

These Teachers Want the Largest Union in the Country to Rescind its Biden Endorsement Over Gaza

A rank-and-file campaign inside the National Education Association is demanding the president stop “sending military funding, equipment, and intelligence to Israel.”

SARAH LAZARE



President Joe Biden speaks during a National Education Association event in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building in Washington, D.C., on July 4, 2023.

(Ting Shen / Bloomberg via Getty Images)

When Israel escalated its military operations against Gaza in October, Rahaf Othman was so distraught, she said, she “couldn’t think straight.” The 45-year-old Palestinian American, who teaches social studies at Harold L. Richards High School in Oak Lawn, Ill., recalled that she “started getting nightmares from my own experiences when I was in Palestine. I was functional at work, but barely functional. My brain was mush. I was getting traumatized every time I turned on my phone.”

“For the first month, people were asking me what we should do, but I couldn’t think, couldn’t focus.” While in this state, she said she discovered that she could lean on some of her colleagues. “Educators rallied together and created this group, Educators for Palestine. I am grateful they brought me along for the ride.”

Othman is a member of the Illinois Education Association (IEA) Local 218, which covers an area to the south of Chicago, part of the 3 million–strong National Education Association (NEA), the largest labor union in the United States. She is now part of a member effort to press the NEA to put real muscle behind supporting a cease-fire, one prong in a small-but-growing campaign within the US labor movement.

But the rank-and-file campaign goes beyond demanding an end to Israel’s military operations, which have killed at least 22,000 Palestinians, 12,000 of them children. Othman and other members want the NEA to revoke its endorsement of Joe Biden for the 2024 presidential race until the president secures a “permanent cease-fire,” stops “sending military funding, equipment, and intelligence to Israel,” and commits “to a fair due process for asylum-seekers and refugees.”

“Until NEA takes this step,” a member petition states, signatories are planning to withhold voluntary donations from the union’s political action committee, which is used to support candidates. (Signatories are not planning to withhold their union dues.)

The demand is eye-catching, because Biden appeared to really want the NEA’s endorsement: The president addressed the union by video at its last representative assembly in July 2023. And first lady Jill Biden has made her long-term membership in NEA a key part of her public political identity. “You—all of you—make me proud to be a longtime member of the NEA,” Jill Biden said in an August 2023 address to educators.

The NEA, in turn, has had a supportive relationship with the Biden administration. The union’s endorsement of Biden for the 2024 presidential race came early—in April of 2023 for the Democratic primary, and in July of 2023 for the general election.

Biden’s identity as a “union man” was central to his presidential run in 2020, and he is setting a similar tone during the current race: He held the first big political event of his reelection campaign at a union rally in Philadelphia, in what the Associated Press said is an indicator of “just how much Biden is counting on labor support to carry him to a second term.”

For members of the NEA who are desperate to stop the killing of civilians in Gaza, making this support contingent on the Biden administration’s meaningful push for a cease-fire is the best leverage they have. The goal, they say, is not to help former president Donald Trump win but the opposite. “Getting President Biden to change his position on Israel will help him to beat Trump,” reads an explanatory document, circulated with the petition. “People who vote Democratic are overwhelmingly in support of a permanent ceasefire and disapprove of Biden’s handling of the situation.” Polling shows the majority of Americans want a cease-fire, including more than 70 percent of Democrats.

The organizing effort to rescind this endorsement is just getting started, and it's too soon to know what base of support it has. But its backers point to momentum they have already achieved: This same group of members successfully pressed 19 local, state, and regional bodies of the NEA to call for a cease-fire in Gaza, including the National Council of Urban Education Associations, a caucus comprised of 251 large NEA locals and UniServ Councils, which are associations of several locals. And the members behind these resolutions claim credit for NEA President Rebecca Pringle's December 8, 2023, tweet in support of a cease-fire. "With the end of the temporary truce," she wrote, "the need for a ceasefire in Gaza is growing."

