it is impossible that national and chauvinist prejudices, particularly anti-Semitism, should not have persisted strongly”. Leon Trotsky¹¹

As stated previously, anti-semitism is a fundamentally right wing ideology formed within European ruling classes. Its function has always been to distract the working class and oppressed nationalities from fighting the real enemy by setting up a convenient scapegoat for their anger, and someone to blame for their material oppression. It makes perfect sense, then, that antisemitism and antisemitic tropes still exist in our movement spaces, even though very few leftists hold real anti-Jewish beliefs.

Antisemitism exists in our unions and movement groups just as misogyny and racism do. Sometimes this is overt and personal, sometimes it is more subtle. Antisemitism can look differently in different movement contexts. It can look like the conflation of Israel with all Jews or the assumptions of dual loyalty. It can also look like exceptionalizing contradictions around race and privilege when it comes

¹⁰ Understanding Antisemitism, p5

¹¹ Leon Trotsky, Thermidor and Antisemitism (Feb 22 1937) Published in The New Internationalist Vol II No 4 May, 1941

to Jews (i.e. claiming that white Jews are more racist than other white people), dismissing oppressive experiences, stereotyping, and expecting Jews to credential their politics (especially around Palestine) in a way that is not expected of others. It can also look like using Jews or Jewish conspiracy as a stand in for capitalism (i.e conflating Jews with Wall Street or the Banks) or blaming Jews for global conflict.

Dismissal of anti-Jewish oppression is perhaps the most common form of antisemitism in our movement spaces. Because the oppression of Jews does not look the oppressions we are more familiar with fighting, it can seem like it's not real unless there is clear and undeniable evidence. However, antisemitism has had real impacts on Left movements historically and today.

Like their contemporaries on the right, many early Left thinkers struggled with or perpetuated antisemitism. Pierre Proudhon used antisemitic imagery, Marx painted Jews as “collectively greedy, soul-less and loyal only to money, and insulted opponents with antisemitic and racist jibes in his private writings”.¹² Populist movements in Czarist Russia celebrated pogroms (violent and often state-sponsored popular uprisings against Jews that regularly destroyed entire communities), but the revolution did not do away with these long-held prejudices against Jews, Europe’s perpetual other. In WWII, armed Jewish resistance fighters were not welcomed by gentile fighters, including the Red Army. Arab anti-colonial movements incorporated anti-Jewish rhetoric, and some even allied with Hitler to boost their anti-British resistance. Several Arab Jewish communities suffered massacres and forced expulsions.

In organizing for the liberation of all people, we need to exercise caution to not perpetuate antisemitic tropes and to call them out when we hear them. By design, antisemitic tropes can sometimes seem close to a real analysis of Capitalism. However, when “the Jews” become the stand-in for the small minority who really does control our global economic system (the ruling class), we allow for divisions within our united front instead of directing mass anger and energy towards fighting the real enemy.

Combating Antisemitism

Antisemitism is a central pillar of white nationalist and white supremacist movements, but is also a more subtle and insidious presence throughout society that pulls towards white right politics. Where the left does not address the systemic targeting of Jews, the right will.

Very few Left organizations address antisemitism publicly unless there is overt violence. Even at that, few Socialist organizations issued any statement about the attack on the Tree of Life synagogue. When organizations remain silent, Jews who otherwise orient with Left united front politics feel unrecognized and dismissed, continuing a lack of involvement in organizations. Across the country, groups like IfNotNow and Jewish Voice for Peace are organizing Jews against the occupation of Palestine, and doing so in a way that is creating a new generation of political activists. The people who run these organizations often identify as socialists, many of their leaders work for labor unions or social movement organizations. Their leaders and members come from more racial and cultural backgrounds than even most Jews are used to seeing in Jewish spaces.

Then what can we as Freedom Road do to combat this vicious ideology that animates the white supremacist movement and obscures the reality of capitalist exploitation? When we are clear about antisemitism we are better positioned to challenge harmful ideas and tendencies in our movements and in the general public. Jews on the left know we don’t have a home in the white ethnostate, but in

¹² The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere, 12

the mainstream we have been inundated with a narrative that Israel - an exploitative, deeply racist, apartheid nation - is our only hope of salvation in a world where both the right and left hate Jews simply because we are Jews.

