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Teacher Unions Push for a Ceasefire, With Education, Agitation, and Resolutions

December 19, 2023 / Barbara Madeloni (/author/5862/content)

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Union members rallied in Oakland, California, in December to demand a ceasefire in Gaza. Photo: Keith Brower Brown

When Becky Pringle, president of the 3-million-member National Education Association (NEA), the largest union in the country, tweeted (https://twitter.com/BeckyPringle/status/1733135900543004722), "We join our partner organizations along with Jewish and Muslim leaders across the globe in an urgent call for an end to the violence," it was one more step in the growing movement among union activists demanding a ceasefire in Palestine.

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(https://secure.everyaction.com/w1qW7B3pek2rTtv9ny5bqw2) spearheaded by the United Electrical Workers and Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 3000. They were followed by educator unions as large as the 41,000-member Oregon Education Association and as small as the 450-member Melrose Education Association in Massachusetts.

CONNECTING NATIONALLY

In Portland, Oregon, Olivia Katbi, a high school track coach and OEA member, had no trouble moving her local, the Parkrose Faculty Association, to call for a ceasefire. Back in 2021, the union passed a resolution in support of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, which urges nonviolent pressure to push Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories and respect Palestinian rights. Katbi is part of an informal group of educators connecting on WhatsApp and Signal to share their organizing strategies locally and nationally.

Rural Vermont history and literature teacher Emily Simpson said organizing is more of a challenge there. She was starting with a 15-minute teach-in after school on December 15, part of a Labor for Palestine global event. "If they do want to learn about the issue and how to leverage their power, they have a place to do it," Simpson said.

BACKLASH

Meanwhile, after the executive committee of the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers passed a resolution condemning "the system of Israeli occupation and apartheid," backlash from teachers and the community led the union membership to vote to issue an apology. The resolution, the MFT's apology said, "harmed many Jewish members, students and families while causing unnecessary division within our union."

In Massachusetts, at the recent MTA Board of Directors meeting, an effort was underway to rescind the union's signature on the labor ceasefire resolution. Instead, Board passed a new resolution, building on the old, which read, "The MTA President and Vice President will urge the president of the NEA to pressure President Biden to stop funding and sending weapons in support of the Netanyahu government's genocidal war on the Palestinian people in Gaza." A backlash ensued, made worse when a copy of the motion was sent to a right-wing blog before MTA members were informed. Board members are receiving numerous emails objecting to the vote and demanding the board rescind the newest NBI.

Deb Gesualdo, president of the Malden Teachers Association, seconded the motion to pass the new resolution. She said the leak to the right-wing press has had a chilling effect on some, while at the same time inspiring strike-wins-1000volkswagenworkers-signunion-cards)

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others to dig more deeply into the work. "It brings to light that we have to educate ourselves and be intentional about how to have difficult conversations—about this and other issues."

The Chicago Teachers Union knows something about the potential for backlash from previous controversial resolutions the union has passed about Palestine and Israel. CTU also signed on to the labor ceasefire resolution—but at the same time the union passed a resolution with specific plans for providing "social emotional support for members and students." These plans included professional development "to help members understand the historic complexity and profound human impacts of this conflict."

MOVING THE NEA



Inside the NEA, which has long been tight with the Democratic leadership, these local and state resolutions have been part of the push for NEA leadership to more directly demand that Biden secure a permanent ceasefire. One key in getting Pringle to tweet her call for an end to the violence was a ceasefire resolution passed by the National Council of Urban Education Associations, a group of NEA-affiliated urban unions.

Aaron Phillips, the president of the Amarillo Teachers Association, was a leader in moving the ceasefire resolution at the NCUEA convention. His local signed on to the labor resolution in late October. They were in quick agreement to sign on because Phillips was leading discussions about Israel and Palestine before Hamas's October 7 attack, which killed 1,200 Israelis.

"Because of the previous discussion we had on the board, we didn't see October 7 as the starting point. We had the bigger picture that you have an occupied people, a right-wing government oppressive to its own citizens even of the Jewish faith. It was easier for us to say a military solution is not possible and we have to stop killing children."

Phillips initiated the discussions on the board, in part, after the NEA Representative Assembly in July, where a motion was passed to defend those who speak out about Palestine.

The ceasefire motion at the NCUEA passed because, Phillips said, "there are not sides to pick. It is obvious who has power and control in the situation and at the end of the day a child, no matter what faith or nationality, has a right to live."

'A BULWARK AGAINST THE BACKLASH'

Christopher Helali, a social studies teacher in Hanover, New Hampshire, and a member of the board of NEA-NH, hoped to bring a motion to the state union calling for a ceasefire. Helali's motion, named "the mourning for all losses," called for peace in the region and advocated for a ceasefire. But the board determined that any resolutions had to be voted on by the membership at their annual meeting, which is in April.

In the meantime, Helali says he will be working to pass a motion in his local and support others to do the same. And he is thinking through what motion to bring to the delegates at the April meeting in order to broaden understanding and support for Palestinian liberation. "I thought as long as we get a ceasefire resolution out there, that is powerful," said Helali, an Iranian-American who has spent time in the West Bank and Israel. "It is a victory enough to speak about Palestine."

Some teachers' union activists felt that Pringle's tweet was not strong enough. But others, like Seattle teacher James Whitney Kahn, see it as a beginning. "If we reject it as a victory, I think we give away something that should be a boon and a bulwark against the conservative backlash as we fight for the NEA to take a stand, as we fight to get teachers to teach the truth in classrooms, and fight to defend them when they are inevitably targeted."

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