

Eric Lee: The Online Labour Solidarity Whiz who's 'Proud to be a Zionist'

Peter Waterman

peterwaterman1936@gmail.com

Eric Lee is best-known as the owner/coordinator of two international labour sites online. [LabourStart](#) is a unique and humungous news and solidarity site, fed by hundreds of volunteers. It is heavily identified with the Eurocentric and Social-Liberal International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). [UnionBook](#) is his pinboard or sandbox, on which contributors can post almost anything, or in which they can play, without any visible effect, with others.¹

Eric, moreover, is organizing, 2016, a rather broad [LabourStart Conference](#) in Toronto, Canada this year. And he is this same year also the recipient of *two* awards for his online labour solidarity work, one in the [UK](#), one in [Norway](#).

I was therefore astounded to see his recent declaration, [Proud to be a Zionist](#), a statement illustrated by a Left Zionist poster, with Hebrew lettering, from 1944: that is from before Israel was even created! Eric also identifies with the Israeli kibbutzim (he once lived and worked in one), though the numbers and socialist inspiration of these has been in decline for many years. As a US Left (?) Zionist paper puts it (in a piece worth reading in full) ['What Actually Undermined the Kibbutz'](#):

Over the past quarter-century, most of Israel's 270 kibbutzim have abandoned the founders' socialist credo, 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need,' and replaced it with the new 'privatized' kibbutz.

So Eric's Pride seems to be inspired by a Left Zionist Israel (real or aspirational) of the 1940s-50s, rather than the neo-liberal, racist, religious-conservative, projection of the present day. In the 1940s-50s Israel was almost universally supported by at least the Western trade union internationals, and the major Western (and even Non-Western) national unions. Today there is a growing international union movement, modeled on the Anti-Apartheid one, that identifies with the Palestinian unions and people, and calls for a Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions ([BDS](#)) campaign against Israel.

Now, like Eric Lee, I am a Jewish socialist and labour internationalist, both on the Ground (modestly) and in the Cloud (even more so). Shocked by his Zionist Pride statement, I decided that rather than dissecting his more-than-somewhat chauvinist² declaration, I would offer my own take on the Israel/Palestine situation. This is part of a general 2014 paper on the [current crisis of union internationalism](#). It considers different

international labour responses to that conflict, including Eric Lee's Labour Zionist one. The relevant section begins as follows:

I have identified with Palestine Solidarity and/or the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign, particularly in so far as this has involved unions and the wider labour movement. More so since the 2014 Israeli outrage in Gaza that scandalized even liberal Zionists abroad and former IDF intelligence unit soldiers in Israel. Given the Balkanisation/Ghettoization of Palestine, I have come to consider any UN-type 'two-state' solution as dead in the water (or should one here say 'desert' – including those caused by long-standing and continuing Israeli destruction of Palestine's ecology?). If we are not to continue towards Israel's 'Final Solution of the Arab Problem', then I see a one-state solution as the only democratic one. It may be distant (so is a post-capitalist world!) yet it provides a horizon toward which we must move.

The section continues with this consideration (edited) of the Labour Zionist position:

The Labour Zionist. Though not confined to one person, this position is exemplified by ... Eric Lee ... whose position reminds me of that of Western Communists as Stalinist Russia stagnated and declined. He has been busy with triumphalist celebration of Israel's wars, as well as the successes of the Zionist Histadrut within the [traditional trade unions] in general and the ITUC in particular. He has, however, increasingly shifted, if uncertainly, to sobering reflections on the success of the BDS/Palestine-solidarity movement, though this is not to the point of recognizing any Israeli responsibility [for this]. Two pro-Israeli sites he has either created or been connected with, [TULIP](#) (Trade Unions Linking Israel and Palestine) and [TUFU](#) (Trade Union Friends of Israel) appear to have run out of steam late-2013.³ Eric (with whom I fruitfully dialogued on [international labour communication by computer] in the 1990s) has also increasingly withdrawn his pro-Israeli/Histadrut news, views and personal attachments from *LabourStart* and *UnionBook*, concentrating them on his own blogsite (from which he has also removed his *LabourStart/UnionBook* affiliations!). Unlike many Western Communists (myself amongst them after the Soviet invasion of Communist Czechoslovakia) he has not yet had his '1968 Moment' - that of abandoning a fundamentalist state-nationalism and an inevitably 'particularistic internationalism', in favour of the dialogical/dialectical internationalism that his remarkable and pioneering online creations make possible.

Eric Lee does a disservice to both his online and offline *LabourStart* activity by his continued total identification with one particular state (compare that of Communist internationalists with the Soviet Union). That he has separated his Zionism from *LabourStart* is a result, evidently, of 1) Israel's increasing violation of human rights both within the country and in Palestine, 2) the increasing inter/national [union opposition to Israel](#), and 3) the international criticism made of his [continuing Zionism over the years](#). This shows, amongst other things, a British union refusing funds for *LabourStart* on the grounds of his Zionism, as well as a failure to achieve a place on the elected board of [Amnesty International](#) in the UK. Indeed, [a condemnation](#) of Eric's support for the Israeli Zionist union confederation, Histadrut, also heavily marked a

LabourStart conference in Turkey, 2011! Lee has consequently played down his identification with that body.

In so far as left, labour, socialist and human rights campaigning internationally, has caused Eric to retreat from using *LabourStart* to promote Zionism (and Israeli Zionist unionism), I am convinced that further campaigning at *LabourStart* conferences, and award-winning ceremonies, is necessary and would be to the advantage of such internationalism as *LabourStart/UnionBook* might represent.

I would like to forestall any argument that it is sufficient if Eric separates his Zionism from LabourStart. This would not stand up for anyone who on one of his sites promoted his labour internationalism and on another expressed anti-semitism, sexism, Maoism or Trumpism.

Eric Lee has shown he is sensitive to the forward march of the union BDS movement, and to criticism of his Israeli chauvinism. A widening campaign might oblige him to recognize there is a fundamental contradiction between national chauvinism and labour internationalism.

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1 Full disclosure: I was for a year or two an active contributor to *UnionBook*. This was when I thought it had potential as a site of dialogue, whilst *LabourStart* is a 'broadcaster', collecting news to a centre, then sending this out. I was twice suspended from UB by Eric Lee, the second time definitively. I decided to focus my energy elsewhere.

2 Merriam-Webster definition: 1 : *excessive or blind patriotism — compare [jingoism](#)*, 2 : *undue partiality or attachment to a group or place to which one belongs or has belonged*.

3 *Update, April 18, 2016*: The TULIP site has evidently been revived, though it seems to have forgotten which Palestinian unions it now 'links' with.