

LABOR ISRAEL & PALESTINE

# The AFL-CIO Squashed a Council's Cease-Fire Resolution. What Does It Say About Labor Right Now?

The move illustrates larger dynamics currently at play within the U.S. labor movement as the assault on Gaza rages on. While some unions and labor activists are advocating for an immediate end to the onslaught, most officials are keeping quiet.

JEFF SCHUHRKE

NOVEMBER 2, 2023



A young person mourning after an Israeli attack that struck a refugee camp in Gaza City on Nov. 2, 2023. So far, more than 9,000 Palestinians have been killed by the Israeli military.

PHOTO BY MUSTAFA HASSONA/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

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**T**he Israeli military has been bombarding Gaza for weeks—dropping thousands and thousands of bombs and killing more than 9,000 Palestinians—including more than 3,700 children—and displacing some 1.4 million.

On Oct. 16, Palestinian trade unions issued a call to action for organized labor and workers everywhere “to halt the sale and funding of arms to Israel—and related military research.”

The Palestinian labor coalition—including the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions—specifically called on trade unions around the world to: Refuse to manufacture weapons destined for Israel, refuse to transport weapons to Israel, pass motions in their individual trade unions demanding the same, take action against companies complicit in the siege of Gaza, and apply pressure to governments to stop supporting and funding the Israeli war machine.

The call resonated with some union members in the United States, including Alice, a delegate with the Olympia, Washington-based Thurston-Lewis-Mason Central Labor Council (TLM CLC). The TLM CLC represents the AFL-CIO-affiliated local unions in the western Washington counties of Thurston, Lewis and Mason.

Alice (who asked that her last name not be published because she fears being targeted by anti-Palestinian groups) saw the call from the Palestinian trade unions and was inspired to draft a resolution for the TLM CLC to publicly affirm its solidarity.

After the council discussed and unanimously adopted Alice’s measure on Oct. 18, according to two TLM CLC delegates, an announcement with a link to the resolution was posted on the council’s website and Twitter account.

The resolution stated that the labor council “opposes in principle any union involvement in the production or transportation of weapons destined for Israel.” It also encouraged the national AFL-CIO to “publicly support an immediate ceasefire and equal rights for Palestinians and Israelis.”

But the following Monday, an AFL-CIO senior field representative informed the board that the resolution did not conform with the national AFL-CIO's official position, according to interviews and emails shared with *In These Times*.

He specifically pointed to a press release issued by the national labor federation on Oct. 11 calling for “a swift resolution to the current conflict to end the bloodshed of innocent civilians, and to promote a just and long-lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians,” but not explicitly mentioning a cease-fire or opposing the production and shipment of weapons destined for Israel. (Some AFL-CIO-affiliated unions represent workers in the defense industry, including the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers and United Auto Workers.)

