



ECONOMY & WORKERS' RIGHTS

Labor unions are making unprecedented calls for a ceasefire in Gaza

Unions are figuring out what comes next after taking a public stand against the apartheid State of Israel's genocide in Gaza



by Laura Weiss
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WASHINGTON, DC - DECEMBER 14: Shawn Fain, president of the United Automobile Workers, joins lawmakers at a press conference calling for a ceasefire in the Occupied Palestinian Territories outside of the U.S. Capitol on Dec. 14, 2023 in Washington, D.C. (Photo by Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images)

Before dawn broke on Jan. 14, [hundreds of labor organizers and activists](#) convened at the Port of Oakland for a protest to prevent ships carrying weapons bound for Israel from leaving the docks. Activists from the Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC) and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which co-organized the event, kept the momentum going all day. In the afternoon, [200 workers reportedly refused](#) to cross the picket line to help load the ships.

“The labor movement has the power to disrupt supply chains,” said Zachary Valdez, a union steward with United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2110 based in New York. “Workers can shut everything down.”

The action was an impressive show of solidarity between the labor movement and the Palestinian

cause, one of a number of [actions in the Bay Area](#) and across the country co-organized or supported by unions in recent months, including [teach-ins](#) and other civil disobedience efforts.

Since the October attacks on the apartheid State of Israel by Hamas, the political and military organization that governs Gaza, Israel's genocidal bombing campaign has killed more than 23,000 Palestinians in Gaza, and the Israel Defense Forces has destroyed critical infrastructure, including electricity, hospitals, and the internet, shut off access to water, and purposefully created famine conditions. This has prompted a sea change in public opinion on Israel, with [two-thirds](#) of Americans saying they support a ceasefire in Gaza, all while the U.S. government continues to send billions of U.S. military aid to Israel.

Within the labor movement, hundreds of unions and union locals have responded to a [call from Palestinian labor unions](#) and signed resolutions [calling for a ceasefire](#), even those whose leadership has [historically supported Israel](#). On Dec. 1, UAW, one of the largest unions in the country, made history when it released a [ceasefire statement](#). Other influential unions, such as the [United Electrical Workers](#), [American Postal Workers Union](#), and [1199SEIU](#) (United Healthcare Workers East), and countless other smaller unions have also released similar statements. On Jan. 22, the [Service Employees International Union \(SEIU\)](#), the second-largest public service employees union in the country, also released a call for a ceasefire.

“We, members of the American labor movement, mourn the loss of life in Israel and Palestine. We express our solidarity with all workers and our common desire for peace in Palestine and Israel, and we call on President Joe Biden and Congress to push for an immediate ceasefire and end to the siege of Gaza,” reads the [petition signed by UAW](#) and hundreds of other union locals.

Labor activists say the increasing number of unions supporting this call is a big deal.

“We were delighted with the ceasefire amendment,” said Mary Jirmanus Saba, a member of UAW Local 2865, which represents University of California graduate workers and academic student employees.

However, leadership of some large unions like the AFL-CIO and SAG-AFTRA have [remained silent](#), seeing the issue as beyond their purview, risky to support, or [too split](#) among their

members. Others have released statements in support of Israel, such as the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president [Randi Weingarten](#). But a [number of AFT locals and other teachers' unions](#) have supported ceasefire resolutions themselves, revealing a schism between leadership and rank-and-file members.

While there has been considerable support for the ceasefire resolutions, union members involved in organizing for Palestine say that they must go further to support efforts like Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) and not be complicit in the abuses against Palestinians by Israel, supported by U.S. tax dollars. “Just the ceasefire declaration, if there’s nothing more, if it doesn’t have any teeth, is not enough,” Saba said.

Unions have a long history of standing for progressive causes internationally, from “opposing fascism in WWII to mobilizing against apartheid South Africa and the CONTRA war,” cited [UAW Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla](#) in a UAW press release. Over the decades, labor has stood up against [World War I](#), the Vietnam War, and [the Iraq War](#).

However, when it comes to Israel, it’s a bit more complicated. Unions such as the AFL-CIO have long been [steadfast supporters of Israel](#), following the consensus within the U.S. government. Though over the decades there have been [glimpses of dissent](#), U.S. unions have purchased millions of dollars worth of bonds from Israel [since the 1950s](#).

