

Ameinu Advancing Social and Economic Justice

Activism for peace, for democracy, and for economic and social justice in North America and the world are intertwined elements of what it means to be part of the Progressive Zionist movement. As outlined in the last Leadership Letter, I see Ameinu's work as a contemporary extension of the dynamic and inspirational history of Progressive Zionism, where each generation has sought to frame a multifaceted agenda to serve the movement, Israel and the Jewish people.

So today, Ameinu joins our eternal focus on Israel -- for a secure, peaceful, free and democratic Jewish state -- with an expansive and ambitious social and economic justice agenda and a set of goals that will guide our advocacy in the weeks, months and years to come.

We hope to accomplish these goals, which are the product of months of consideration by Ameinu's Policy and Advocacy leadership, in partnership with Jewish and progressive activists in North America. While not all issues will have the same relevance in each country, Ameinu is seeking to develop focused campaigns in the United States and Canada. We expect that these goals will continue to evolve to meet developing needs and that the process of realizing Ameinu's social justice vision will be a core project of our Progressive Zionist grassroots community.

Ameinu, therefore, welcomes the chance to participate in a dialog with activists at home and abroad as we study, debate and organize together. Please feel free to contact me at Gideon@Ameinu.net to share your ideas on priorities and strategies so that we can collectively create our Progressive Zionist advocacy movement for social and economic justice.

Ameinu Social and Economic Justice Advocacy Goals

As approved by Ameinu's Policy and Advocacy Committee, September 23, 2013

Ameinu (Our People) works to achieve peace for Israel. Ameinu also works to achieve economic and social justice, in North America, Israel and all nations of the world. Every society has a responsibility to offer protection to its weakest members and minorities, to foster pluralism and democracy, and to respect and encourage diversity. These values, and the prophetic admonition to "seek justice and pursuit it," have guided the Jewish people throughout our history. This is the vision that inspires and guides Ameinu today.

Ameinu believes that the North American Jewish community must stand firm and be true to its roots by taking a leading role in the struggle for more decent, more just, and more equitable societies in the United States, Canada, Israel and around the world. Advocacy on these issues is guided by the teaching of the Jewish tradition and the lessons of Jewish history that inform our contemporary Jewish experience.

Ameinu believes that the widening gap between the rich and poor, the weakening social safety net, the diminished social and economic mobility and the racism and violence must be opposed by the North American Jewish community. **Ameinu will seek to address, both through its grassroots network and in coalition with allied organizations in the North American Jewish and progressive communities, the following public policy goals.**

Domestic Policy Goals*

Poverty, Living Wage and Economic Opportunity

- ❖ In the U.S., more than 46 million Americans are living below the poverty line – \$22,314 for a family of four. A 30 year decline in wages has caused enormous human suffering, a spike in inequality in the economy and a trap where millions, who once worked towards a secure middle income lifestyle, are relegated to ongoing cycles of poverty. While improving somewhat, unemployment continues to remain extremely high with millions being unable to find employment.
- AmeenU contends that combating poverty and the waste of human potential that it involves must be a top societal priority. Among the best solutions to the poverty trap is an expansion of wages at the lower end of the spectrum. The minimum wage should be increased and indexed to inflation and all workers should be assured that their hard work will be rewarded with a living wage. The government also should develop a significant jobs program that will ensure that willing workers are able to obtain the training and opportunity needed to work, support their families and progress out of poverty into a secure economic future.

Labor Rights

- ❖ The right to organize and collectively negotiate for better wages and working conditions is a cornerstone of economic security for workers. It has made tremendous contributions to the development of a just society. Particularly for lower skilled and low income workers, the absence of representation has allowed exploitation, unsafe working conditions and insufficient wage levels to take families out of poverty. In recent years, there also has been a concerted campaign to strip the union rights of public sector workers.
- AmeenU supports the right of all workers to create unions and to fight exploitation and unsafe working conditions. AmeenU also supports recent labor actions by workers in the fast food, domestic, health, parking and other service industries. AmeenU opposes state action to undermine the labor rights of public sector workers. The Federal Government should take steps to protect the right to organize, including passing legislation to allow majority sign up (card check) to create unions and to allocate sufficient resources to aggressively enforce labor laws, occupational health and safety laws and other worker protections.