And there are at least some supporters of the presidential un-endorsement in NEA's board of directors. Among them is Aaron Phillips, a 41-year-old fifth grade teacher and NEA board member from Amarillo, Tex. "There's a growing group of board members that support it," he said, referring to the effort to revoke the presidential endorsement. "If I were to make a motion, I'm confident I would have a second and would have a growing group of board members stand with me."

For Othman, the campaign is personal. "As a Palestinian American, it hurts," Othman said, "because our union has been very focused on racial and social justice, and supporting him when he is not only funding but also sending weapons killing my people sends me the message that we don't matter, and that we are collateral damage and that's OK." She has been a teacher for 27 years, at Richards High School for 19 of them, and boasts a roster of NEA titles: To list just a few, she is secretary for her local, vice chair for her region, vice chair for the Arab American caucus, vice chair for the IEA ethnic minority caucus, and facilitator for the NEA's Leaders for Just Schools.

Israel is killing Palestinians at a rate that is unparalleled in modern conflicts, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is openly calling for the forcible transfer of the Palestinian population out of Gaza. And in an 84-page complaint, South Africa has formally accused Israel of genocide at the the International Court of Justice. On October 16, 2023, the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions released a statement urging labor unions around the world to "end all complicity" and "stop arming Israel."

The United States has been Israel's biggest supporter in this military campaign since October 7, when a Hamas-led surprise attack killed 1,139 Israelis and foreign workers and took approximately 240 hostages (132 remain in Gaza). Two separate times in December, the Biden administration bypassed Congress to approve weapons sales to Israel, and it vetoed a call for a cease-fire at the UN General Assembly. The Biden administration has maintained this support, and pursued a new front in Yemen, even as supporters of a cease-fire say the White House should use US leverage to demand that Israel immediately and permanently stop its military operations.

Within the union, Othman said, "we've had so much progress as an organization over the last two years when it comes to Palestine. When I first started getting involved with the union at the national level, we couldn't really say the word Palestine." When introducing new business items (NBI) at the union's representative assembly, Othman explained, "mentioning Palestine meant automatic objection."

Popular

1 The Progressives Who Give Us Hope for 2024

FEATURE / JOHN NICHOLS

2 What Does It Mean to Be Palestinian Now?

FEATURE / NOURA ERAKAT, AHMED MOOR, NOOR HINDI, MOHAMMED EL-KURD, and LAILA AL-ARIAN

3 The Brilliant Discontents of Lou Reed

BOOKS & THE ARTS / SASHA FRERE-JONES

4 The Blue-Blood Families That Made Fortunes in the Opium Trade

FEATURE / AMITAV GHOSH

But that has started to change. In 2022, the representative assembly passed an NBI that the union “will protect members and local affiliates that educate students about the history, geography, and current state of the Palestinian people.” And in 2023, two NBIs related to Palestine passed, focused on using “existing digital communication” to recognize Palestinian history and culture, as well as Palestinian students and members.

Othman is part of an Arab American caucus within the NEA, which helped these NBIs get approved. Stephen Siegel, a high school special education teacher at Reynolds High School in Troutdale, Ore., said it was through these national efforts that a rank-and-file informal grouping began to form within the NEA. “That group stayed small and mostly focused on the representative assembly,” he said.

Then Israel unleashed its current military operations in Gaza. “Some of us wanted to get together and meet, and then other people heard about us who had never been to an NEA assembly,” said Siegel. “So that small Signal group of 12 or 15 of us grew to about 100, and those are educators who are pretty spread out.”

Participants in this effort are heartened by the flurry of cease-fire resolutions that have passed, which represent a fraction of NEA membership bodies, but nonetheless mark a significant shift in the union.

Among them is the Oregon Education Association (OEA), which passed a resolution to sign on to a cease-fire letter first organized by United Food and Commercial Workers International Union 3000 and the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America. The resolution also calls for the OEA to directly urge Pringle to “use her voice and the NEA resources at her disposal to push President Biden to demand a ceasefire” and calls for the lobbying of Oregon’s senators and representatives.