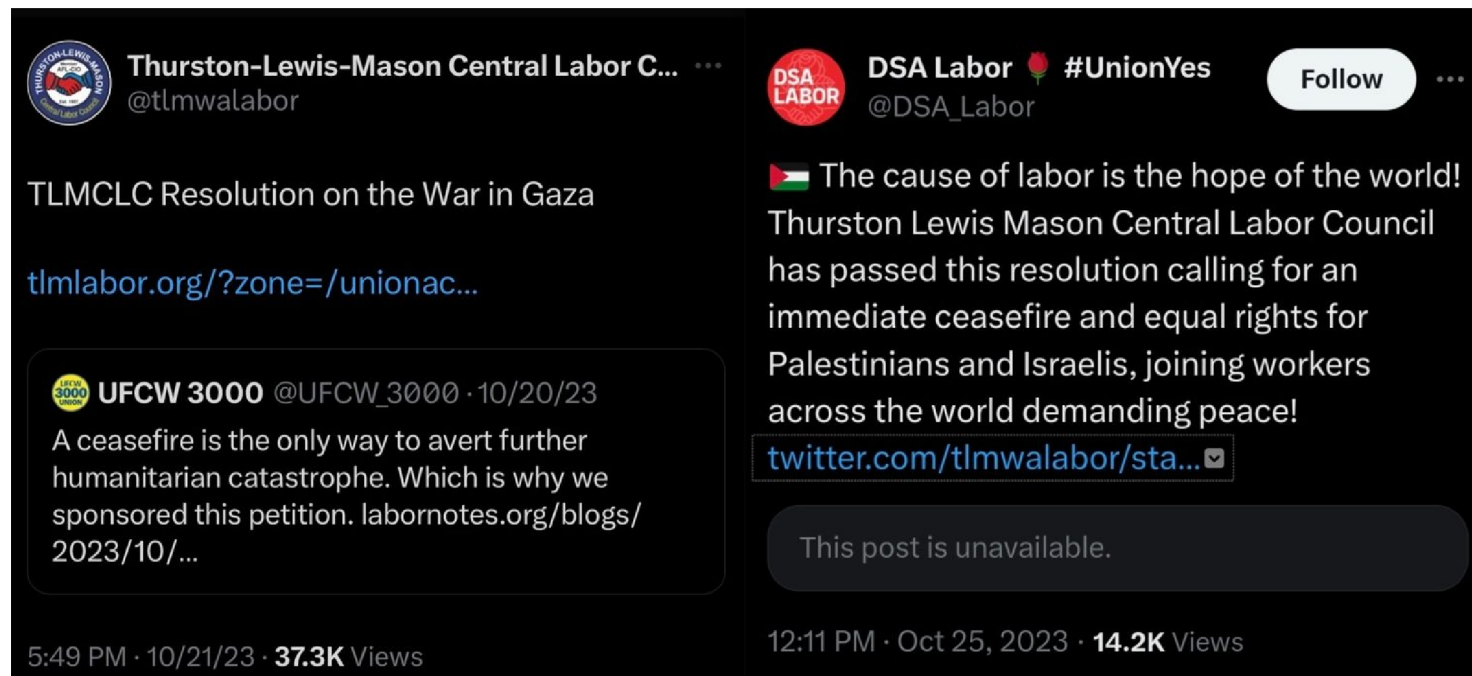
By differing from the AFL-CIO's stated position, the field representative explained, the TLM CLC's resolution was technically void because it violates a governance rule, Rule 4(b), which states: “Area labor councils, as chartered organizations of the AFL-CIO, shall conform their activities on national affairs to the policies of the AFL-CIO.” He further clarified to Alice that the rule “has long been understood to apply to international positions as well as national.”



The Israeli army struck a refugee camp in Gaza City and Palestinians are searching through the rubble and trying to remove debris on Nov. 2, 2023.

Meanwhile, the resolution had already gained widespread public attention after the TLM CLC’s statement about it was retweeted by the Democratic Socialists of America’s National Labor Commission.

But Alice says that after being pressured by the AFL-CIO’s field representative, the TLM CLC deleted the statement from its website and X (formerly Twitter) account late last week. She adds that the field representative also asked her not make a public statement—including to media—about the situation, but she feels it is urgent to get the word out to encourage more local bodies within the AFL-CIO to take a stand at this critical moment. (Labor Notes also published an article about the AFL-CIO and TLM CLC.)



A screenshot of a deleted tweet from the Thurston-Lewis-Mason Central Labor Council (left) and evidence that it had been deleted based on a retweet from DSA Labor (right).

“We need more labor councils, we need more locals passing resolutions like this, because they can’t stop us all,” Alice says. “If it’s just us, they can sweep it under the rug like they’re trying to do right now. But if many, many of us across the country start doing it, then it becomes something much harder for them to sweep under the rug.”

The AFL-CIO’s intervention against the TLM CLC’s cease-fire resolution illustrates the larger dynamics currently at play within the U.S. labor movement as the assault on Gaza, which has been described and decried as genocidal, rages on.

While some unions and labor activists are advocating for an immediate end the Israeli military’s onslaught and expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people, most of the top officials in U.S. labor are either keeping quiet, dancing around the central issues, or—in this case with the AFL-CIO—stepping in to police voices calling for a cease-fire and non-cooperation with Israel’s war machine.

