

Third International Conference on Soviet Jewry

I am delighted to be here representing not only the American Federation of Teachers, but the AFL-CIO and its President, Lane Kirkland.

I am here to give voice to the American labor movement's deep concern for the plight of Soviet Jews and its outrage at the Soviet Government's denial of their right of emigration.

I know there are those who sincerely believe that the issue of Jewish emigration can be most effectively addressed by separating it from other issues of Soviet behavior.

But the Soviet policy on Jewish emigration, and the official anti-Semitism that underlies it, speak volumes about the character of the Soviet state and its relations with other nations.

What kind of government, led by what kind of people, keeps a man like Anatoly Shcharansky in solitary confinement for a year, without mail or visitors, in contemptuous disregard of world opinion?

And what can be learned about this regime from its treatment of Yosef Begun. He submits an application to emigrate to Israel and is fired from his job. Then he is arrested for "parasitism" and sent to Siberia for two years. When he returns to Moscow he is arrested again for violating internal passport regulations and

is sent back to Siberia for three years. Then he tries to earn a living teaching Hebrew--and is arrested on charges of "anti-Soviet propaganda and instigation." He now faces seven years imprisonment and five years exile.

Think of all the time and energy devoted to this persecution by Party bureaucrats and secret police. All because Yosef Begun wanted to go to Israel.

From time to time we are asked to believe that the Soviet leadership is just like us--except for a different geopolitical view of the world. What are we saying about ourselves if we accept that such inhuman behavior does not belong in a separate category, the product of a monstrous political system, a pathological political mutation?

Fewer than 100 Soviet Jews have been allowed to emigrate so far this year--down from 52,000 in 1979. Is this not a blatant violation of the Helsinki Accords, which provide for the free flow of people and information across national borders?

We have not been able to secure enforcement of the Helsinki Accords, or to prevent the Soviets from using Jews as bait to win concessions from the West. And yet, there are many in the West who want to rush headlong into new agreements with the Soviets with scant attention to their enforceability.

We are in debt to the Anatoly Shcharansky and the Yosef Beguns. In seeking to exercise their basic human rights, they uphold the values we take for granted. In denying these rights,

the Soviet authorities reveal the character of their regime--
of which they are themselves the brute products--and illuminate
the chasm that separates two worlds.

To recognize that chasm is painful and frightening. Not
to recognize it is to foreclose the possibility of bridging it.

Thank you.