The Social Safety Net

- ❖ While good jobs and a living wage are the best insurance of economic justice and opportunity, the government must protect those who remain in need. Adequate public benefits must be provided for the poor, disabled, elderly and other vulnerable groups. Freedom from hunger is a basic right and a prerequisite for economic success. Additionally, access to quality health care must be guaranteed to all. With stagnant wages, economic inequality is growing dramatically.
- AmeenU is committed to the continuation and extension of a robust safety net for the needy. State and federal budgets must be provided with sufficient resources to fund the full scope of effective public assistance programs including those that offer food assistance, medical care for children, relief for the unemployed and care for retirees. Long term fiscal solvency should not be achieved through reductions in benefits that will threaten the economic security of the vulnerable. Moreover,

a key to responsibly ensuring a strong social safety net is through a progressive system of taxation where the individuals who are benefiting most from the nation's prosperity pay their fair share.

Housing and Education

- ❖ Individuals cannot improve their economic status without adequate housing and education. Among the problems plaguing developed societies are affordability, health and safety conditions, accessibility for the disabled and discrimination based on race, sexual orientation or other characteristics. In education, schools have faced a massive funding crisis as federal and state contributions have been slashed. Moreover, a dramatic gap in performance, technology and resources exist between wealthy and poor community schools that perpetuate a cycle of poverty and growing inequality in society.
- Ameen believes that the housing and educational systems must focus on expanding access for all, improving quality of service and lowering costs. Housing should be viewed as a right. As such, government initiatives, as well as incentives for the private sector, should be developed to improve the overall quality of the housing stock, ensure that homelessness is ended and increase the availability of affordable housing. Reform of education – including issues relating to testing, teacher performance, core curriculum, access to pre-K programs, technology in schools and availability of financial assistance for post-secondary education – must lead to greater equality of opportunity and improved performance by all students. Investments in education must be increased to promote economic development and poverty alleviation.

Immigration Reform

- ❖ Immigration is a core component of national identity and has been the essential driver of economic success and cultural diversity. Great benefits have been realized through the arrival and integration of new waves of immigrants – employment based, family sponsored and humanitarian. These positive features are undermined by the historic failure of the U.S. Federal Government to fix a broken immigration system that has resulted in approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants, backlogs in certain immigration categories, exploitation of undocumented workers, a severe mismatch between available employment and visas, hundreds of deaths on the border, undermining of rule of law and insufficient funding for English and other integration programs. Past efforts at reform have unfortunately addressed these interconnected problems in a piecemeal fashion.
- Ameen sees Comprehensive Immigration Reform as the best approach to repair the immigration system. Legislation should be enacted that will address a path to citizenship for the undocumented, border and interior security, levels of future legal immigration and integration of newcomers into society. Particularly vulnerable groups of immigrants – including minors, refugees and victims of torture and trafficking – should be provided with special assistance. Immigrant workers should be protected from exploitation in the workplace.

Voting Rights and the Role of Money in Politics

- ❖ At the heart of the democratic process is equal access to the polls and a legitimate process where voters have faith that the electoral system isn't rigged for those with financial power. Recent actions by state governments have sought to suppress the votes of minority communities, young and elderly voters through voter ID laws, restrictions on early voting and other mechanisms. The 2010 Supreme Court decision, *Citizens United vs. Federation Election Commission*, gutted key provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act eliminating crucial federal oversight of state election laws. Moreover, the role of money in politics has undermined confidence in the entire electoral process.

- Ameinu opposes local and state legislation that curtails opportunities for voting as well as policies that lead to extreme waiting times at the polls. The Federal Government should take immediate legislative action to protect the voting rights of all citizens. Action should also be taken to minimize the impact of Citizens United, and to work for its reversal so that wealthy individuals are not able to dominate elections. Complete transparency for all contributions to political campaigns must be ensured.

Civil Rights and Equality

- ❖ Full equality under the law is a fundamental North American and Jewish value. For this reason, Jews have been active proponents of civil rights for decades. While great strides have been made, much still needs to be done to ensure that discrimination due to race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other characteristics is ended. Discrimination can still be found in employment, housing, law enforcement, access to public services, education, transportation and other essential areas of life.
- Ameinu opposes local, state and federal laws that discriminate based on the immutable characteristics of individuals. Moreover, facially neutral policies must also be opposed if they have disparate impacts on different groups of people not based on legitimate job-related requirements. As part of the struggle for full gender equality, governments must guarantee the availability of affordable child care, parental leave and reproductive rights, and must combat domestic violence and sexual assault. Beyond combating state sponsored discrimination, Ameinu sees education and intergroup dialog as being crucial to ending the societal discrimination and violence. This type of dialog will encourage a full appreciation for democracy and pluralism.