John Campbell, another TLM CLC delegate (we are using a pseudonym because he is concerned about retaliation), says Alice intentionally tried to make the resolution palatable for people with various viewpoints and that the council wasn’t “exactly going out of our way to say anything [outlandish] here” and that “I think calling for a cease-fire is pretty reasonable.”

“The fact that even what she did end up putting out, and what the membership did end up voting on—again, unanimously—the fact that that still ruffled feathers is a bit surprising, honestly,” Campbell says.

The AFL-CIO and the field representative who Alice said she interacted with did not respond to requests for comment.



Smoke rises in Gaza after an attack by the Israeli military on Nov. 2, 2023.



Kooper Caraway, who was previously president of the South Dakota State Federation of Labor and the Sioux Falls AFL-CIO, says it is not uncommon for the AFL-CIO to step in and overrule central labor councils when they take actions on national or international issues.

Caraway resigned as executive director of the SEIU Connecticut State Council a couple of weeks ago after backlash from state Republicans and Democratic Gov. Ned Lamont over remarks Caraway made at an Oct. 9 Palestine solidarity rally in New Haven—making him one of at least dozens of people in the United States who have lost their jobs or had job offers rescinded resulting from their advocacy for Palestinians in recent weeks.

While not commenting on the circumstances of his resignation, Caraway urges local labor bodies to “act locally in any way they can” to support Palestine, similar to how they did to encourage the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa.

“There was a lot of local action for a long time in support of the ANC [African National Congress] and supporting the South African struggle against apartheid before the national labor movement got behind that,” he says. “That helped build momentum nationally.”

## **BUILDING MOMENTUM**

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U.S. LABOR OFFICIALS HAVE A LONG history of being among Israel’s most stalwart supporters, using

union funds to purchase hundreds of millions of dollars in State of Israel bonds from the 1950s onward.

Only in recent years have some unions become more critical of the Israeli government and more sympathetic to the Palestinian freedom movement, including during Israel's 2021 bombardment of Gaza.

In the past few weeks, several local unions and networks of labor activists have issued statements or circulated letters expressing solidarity with Palestinians, urging a cease-fire and condemning both the unfolding genocide in Gaza and escalating settler attacks in the West Bank.

One of the latest examples is the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), whose house of delegates this week approved signing on to a letter of solidarity with other unions “calling for human rights, for the release of all hostages, and for a cease-fire in Israel and Palestine.” The letter also directly calls on Biden to immediately call for a cease-fire.

At the same meeting, the CTU also approved another resolution focused on the classroom and teaching and learning that called for increased measures around “social emotional supports for members and students during world conflicts.” This includes, among other things, professional development “to help members understand the historic complexity and profound human impacts of this conflict” and that the CTU “will gather, share, and support options and resources for supporting children and families impacted by this conflict.”

Meanwhile, after Republicans, right-wing news outlets and Starbucks smeared Starbucks Workers United (SBWU) as terrorist supporters in response to some members posting statements in support of Palestinians on social media, Workers United President Lynne Fox came to SBWU's defense.

“At a time when we should be focused on the human tragedy taking place in Gaza and Israel, Starbucks is instead taking every chance it gets to bash its employees as supporters of hate and violence without any concern for truth—or consequences,” Fox wrote in *In These Times*.

On October 20, SBWU posted a statement on social media reaffirming their members' "solidarity with the Palestinian people's right to self-determination."

"We are opposed to violence, and each death occurring as the result of violence is a tragedy. We absolutely condemn antisemitism and Islamophobia," the SBWU statement said. "We condemn the occupation, displacement, state violence, apartheid, and threats of genocide Palestinians face."

Unions of academic workers at institutions including Rutgers, University of Michigan, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Columbia and New York University have also published statements expressing solidarity with Palestine in recent weeks. The Harvard Graduate Student Union (HGSU)'s attempt to do the same was allegedly obstructed at an Oct. 16 membership meeting through intimidation and procedural delays, according to a press release from a group of rank-and-file HGSU members. (The HGSU did not respond to a request for comment.)

