

NEWS | ECONOMY & LABOR

The International Labor Movement Is Mobilizing for a Free Palestine

Global labor unions are responding to Palestinian workers' calls for solidarity and demanding an immediate ceasefire.

By Shane Burley, TRUTHOUT
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Protesters march in solidarity with Palestine, demanding a ceasefire amid the ongoing conflict between the Israeli government and Palestine, on November 25, 2023, in London, England.

ALISHIA ABODUNDE / GETTY IMAGES

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“Which side are you on?” a worker with the independent New Seasons Labor Union asked other unionized workers at a November 11 rally in Portland, Oregon. “Now normally this means, ‘Are you on the side of the workers, or are you on the side of the bosses...’ But today when we ask what side are you on, we are asking, ‘Are you on the side of the oppressed, or on the side of the oppressor?’”

The rally was organized by the labor coalition Portland Jobs with Justice (JWJ)* and a group of union activists concerned with the growing death toll in Gaza. A recently extended “humanitarian pause” between Israel and Hamas has been in effect since November 24, but as *Truthout* reported, “Israeli forces have continued killing Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza throughout the supposed pause.” Moreover, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant has said the assault will resume once the temporary truce ends. This means that a true ceasefire has yet to be established.

While many of the groups who joined the rally were familiar to the fight for Palestinian rights, such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), what was notable was that this was a rally by and for the labor movement. “At Portland Jobs with Justice, we mean it when we say ‘solidarity to workers everywhere,’” Jill Pham, the executive director of Portland JWJ, told *Truthout*. “Palestinian trade unions made a call for labor to take a stand and we’ve answered.”

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Despite being some of the most powerful organizations fighting for economic justice in the country, labor unions are often the slowest to act on contentious global political issues, particularly when Democratic leaders are not. Some union leaders have even fought back against calls for a ceasefire, leading to rank-and-file pressure from members of unions like SEIU to move leadership on this issue. But there is also a long history of unions taking a stand on issues of worldwide importance, and because they have such a critical position at the point of production, their entry into the campaign for a ceasefire may be a critical factor in ending Israel's war on Gaza.

Palestinian Labor Movement

Labor's entry into the ceasefire movement was motivated, in part, by a call from the Palestinian labor movement for unions to join them in demanding an end to the assault on Gaza and working towards undoing Israel's decades-long occupation. On October 16, the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions — which includes unions specifically for Palestinian women, teachers, engineers, journalists, and other demographics and professions — put out a call for solidarity from labor unions around the world. This includes supporting the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement to force Israel to follow international law; refusing to participate in weapons manufacture and delivery to the Israel Defense Forces; researching to see if unions or organizations are dealing with any companies profiting off of Palestinian subjugation; divesting from any such companies in pension or investment funds; and publicly advocating for justice in the region.

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“[We] have a moral obligation to answer their appeal, particularly since Israel’s crimes are only possible because of billions in bipartisan U.S. military aid that gives Israel the guns, bullets, tanks, ships, jet fighters, missiles, helicopters, white phosphorus, and other weapons to kill and maim the Palestinian people,” said

Michael Letwin, an activist with the organization Labor for Palestine, which works to connect unionized workers with the global solidarity movement. “We need to point out that Israel represents the same system of racist state violence that, through shared surveillance technology and police exchange programs, brutalizes BIPOC and working-class people in the United States and around the world.” Letwin also mentioned that there are even further actions that can be taken by unions, such as divesting from Israel bonds and breaking relationships with Israel’s labor federation, the Histadrut, which had a unique role in Israeli state-building.

As has often been the case with large progressive steps in the labor movement, the independent United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) was among the first to release a public labor statement demanding a ceasefire, which it cosponsored along with United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 3000. Other locals signed on as well, including International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 520, the Massachusetts Teachers Association, United Auto Workers Region 6 and the San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel Local 67. The petition demands first a ceasefire in Gaza, for Hamas to release all hostages and that the “basic rights of people must be restored,” including access to “water, fuel, food, and other humanitarian aid.”

Tove Holmberg is a board member with International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 5 and bargaining unit representative for the workers at Powell’s Books (whom Local 5 represents). “When a member raised the question of what we could do to support Palestine, we looked to our union’s history and found multiple resolutions, dating as far back as 1988.... Each of those resolutions called for an end to the violence against Palestinians in the occupied territories, and an end to Israel’s occupations,” Holmberg told *Truthout*.

Passed by the union's International Conventions in 1988 and 1991, the resolutions called upon the U.S. government to "pressure Israel to stop the killings and beatings of Palestinians," commended South African dock workers for refusing to offload an Israeli vessel in 2009 and celebrated multiple instances where

ILWU dockworkers refused to cross community picket lines that were protesting Israeli cargo vessels.

"Not only was it clear the ILWU had a long history of solidarity with the people of Palestine[,] it was also clear that in order to honor that history and address the horrific injustice we were all witnessing, we needed to add our voices to the mounting call for a ceasefire and encourage our membership to take action," Holmberg said.

That legacy was again taken up on November 3 at the port in Oakland, California, and November 6 at the port in Tacoma, Washington, where protesters attempted to block weapons headed for Israel, showing the kind of power that dock workers can have when intervening on business as usual. This action mirrored a similar one by unionized Belgian transport workers, and other unions across the world have taken actions to either block participation with the encroaching genocide or firmly assert their unambiguous opposition to the current military barrage.