This unconditional support began to shift in the early 2000s, writes [labor historian Jeff Schuhrke in Jacobin](#), as “many organizers in the emerging antiwar movement after 9/11 understood the connections between US militarism and Israeli apartheid.” Since then, coalitions within the major unions have made efforts to support resolutions for BDS—including [one from UAW Local 2865 in 2015](#)—but most have been squashed by leadership.

Marcie Pedraza, a longtime union member based in Chicago and part of UAW Local 551, which represents autoworkers, says the UAW is well placed to take a stance on this issue now. The resolution comes on the heels of their successful strike this fall and the reform efforts in the last few years that brought much needed new leadership into the UAW.

Still, support for the ceasefire resolution within the UAW did not come automatically.

“Without the pressure that the rank-and-file has been putting on this newly elected reform leadership, it would not have been possible to come out in support of a ceasefire,” said Valdez, a member of the Labor for Palestine working group within the UAW.

And there has been some pushback. In November, some branches of the [Association of Legal Aid Attorneys, UAW Local 2325](#), tried to prevent their union from even voting on a ceasefire and anti-occupation resolution, citing fears about blowback from potential clients. However, they lost this effort, and the [resolution passed handily](#).

Pedraza said that some of the people she’s spoken with on the shop floor are less immediately receptive to the issue or don’t see it as related to them.

“I just try to explain it to people in a simple way. This is a genocide that our tax dollars are funding,” she said.

It also directly relates to the material conditions of the workers, she continued, because while the government claims not to have enough money to fix broken systems from health care to public schools to infrastructure, it has “billions of dollars for military aid, to massacre thousands and thousands of innocent civilians.”

Pedraza’s efforts paid off. On Jan. 22, her local just voted to support a resolution calling for a ceasefire and to end aid to Israel.

According to Saba, leadership in her region, 9A, which covers much of the Northeast and Puerto Rico, first told the Labor for Palestine group that a ceasefire statement was a no-go. But after union members wrote some 250 letters, the executive board changed its tune. Meanwhile, Saba and other UAW members of Labor for Palestine were circulating their own letter calling for BDS, and some branches within UAW Local 2865 have also tried passing their own BDS resolutions, she said.

Yet while some more militant or radical unions and many locals have issued stronger resolutions, mainstream central leadership of major unions like UAW and SEIU have largely balked at going beyond a ceasefire, rank-and-file members told Prism. As Linda Khoury-Umili, a Palestinian-

American member of SEIU Local 1021 based in the Bay Area, said, it wasn't challenging for rank-and-file members to encourage SEIU leadership to put out a ceasefire resolution. But "to get a resolution that goes beyond ceasefire there was pushback."

For its part, Khoury-Umili's local, 1021, has released a [strongly worded resolution](#) calling for an "immediate and permanent ceasefire;" "the restoration of food, clean water, fuel and electricity to Gaza"; "humanitarian aid"; "the release of all hostages"; "opposing all existing and any future military aid to Israel"; "the withdrawal of Israeli forces illegally occupying Gaza and the West Bank"; and "an end to the occupation of Palestine and the apartheid policies of the Israeli state allowing for equal rights and self-determination of all Palestinians."

Khoury-Umili has been organizing remotely with other SEIU workers across various sectors, from nurses to government workers to educators to retirees, facilitated by WhatsApp and Signal groups. Organizing virtually has made it easier to get more people involved and to spread more accurate information of on-the-ground conditions in Gaza through social media.

"My goal is to continue doing education and ... a long-game strategy for pressure, getting unions to take bigger actions, engage in strikes, engage in divestment, boycott, sanctions," Khoury-Umili said.

UAW members of Labor for Palestine also want to move beyond rhetoric and toward direct action. "The UAW is uniquely placed within this system of oppression because ... UAW members are involved in the creation of weapons that are being sent to Israel and bombs that are being dropped on Gaza," Valdez said.

Saba and other activists are looking for ways to support UAW workers in weapons plants and trying to disrupt those supply chains.

"What does it mean for the UAW to have a ceasefire resolution if they're not going to then try to act on stopping the flow of weapons to Israel?" Saba said.

Valdez hopes that these discussions can help us to envision a more just, peaceful, green future for all.

“We are starting to have a conversation about how we accomplish a just transition from this war economy that is causing not only the genocide in Palestine, but also wars across the entire planet and across humanity,” he said.

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