Prevention of Gun Violence

- ❖ More than 30,000 people are killed by firearms in the United States each year including homicides, suicides and accidental shootings. The number of people injured by guns is even greater. The daily tragedy of gun violence is periodically dramatized by mass shootings that claim multiple victims, such as the murder of 26 people, including 20 young children, in Newtown, Connecticut. In such mass shootings, the perpetrators often use large ammunition clips and military style assault rifles. While the proliferation of guns is not the only cause of violence in society, sensible restrictions on the easy availability of weapons and loop holes in the background check system are keys to ending many of these killings.
- To save lives, Ameinu believes that gun laws should be tightened. Among the changes that should be undertaken are universal background checks, bans of assault weapons and large ammunition clips and increased penalties for gun trafficking. A continuous process to develop new effective restrictions to keep guns out of the hands of criminals and other dangerous individuals should be initiated. Additionally, as severe psychological problems often contribute to mass shootings, the government must ensure that all who need mental health services can receive them and that actions be taken to end the stigmatization of those who seek this form of health care.

Global Policy Goals

Elimination of Extreme Poverty

- ❖ Half of the world's population lives on less than \$2.50 a day and 1.2 billion people are living in extreme poverty under \$1.50 a day – without sufficient food, clean water, health care, sanitation, education and other essentials for life. The Human Development Report estimates that globally 22,000 children die each day due to conditions of poverty. In 2000, the United Nations approved a series of eight Millennium Development Goals including the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger by 2015. While progress has been made, a great deal remains to be done to address these core development challenges and so a UN global agenda “Beyond 2015” has been created.
- Aमेину believes that the United States, Canada and other developed countries must lead by engaging the world to address issue of extreme global poverty. Greater resources should be provided to meet this goal through increased humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and international development funding. Expanding educational opportunities for girls, minority populations and the poor is an essential component of the fight against poverty. Aमेину sees the conditions of extreme deprivation around the world as being fundamentally in conflict with human dignity and so direct foreign assistance and international development decisions should serve to advance the goal of poverty alleviation.

International Labor Organizing and Working Conditions

- ❖ The right for workers to organize is universal and is essential to promoting safe working conditions and economic sustainability. However, this right, recognized by the International Labor Organization as a core labor standard, is frequently violated across the globe with workers and organizers being intimidated and threatened to prevent unionization. In many countries around the world global economic development serves to enhance the profits of corporations at the expense of their workers and creates a “race to the bottom” where countries compete to offer potential employers a lower wage rate and lax regulatory environment. The results can be tragic as seen by the recent series of industrial accidents in Bangladesh, including a garment factory collapse in April 2013 that claimed the lives of 1,127 workers.
- Aमेину views working conditions and the right to organize as being essential for all peoples and all nations. Multinational corporations must protect their workers, support union rights and ensure that all working conditions are safe. Aमेину opposes all national benefits, including tax breaks, for corporations that fail to meet international labor standards.

Human Rights and the Prevention of Genocide

- ❖ As victims of persecution and discrimination throughout our history, the Jewish community is extremely sensitive to protecting victims of human rights abuses around the world. This is particularly true in the case of Genocide where the Jewish experience of the Holocaust informs a Jewish response to Genocide in Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Darfur and elsewhere. Protection of human rights and prevention of Genocide have been crucial pieces of the work of the United Nations since its creation with numerous conventions having been developed, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

- Ameinu promotes expanded protection for all victims of human rights abuse around the world. Crimes against humanity and Genocide must be combated by all national governments as well as the international community. Legal instruments to protect the victims should be strengthened. Victims of persecution, torture, human trafficking, refugees and internally displaced people should be provided with protection and assistance so that they can survive in the immediate term and with durable solutions so that they can have an opportunity for a future of security and freedom.

Environmental Protection

- ❖ Today the world faces a wide array of environmental threats that call into question the long term sustainability of humankind. Most pressing are pollution and climate change caused by a dependence on fossil fuels to meet energy needs. Additionally, global biodiversity continues to be degraded with loss of habitat and insufficient protection of endangered species on both public and private lands. The interconnectedness of all life on earth leads to interrelated concerns over the environment and economic development. We must find solutions that meet human needs while enhancing environmentally sustainability.
- Ameinu calls on the United States, Canada and other developed countries to make environmentally sustainable development a global priority. Governments should develop energy policies that combat climate change and encourage use of renewable energy sources. Reducing the harm from pollution and ensuring that private economic interests do not trump public health and protection of the environment must be core goals of government policy. And while striving to protect the environment, governments should seek to pursue sustainable economic development so that good jobs can be created in new sectors thereby raising the standard of living of the poor.

*While not all issues have the same relevance in each country, Ameinu seeks to develop focused campaigns in the United States and Canada, as well as joint efforts where appropriate. This is an evolving component of Ameinu's work.