The Power of the Pen

While support has been growing across many industries, journalists and media workers are speaking out at unprecedented levels. Built on the history of Writers Against the War, a group of professional authors and journalists who spoke against the Vietnam War in the 1960s-70s, a group of journalists working at organizations *Jacobin* and *Jewish Currents* formed Writers Against the War on Gaza, with hundreds of high-profile signatories demanding a ceasefire. The radical Industrial Workers of the World Freelance Journalists Union (FJU) took a stand almost immediately, voicing support for a ceasefire and signing onto the requests from the Palestinian labor movement. The FJU also spoke up in solidarity with the Palestinian Journalists' Syndicate (a member of the International Federation of

[Syndicate](#) (a member of the International Federation of Journalists), specifically highlighting “the humanitarian catastrophe facing all aspects of life in Gaza” and the killing of Palestinian journalists.

“Worldwide, journalists face dangers reporting on conflict. Freelance journalists, without institutional backing, are in a more precarious place, often asked to gather information in circumstances that are riskier and with less support,” said Morgan Parker, a union officer in the FJU. “All journalists should stand in solidarity with those who are targeted for reporting on conflicts that aggressors would prefer the world not see.”

Both the [Pacific Media Workers Guild \(CWA\)](#) and the [National Writers Union \(NWU\)](#), which is an affiliate of the UAW,

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pretty progressive politics,” said Tammy Kim, a member of the National Writers Union, and that statement acted as a bridge for other unions to take similar steps. “It’s led to a bunch of organic organizing connections with other groups of cultural workers and activists who are wanting to speak out about the war.”

Kim notes that there is overlap between those organizing in NWU and those who are building Writers Against the War on Gaza; NWU members participated in a November 9 New York City march and sit-in at *The New York Times* building to challenge the paper’s coverage, which activists say is inaccurate and biased against Palestinians. Because so many professionals have faced backlash for sharing pro-Palestinian views, writers included, the NWU has now created an [intake form for freelance workers](#) to share their story if they have faced reprisals in their own career.

Solidarity Unionism

Many of the signatories to the petition put out by UE and UFCW 3000 are also leaders in the growing independent labor movement, which are unions not affiliated with larger federations or the AFL-CIO and which are often younger and more radical. The Coalition of Independent Unions (CIU), a collection of workers organizing across different service sector locations in

workers organizing across different service sector locations in Portland, Oregon, is one such example. “The CIU supports the incredible work of the Palestinian labor movement, and we believe in the lessons learned by the workers movement in the fight against apartheid in South Africa,” said Sinead Steiner, who works with the CIU. “We can bring all settler colonialism, from Portland to Palestine, crashing down and build a world built on peace, not stolen labor and stolen land.”

For health care unions, a slightly different angle was taken. The resolution that passed through several unions representing nurses, techs, and other frontline professions was focused specifically on how the violence in Gaza affects health care workers and their patients. “The California Nurses Association/National Nurses Organizing Committee calls for an immediate ceasefire, delivery of humanitarian aid, release of all hostages, and an end to this violence,” reads a [statement from the California Nurses Association \(CNA\)](#). National Nurses United, associated with CNA, has a history of supporting the Palestinian movement and put out a [similar statement](#) criticizing Israeli militarism and apartheid in 2022.

Despite growing support, it is still a challenge to move unions on this issue, and those that have spoken out remain in the minority. When unions have spoken out, it was because of rank-and-file pressure from below. Battles between leadership and the rank-and-file have taken place in some locals, such as the alleged ouster of SEIU’s State Council for Connecticut Executive Director Kooper Caraway after she voiced support for Palestine and a ceasefire.

There have also been situations in which workers say they have faced backlash after their union took a stand. In Portland, after the New Seasons workers joined the November 11 rally and several union workers wore Palestine flag pins at work (which they say has usually been a place where political pins are welcome), workers say that management has put out a statement countering the union’s position and began pressuring employees to stop showing support at work. This led to a [November 22 picket at a popular Portland location of the grocery chain where community supporters blocked the entrances to the store, effectively severing business on one of the busiest shopping days](#)





of the year.

Many activists point to a new future where the Israeli and Palestinian working class could unite against those in power, winning a more just arrangement for everyone. After a series of speeches in Portland, hundreds hit the streets with signs demanding an end to the occupation and a free Palestine, indicating that a ceasefire is just the first step in what many hope will be lasting change in the region and a movement towards sustained peace and justice.

“As union laborers, we know that solidarity is our word. Solidarity is our life. As one person, we cannot do anything. But through solidarity, there is nothing we cannot do,” said Hannah Winchester, a health care union leader in Portland, during her speech to a cheering crowd at the November 11 rally. “Not one more day, not one more life.... I know it seems like a really hard thing to do as just one person, but I know I will scream until I have no more voice. Ceasefire now!”

**Full disclosure: The author is a board member of Portland Jobs with Justice.*

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Shane Burley is the author of *Why We Fight: Essays on Fascism, Resistance, and Surviving the Apocalypse* (AK Press, 2021) and *Fascism Today: What It Is and How to End It* (AK Press, 2017). His work has appeared in places such as *NBC News*, *Jacobin*, *Al Jazeera*, *The Baffler*, *The Daily Beast*, *Truthout*, *In These Times* and *Protean*. He is currently working on an anthology of antifascist writing called *¡No pasarán!* and writing a book on antisemitism. Follow him on Twitter: [@shane_burley1](https://twitter.com/shane_burley1).

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