About two weeks ago, U.S. Labor Against Racism and War convened a call attended by hundreds of unionists across the country, and has organized an email-writing campaign directed at national union presidents urging them to call for a cease-fire. Since the campaign was launched at that time, more than 28,000 letters have been sent. Another national call was held on Nov. 2.

The National Writers Union, which also convened a call in the middle of October for labor activists to discuss the situation in Gaza, has criticized the Israeli government for violating international law and called on Western media to do a better job of covering the crisis.

The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) has called for a cease-fire. UE is also the only national union to both call for an end to U.S. military aid to Israel and to endorse the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement to peacefully pressure Israel to end the occupation. Together with with United Food and Commercial Workers Local 3000 (and endorsed by a group of unions including the San Antonio Alliance of Teachers & Support Personnel Local 67), the UE has sponsored a petition for unions and members to demand a cease-fire. This is the petition that the CTU signed.

Labor for Palestine, a group that has been active since 2004, is also asking U.S. union members to sign onto a statement embracing Palestinian trade unions' call to not build or transport weapons for Israel, while rank-and-file United Auto Workers (UAW) members are circulating an open letter urging the union to endorse BDS, which can be signed by UAW members or community allies. (In 2015, after rank-and-file members with UAW-affiliated graduate worker unions at the University of California, New York University and University of Massachusetts Amherst each voted in 2014 to endorse BDS, the UAW's international executive board formally "nullified" the measures.)

## "MORAL RESPONSIBILITY"

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CALLS FOR A CEASE-FIRE HAVE BEEN growing and coming from a variety of groups around the world, including coalitions of Palestinian-led organizations, Jewish American activists holding mass civil disobedience protests around the country and respected humanitarian groups like Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders, the International Committee of the Red Cross, as well as the United Nations General Assembly and hundreds of thousands of protesters across the globe. The editorial board of the conservative *Financial Times*, one of the most pro-business publications in the world, has also recently joined the calls for a cease-fire.

Meanwhile, most U.S. union leaders have remained silent.

*In These Times* reached out to fifteen prominent U.S. unions and asked directly if their national leaders support the growing demands for a cease-fire and whether they support Palestinian labor's call for an end to the arms trade with Israel. In what appears to be a sign of the larger movement's hesitations, only the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) responded.



Palestinian children in Gaza following an Israeli attack on the Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza City on Nov. 1, 2023. More than 3,700 Palestinian children have been killed by the Israeli military over the last several weeks, and more than 6,300 other Palestinian children have been injured.

“We unequivocally condemn the actions taken by Hamas that purposefully targeted Israeli citizens. Civilians now on both sides of the conflict are disproportionately suffering, and the current humanitarian disaster unfolding in the Gaza strip is entirely preventable,” IUPAT General President Jimmy Williams, Jr. said in an emailed statement. “Israel must cease bombing dense urban areas and should immediately allow for humanitarian aid to reach the people most affected by the conflict. Targeting civilians is a war crime. Collective punishment is a war crime. It is the duty of all working people to stand up and say enough.”

“A conflict of this magnitude cannot be fixed by bombs and bullets,” Williams continued. “The IUPAT is proud to join the labor movement across the globe in calling for an immediate end to hostilities and de-escalation of tensions across the region.”

The AFT’s response pointed to recent tweets by the union’s president, Randi Weingarten, calling for a “humanitarian pause” to allow aid into Gaza and criticizing the Israeli government for not doing enough to stop settler attacks in the West Bank and harassment of Arab students at Netanya College.

Weingarten and two of the AFT’s other top officers also issued a statement shortly after Hamas had attacked southern Israel and killed 1,400 people, including more than 1,000 civilians, and the Israeli government had begun its assault on Gaza. That statement said in part that “Israel has every right to defend itself as it will now do,” while also expressing concern for Palestinian civilians “caught in the crossfire.”

Only a few other national unions have publicly said anything about the recent violence in the region, or have explained to their members why they will not be speaking out.

For example, on Oct. 17, SEIU President Mary Kay Henry denounced “the horrific terrorist attack by Hamas” and said the union was “deeply troubled by the emerging humanitarian crisis in Gaza,” calling for

“long-term solutions that will bring safety, peace and justice to the people of the region.”