Here are some suggestions for how FRSO can contribute to a Left culture that welcomes Jews, disrupts a fundamental aspect of the New Confederacy's ideology, and that can contribute to building a broader united front while opening our organization to a new class of young leaders looking for a broader political home.

- Support Jewish comrades around claims of antisemitism - whether that is in our unions, our community organizations, or in FRSO.
- Do not ask Jews in movement spaces to credential their politics (especially around Palestine) in a way you would not ask of non-Jews.
- Be aware of antisemitic tropes so as not to inadvertently use them, and call them out publicly when you see them.
- Support the activities of left Jewish organizations in your area and build relationships of mutual solidarity.
- Provide education on anti semitism and the importance of combating it in our mass organizations
- Discuss this document or any of the below resources in depth at district and unit meetings to develop a better understanding of antisemitism and the white right
- Publicly challenge and call out acts of antisemitic violence when we see them

We are also calling for a broader discussion on antisemitism in the 2019 congress period. Please contact us at FRSOConfrontingAntisemitism@gmail.com if you would like to participate in a broader conversation about antisemitism at the congress and beyond.

Conclusion

Antisemitism is a core part of the ideology of our main enemy. When we don't clearly understand the role it plays in New Confederate ideology, and how it is used to undermine and divide our strategic alliance, this right wing rhetoric can effectively paint progressive and left movements as antisemitic. We should not concede the support of the majority of Jews to a white supremacist right wing coalition. Jews have a material interest in fighting the white supremacist New Confederacy in the alliance for collective liberation.

Antisemitism paints Jews as an elite global cabal conspiring to destroy the working class. As long as those in our movements believe that this is true in any way, they will miss that there is a real elite global cabal conspiring to destroy us all: the ruling class of global capitalism. As Freedom Road, we must be more adept at recognizing the difference between real anti-capitalist analyses and those that rely on antisemitism so we can more effectively fight the real enemy.

One old antisemitic trope says that all Jews are communists and race traitors who align with people of color to upend the stability of the current order. May it be so! Jews have long played significant roles in the US left, and should continue to do so. By incorporating a clearer and more explicit analysis around antisemitism into our organizational strategy and mass work, we can help bring about a day when Jews are a real part of our strategic alliance, when violent attacks on Jewish communities are thwarted before they happen, and accusations of antisemitism are no longer used to weaken our movements.

RESOURCES:

The Past Didn't Go Anywhere (by April Rosenblum, 2007, 36 pages): A zine/pamphlet on understanding, recognizing, and combating antisemitism for activists on the political Left. This accessible resource is particularly geared towards understanding antisemitism in left and movement spaces. You can read this online or download a pdf at:
<https://archive.org/details/ThePastDidntGoAnywhere>

Understanding Antisemitism (Jews For Racial and Economic Justice, 2017, 44 pages): “Antisemitism is real. It is antithetical to collective liberation, and it hurts Jews but not only Jews — it undermines, weakens and derails all of our movements for social justice and collective liberation.” It is long past time for the left as a whole to sharpen its understanding of anti-Jewish ideology, and for Jews to engage more deeply in the collective fight against white supremacy. This paper is designed to help us develop that understanding and strengthen those commitments to one another.
Available for download at: <https://jfrej.org/understanding-antisemitism/>

Lenin's Speech on Anti-Jewish Pogroms: <https://youtu.be/i0ljxQsgUM4>
(text available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/mar/x10.htm>)
VI Lenin's short speech decrying Anti-Jewish Pogroms and calling for broader inclusion of Jews into the struggle for socialism.

Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism (by Eric K Ward, 2017): Noted anti-racist organizer and researcher Eric K Ward's examination of modern antisemitism, informed through infiltration, research, and experience with right white organizations and activists.
<https://www.politicalresearch.org/2017/06/29/skin-in-the-game-how-antisemitism-animates-white-nationalism/>

Attacking Antisemitism (Ben Lorber, Jacobin Magazine Nov 2018): A useful summary from a socialist perspective of why socialist movements in the US need to address antisemitism.
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/11/antisemitism-squirrel-hill-pittsburgh-shooting-racism>

The Death and Life of the Jewish Century (Benjamin Balthaser, Boston Review March 2019): Situates rising antisemitism in our broader political context with an understanding of shifting narratives.
<http://bostonreview.net/politics/benjamin-balthaser-death-and-life-jewish-century>