

Labor's Counter-Olympics-1936

By: **Arieh Lebowitz**

Much has been made recently of the 100th anniversary of the modern Olympics. Television commentators and journalists have also made mention of the Berlin Olympics of 1936. Left untold, is the story of the 60th anniversary of the World Labor Athletic Carnival, held at New York's Randall's Island to protest the holding of the 1936 Olympic games in Nazi Germany.

The two day event, organized by the newly-formed Jewish Labor Committee, with the active support and cooperation of a number of labor bodies, brought 400 athletes from across the country to compete in what became known as the "Counter Olympics."

Honorary co-chairs of the event, included New York Governor Herbert Lehman, New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, American Federation of Labor President William Green, and Judge Jeremiah Mahoney, former President of the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States. Mahoney was a leader of the "Move the Olympics" movement and resigned from the American Olympic Committee to protest the holding of the 1936 games in Berlin.

Chairing the Labor Committee of the Carnival was Isidore Nagler, Vice President of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (now UNITE).

JLC, Leader in Anti-Nazi Movement

The story of this episode in labor history begins in 1934, with the

newly formed Jewish Labor Committee (JLC). The JLC, founded by leaders of labor unions and support groups, made every effort to alert the world to the danger posed by the Nazis and their allies.

Early in 1935, JLC Chairman B.C. Vladeck was invited to join the "Move the Olympics" Committee headed by Samuel K. Maccabee. Soon afterward, JLC Executive Secretary Isaiah Minkoff and Vladeck began work on organizing a massive anti-Nazi demonstration to take place while Olympics were being held in Berlin. The JLC decided to organize a counter Olympics in New York City.

The public event, held over the August 15th-16th (the last two days of the Berlin Olympics) weekend at the newly-opened Municipal Stadium on Randall's Island, brought together hundreds of athletes from various sectors of the United States and Canada and gained the imprimatur of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), the highest body for such games.

Jumping Janitor

About 18,000 fans saw a number of athletes, including George Vargott, the world record holder in the pole vault. Dubbed the "Jumping Janitor," Vargott vaulted 14 feet 4.5 inches, more than one and one-half inch better than the best vault at the Berlin Olympics.

Also present was Henry Cieman, the world class Jewish walker from Canada who refused to go to Berlin; Eulace Peacock, the Temple University sprinter and high jumper who defeated Jesse Owens

two months earlier; Eddie Gordon, the gold medal winner in the broad jump 1932 Olympics; Walter Marty, the former record holder in the high jump; Charles Beetham, the AAU 800 meter champion; and Ham Hucker, the current AAU 200 meter hurdles champion.

This anti-Nazi protest was widely covered in the general, labor and Jewish press of the time. The event was so successful that another one was held the following year. Although the 1937 games had less connection with the anti-Berlin Olympics protests of 1936, it nevertheless gave an opportunity during the summer of 1937 to publicly protest the Nazis and their activities.

Record Set in 1937 Meet

The 1937 meet included 6 members of the 1936 American Olympic squad, three of whom had won medals. Elroy Robinson of San Francisco broke the world's record in the half-mile event. The games also included three events reserved for the disabled.

The World Labor Athletic Carnival was a unique publicity vehicle to support those in New York and around the world who actively opposed holding the Olympics in Berlin. It gave visibility to the Jewish Labor Committee and other groups and individuals active in the anti-Nazi struggle.

The author is the Program Associate of the Jewish Labor Committee.