A brief SAG-AFTRA [statement](#) on Oct. 13 similarly condemned the Hamas attack, but made no mention of Palestinians or Israel’s siege and bombing of Gaza. Several high-profile SAG-AFTRA members have signed onto the [Artists Call for Ceasefire Now](#) letter to President Joe Biden, supported by Oxfam America and ActionAid USA.

In an internal message to members noting “the atrocities in Israel committed by Hamas” and “the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza,” officers of the Writers Guild of America (WGA) East said they would not be making any public comments due to a recent [change in policy](#) around public statements. Leaders of the WGA West similarly [told](#) members they would not make public remarks about the violence in Palestine and Israel due to a lack of consensus, but later told members they were “horrified” by the “murder of so many innocent people in Israel” and that they “deeply mourn the deaths of innocent Palestinians.”

Behind closed doors at an AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting last Monday, American Postal Workers Union (APWU) President Mark Dimondstein [reportedly](#) urged the labor federation to demand a cease-fire while also arguing that Israel and Palestine should be combined into a single state (APWU did not respond to a request for comment). According to the *New York Times*, “no other labor leader in the meeting offered vocal support for his position,” but the AFT’s Weingarten “asserted Israel’s right to defend itself.”

The relatively muted response from U.S. union presidents stands in contrast to labor leaders in other countries, particularly the United Kingdom. At a massive Palestine solidarity rally in London last Saturday, the crowd was addressed by [Libby Nolan](#), president of the 1.3-million-member public service union UNISON, and by [Mick Lynch](#), general secretary of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT).

## LIBBY NOLAN

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Libby Nolan President of [@unisontheunion](#) representing 1.3 million workers, calls on the British government to push for an immediate [#CeasefireNOW](#)

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“The Labour Party and the whole workers movement must show it is on the side of the peacemakers, not the warmongers,” Lynch said at the rally. “End the killing now, call the immediate cease-fire, and let’s create the road to a settlement with peace, social justice, human rights, freedom and dignity for all. Solidarity to Palestine.”

Caraway says there are strategic reasons why U.S. labor leaders should not only call for a cease-fire, but support the Palestinian freedom movement.

“This is one of the most pro-Palestinian generations that this country has ever seen. Millennials and Gen-Z—the same folks who are the most pro-union generation—those are also the folks who do not want the U.S. to continue sending weapons to Israel,” Caraway says. “It’s strategically important for the leadership of the labor movement to do their best to reflect the values and principles of the younger generation of working-class people who they seek to unionize or help organize.”



A view of part of the Jabalia refugee camp in Gaza City that was bombed again by the Israeli army on Nov. 1, 2023.

But Caraway adds that there are other reasons for U.S. labor to stand with Palestine.

“There’s the old labor adage that an injury to one is an injury to all,” he says. “So as long as one group of working folks are colonized or occupied, or their families are facing elimination and genocide, there’s the moral responsibility of the labor movement—particularly in the country that is funding that occupation and genocide—to stand in support of the workers being attacked.”

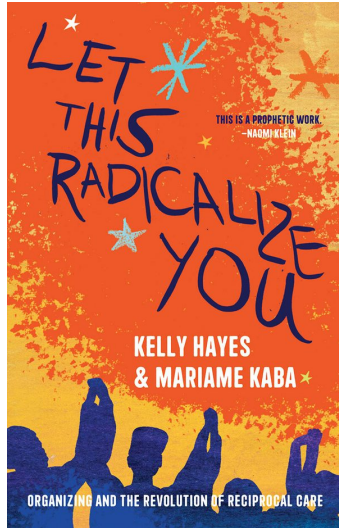
Alice from the Thurston-Lewis-Mason Central Labor Council says this sense of solidarity is what motivated her to introduce the cease-fire resolution.

“I felt like this was something we really needed to press for,” she explains. “There’s ethnic cleansing going on in Gaza right now, and we have a responsibility—especially in the richest country in the world—to do everything we can to stop that.”

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