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By Martha Grevatt posted on December 19, 2023

Labor solidarity with Palestine continues to grow — even in the U.S. where the leadership of organized labor has historically been pro-Zionist.

Thousands of union activists and allies rallied in Oakland, California, on Dec. 16, to voice solidarity with Palestinian workers. Called by Bay Area Labor for Palestine, the demonstration was endorsed by over 20 labor organizations, including American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 3299, Oakland Education Association, Service Employees Union (SEIU) Local 1021, International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 10, UNITE HERE Local 2, Inland Boatmen's Union San Francisco – ILWU, International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers Local 21, Trader Joe's United (Rockridge) and others.



Mass labor rally for Palestine, Oakland, California, Dec. 16, 2023. (Photo: Indy Media Bay Area)

Also on Dec. 16, Labor for Palestine and the Palestinian Youth Movement held a rally in New York City with the hashtag #LaborShutItDown4Palestine. The labor rally that brought out hundreds fed into a larger mass march.

“Workers have a special ability to stop Israeli genocide,” said Michael Letwin of Labor for Palestine. “If workers refuse to load or unload Israeli Zim Line ships, that’s worth 1,000 resolutions.” Letwin is the former president of United Auto Workers Local 2325, the Association of Legal Aid Attorneys.

Meanwhile the largest U.S. health care workers’ union, SEIU1199, issued a statement Dec. 15 calling for a cease-fire in Palestine. Among other national unions raising this demand are the IAW, American Postal Workers Union and

United Electrical Workers (UE), who held a joint press conference outside the U.S. Capitol Dec. 14, along with several House representatives.

Speaking at the press conference, UAW President Shawn Fain said, “As the UAW, we take pride in our history of standing up for justice at home and around the world. ... I thank our UAW members for speaking out and pushing us to come out in support of a cease-fire.” (UAW International Union Facebook)

President Fain was acknowledging the hard work of dozens of UAW rank-and-file members, especially graduate student workers and legal services workers in UAW Region 9A, which encompasses the New York City area, New England and Puerto Rico. In meetings with Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla, these workers made it crystal clear that their union must take a position in solidarity with Palestine. Director Mancilla also spoke at the Dec. 14 news conference.

Pro-Zionist labor leaders under fire

Activists have been hammering pro-Zionist labor leaders. American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten is one of the most reactionary union defenders of Israeli apartheid. Rank-and-file teachers disrupted an event in New York City Dec. 14 where she was given an award by Citizen Action, an advocacy organization closely associated with the Working Families Party, which functions as a ballot line for the Democratic Party in New York.

Despite Weingarten’s reactionary stance, AFT locals are passing pro-Palestine resolutions. The Professional Staff Congress, representing 30,000 faculty and professional staff at the City University of New York, voted to support a cease-fire by a better than 3-to-1 margin.

The next day labor allies of Palestine interrupted bureaucrats at a gala New York State AFL-CIO holiday party Dec. 14 to attempt to remind them of the genocide in Gaza. For decades the AFL-CIO has backed Israel and recently defeated a motion for a cease-fire introduced by APWU President Mark Dimondstein.

Some labor organizations have gone beyond merely calling for a cease-fire, including Starbucks Workers United, which stated in October that its members “stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination.” SBWU added, “Furthermore, we condemn Starbucks for shamefully using this devastating humanitarian crisis to make false statements against our union and to vilify us.”

While SBWU did not officially endorse a call for strikes in solidarity with Palestine, there were wildcat strikes at several Starbucks stores. (Starbucks Workers United on X)

In some cases, rank-and-file-led caucuses inside unions have taken more progressive positions on Palestine than their own union leadership. The Movement of Rank-and-file Educators (MORE), a caucus within the United Federation of Teachers, stated Oct. 18 that, “We call on our union to listen to Palestinian trade unionists and heed their calls to action.” The UFT represents 200,000 New York City educators and is affiliated with the AFT. (morecaucusnyc.org)

Unite All Workers for Democracy, a caucus inside the UAW, passed a resolution Dec. 10, including the point: “Be it resolved that UAWD shall commit to organizing support for Palestinian liberation and BDS [the non-violent Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement to remove complicity with Palestinian oppression] among rank-and-file UAW members, and to making BDS the official position of the UAW International.” The resolution referenced the call from over 30 Palestinian labor organizations for workers around the world to obstruct the Zionist military machine and “end complicity with Israeli genocide.” (uawd.org)



In the Chicago, Illinois, area, workers at over 200 workplaces, including several schools, participated in the Palestinians' call for a global strike on Dec. 11 to call attention to the tens of thousands of Palestinians killed by Israel in the past two months. This follows the Nov. 13 call by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) for a cease-fire in Gaza.

In a myriad of ways, the U.S. working class is entering the struggle for a free Palestine. This is long overdue.

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