“What’s going on over there right now is that children are being killed. School-aged children are being killed by the thousands. And schools are being bombed. So there are two very direct connections specifically to our union,” said Siegel, who is one of three regional vice presidents for the OEA. According

to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “352 schools have sustained damage across the Gaza Strip, affecting the education of 400,700 students.”

Olivia Katbi is a track and cross-country coach at Parkrose High School in Oregon, represented in NEA by the Parkrose Faculty Association. She said that President Pringle’s tweet supporting a cease-fire “is a good first step, but people aren’t satisfied by that.”

“There’s definitely more of a push within this Educators for Palestine group to get this to be official NEA policy and, beyond that, rescind the endorsement of Biden,” said Katbi, who also organizes with the Palestinian BDS National Committee.

Phillips said he is “a little unclear” on the process for revoking the presidential endorsement. “I have asked and am waiting to hear,” he said. “As a board member, I am ready and willing to make the appropriate motions to set that forward. We at least have to have the conversation.”

In the meantime, members are focused on building a base of support. “We are hoping to get some motions passed for locals or states to share the petition with their members,” Siegel said. And NEA members are planning an in-person protest at the NEA’s board meeting in February, in conjunction with members of the American Federation of Teachers. On December 30, AFT president Randi Weingarten tweeted out a qualified statement of support for a cease-fire.

While the US labor movement has historically been supportive of Israel, largely in line with broader US foreign policy, there have been notable detractors, and that number is growing as the Palestinian death toll rises. Major national unions have joined the call for a cease-fire, including the United Auto Workers, National Nurses United, the American Postal Workers Union, and the Association of Flight Attendants—CWA, and across the labor movement, members at other unions are mobilizing to expand this number. While the effort hasn’t shifted the position of the AFL-CIO, it has thrust this cause into the limelight as an issue workers care about—and are divided on. These developments come amid sustained public protests against US support for Israel’s actions, led by Palestinian American communities, progressive Jewish organizations, and people of conscience across the country.

NEA members hope that, by going a step further and calling for the union to rescind Biden’s endorsement, they can escalate this push. “The NEA is the largest union in the country, and for so long we’ve seen many of these massive unions just go along with the status quo,” Katbi said. “But if anything is going to change that, surely it must be witnessing a genocide in real time.”

Othman said this issue is important to the significant Palestinian American community in Oak Lawn and surrounding areas. She was born in Jerusalem, and her mother’s family is from Beit Ikksa, a small village just outside of the city. “When we were younger, we would go back every five years or so,” she said. But the last time she went was in 2008, when her family endured an experience that she said “traumatized” her children.

More on a Working-Class Foreign Policy

A Working-Class Foreign Policy Is Coming

SPENCER ACKERMAN

Why These Teachers Unions Are Demanding a Cease-Fire

SARAH LAZARE


This Union Is Famous for Opposing South African Apartheid. Now It's Standing With Gaza.

SARAH LAZARE

On the way to Nablus, she said, “I was pushing my 1-and-a-half-year-old in his stroller at a checkpoint, and five soldiers surrounded my husband, mother, myself, and three kids. They weren’t pointing their guns at the adults. Instead, all of them had guns pointed at my baby in the stroller.”

Her family, which has since grown to four children, has not been back since.

Othman said teachers have a special responsibility to stand up for the rights of children everywhere, and this responsibility is intensified right now. “The union is the one that taught me to best organize and do this work, and I thought we advocate for everybody,” she said. This principle, she explained, has informed her own advocacy for the Black Lives Matter movement and LGBTQ rights.

“As teachers,” she said, “we are all about the kids and what’s best for kids—and not just kids in our classes, but all kids. We go into this field because we want what’s best for kids. Everything we stand for and everything we believe in says we should be involved and should be doing something about this.” 

Sarah Lazare

Sarah Lazare is the editor of *Workday Magazine* and a contributing editor for *In These Times*.