

# Internationalism Is in Labor's Interest

BY

ALEX N. PRESS

The old labor slogan “An injury to one is an injury to all” isn’t just a moral imperative. It’s the practical foundation of a strong labor movement.

On Wednesday, the United Auto Workers (UAW) endorsed Joe Biden for the 2024 presidency. While the timing of the move came as somewhat of a surprise, the decision itself did not: Biden walked a picket line during the Big Three auto strike last year, and there is no doubt that another Donald Trump presidency would be a complete disaster for workers. (As UAW president Shawn Fain put it yesterday, “Donald Trump is a scab.”)

There’s a bigger debate to be had about the two-party system and union members’ hostage-like relationship to the Democratic Party — the absence of a labor party goes a long way toward explaining our perpetual predicament — but that the heat was on for a Biden endorsement is no shock.

Yet there is a wrinkle: in December, the UAW joined the growing call within the labor movement for a permanent and immediate cease-fire in Israel’s war on Gaza. As Biden is aiding and abetting Israel’s violence, which has now killed more than twenty-five thousand Palestinians, the endorsement didn’t go over smoothly.

“I believe that endorsing and supporting candidates who prioritize the cessation of hostilities is essential for the promotion of peace and justice,” said Merwan Beydoun, a UAW member of twenty-nine years in Dearborn, Michigan — both the historic home of Ford Motor Company and the center of the Arab American diaspora. He isn’t alone: Biden’s speech to UAW members was interrupted repeatedly by members, and more than five hundred on the union’s rolls have signed a petition

demanding the UAW Community Action Program (CAP, its political arm) not back candidates who haven't called for a cease-fire. Some members have taken issue with the process of the endorsement, decided by the international executive board with no input or polling of the membership.

While some members would never support endorsing a president who has enabled Israel's atrocities, there is also a strategic disagreement: the union supports a cease-fire, but what obligations come with that position, and what can the union do to achieve that aim? Unions are complex, relatively democratic organizations: while undoubtedly some people in the union do not care about Israel's campaign of mass slaughter (and some even support such violence), a cease-fire is the union's official position because many inside the union *do* care. How can they most effectively bring it about?

Some in the UAW believe they can still pressure Biden on his Israel stance, and endorsing him does not preclude that; maybe it makes it even more effective. According to one reporter, when asked about members interrupting Biden's speech, Fain told her "they were members exercising their democratic rights" and that "the UAW would continue calling for a cease-fire."

I'm not so sure that call will be heard. One lesson from the Big Three strike is that withholding an endorsement creates leverage. The union hadn't endorsed Biden when it launched the strike in September, and Biden was taken aback by this act of political independence. After all, the labor movement has long been tied hook, line, and sinker to the Democratic Party, with labor leaders rarely antagonizing the party's leadership, and the UAW's criticisms of the Biden administration surely come as a surprise to a party that takes the working class's support for granted.

It is precisely such willingness to hold the line and force Biden to, as Fain put it in his endorsement speech yesterday, "earn our endorsement" that put the president on a Michigan picket line. Biden wants to shore up his support in the states where the UAW political operation and membership are strong, and so he became the first sitting president to walk a picket line. In other words, with its endorsement of Biden, the union has prematurely given up the leverage it could exert to pressure him to stop backing Israel's massacre of Palestinians.

## **Why Should the UAW Care?**

In the wake of the UAW endorsement, many outside observers (and some union members too) have wondered why the UAW, or any of the many other unions that have signed on to the cease-fire calls — SEIU, the country's second-largest union, is the latest to do so — are worrying about Israel-Palestine in

the first place. The UAW got behind Biden because Trump will be bad for workers, the thinking goes, so of course the union endorsed his only viable opponent.

Why do labor unions take positions on foreign policy? It's a fair question, but the truth is that foreign policy is not really "foreign." It affects the lives of union members every day, and some members are more concerned with securing a cease-fire than whether Trump or Biden wins the presidential election. And setting aside the fact that many union members have family and friends who have been killed or maimed by Israel in recent months, and that a broad coalition of Palestinian unions has called for solidarity from their fellow workers around the world (not to mention the immorality of sitting on the sidelines during a massacre), war has economic effects.

When it took UAW leader Walter Reuther three years to shift from supporting the Vietnam War to opposing it, that wasn't just a failure of putting "an injury to one is an injury to all" into practice; it also was bad bread-and-butter leadership. As historian Nelson Lichtenstein put it in his biography of the labor leader, "Reuther was a knave if not a fool, for the inflationary surge of the next three years cost the average UAW worker more than eight hundred dollars." Inflation, deeply tied to the war in Vietnam, ate up the gains members won at the bargaining table. There are many reasons UAW members, like much of the rest of the US public, don't want the country waging a war abroad, but one is that it affects their lives, including at work.

More broadly, the enthusiastic and sometimes strategically crucial support of most of organized labor for US foreign policy during the Cold War proved self-undermining in the long run (if opportunistically advantageous in the near term). It helped trap labor in its strategic dependence on the Democratic Party and weakened union democracy. It contributed to the destruction of pro-worker movements abroad, which ended up bolstering US-led corporate globalization and boomeranging on the AFL-CIO, decimating its membership. In Latin America, there are still old socialists and trade unionists who call it the "AFL-CIA."

So the US labor movement's failure to exercise solidarity internationally is a structural weakness. When we don't support Mexican workers building independent unions that can actually raise their standards, we condemn ourselves to further job loss domestically as employers relocate south of the border to exploit a more captive workforce. Union members know that the floor must be raised for everyone, or the boss will begin moving work to those who do it on the cheap. This applies globally too. There is a special obligation here, in the labor movement, to protect our brothers and sisters, no matter where they may live. It is an extension of the same principle of domestic unionism: workers divided among themselves will always be weaker in the long run.

Then there is the matter of US unions' specific ties to Israel. Much like the United States itself, the US labor movement has a special relationship with Israel. As historian Jeff Schuhrke has detailed, this country's unions played a key role in the creation of Israel: not just purchasing State of Israel bonds and holding national rallies for Israel, but literally *constructing* the country. As Schuhrke writes, this explains the existence of buildings like “the Walter Reuther Youth Center in Holon, George Meany Stadium in Nazareth, Philip Murray Memorial Center in Elath, William Green Cultural Center in Haifa, James R. Hoffa Children's Home in Ayn Karim, and ILGWU Hospital in Beersheba.”

Union members aren't weighing in; they're already involved in the conflict, and now they want to change their organizations' approach to it.

The thing about a union is that it is where workers learn to exercise power. When a worker wins at the bargaining table what they were told could not be won — a pension, a living wage, health and safety measures — it is only natural for them to wonder what else is not as impossible as they'd been told. And they don't forget that sense of power and possibility when they clock out at the end of their shift. So when injustice rears up, rather than merely watching, workers turn to the weapon in their arsenal with a proven track record: a union.

#### CONTRIBUTORS

Alex N. Press is a staff writer at *Jacobin* who covers labor organizing.

#### FILED UNDER

---

Israel / Palestine / United States

---

War and Imperialism / Unions

---

UAW / Israel / United Auto Workers / Israeli Occupation / Joe Biden