

ECONOMY & WORKERS' RIGHTS

# Almost 5 months in, organizers for a ceasefire and free Palestine aren't backing down

While union organizing, education, and direct action are keeping calls to stop the genocide in the public eye, fissures within the movement are coming to the fore



by Laura Weiss  
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TOPSHOT - People gather in support of Palestinians outside of the venue where President Joe Biden is speaking to members of the United Auto Workers (UAW) at the UAW National Training Center, in Warren, Michigan, on Feb. 1, 2024. (Photo by JEFF KOWALSKY / AFP) (Photo

It's been almost five months since the Israeli government began its genocidal assault on Gaza in the wake of Oct. 7, killing about **30,000 Palestinians** and displacing nearly its entire population to the south in Rafah, where the occupation's **attacks continue**. Despite legal, **diplomatic**, and political pressure and **directives**, relentless U.S.-backed bombing by the Israeli military has decimated critical infrastructure in Gaza, from safe water to hospitals to electricity, and blocked humanitarian aid as occupation forces have razed much of the strip.

The U.S. government is increasingly isolated in its support of Israel's attacks in Gaza. It recently **cut off funding** to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), a critical source of humanitarian aid to Palestine. And while Biden administration officials have shifted their rhetoric somewhat—with President Joe Biden saying to the press this week that Israel is “close” to a ceasefire—they continue flooding Israel with **unconditional additional** military aid **beyond the \$3.8 billion** already allocated for 2023.

Within the U.S., unions, **humanitarian organizations**, **city councils**, and at least **69 members of Congress** have pressured the Biden administration to shift its position and end the bloodshed. In recent months, an **unprecedented wave of unions** have called for a ceasefire in Gaza, including some of the nation's largest, such as the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the **Service Employees International Union (SEIU)**, and hundreds of union locals and branches.

But there is a range of what exactly these groups are calling for—and how to achieve it.

The newly formed **National Labor Network for Ceasefire (NLNC)**, a coalition of 9 million union members including the UAW and SEIU, is calling for “an immediate ceasefire in Gaza between Israel and Hamas, restoration of basic human rights, immediate release of hostages taken by Hamas, unimpeded full access for humanitarian aid, [and] our president calling for a permanent ceasefire.”

The NLNC held a virtual webinar last week to kick off its efforts, featuring journalist Juan González, and UAW President Shawn Fain, National Education Association President Becky Pringle, and Reps. Rashida Tlaib and Summer Lee. Though more than 500 people joined the webinar, there were no open questions.

In his presentation, Fain cited the UAW's history of standing up for anti-war causes, such as the Vietnam War, and how labor must follow the example of activists like Martin Luther King, Jr. Pringle echoed Fain in the “renewed urgency to call for a ceasefire.” In her speech, she also underscored the importance of reelecting Biden and “commitment to long-term peace via a two-state solution.”

Tlaib, who is the only Palestinian member of Congress and represents Michigan, a critical swing state with a sizable Arab-American population, took a different tack. Her speech focused on the role of outside pressure to shift Biden's policy. "We will not be silenced. We will not stop marching ... We will not stop demanding that President Biden support a ceasefire," she said. She also referenced two bills she is sponsoring to hold military aid more accountable and to prevent politicians from [profiting from war](#).

It seemed that the event's goal was to sway undecided listeners to support a ceasefire and to put pressure on Biden, particularly in an election year when his refusal to do so could cost him the presidency. Ahead of Tuesday's primary in Michigan, a group of disillusioned Democrats said they planned to write "[uncommitted](#)" to pressure Biden to call for a ceasefire ahead of the general election.

Mary Jirmanus Saba, who is a member of UAW Local 2865 and part of UAW Labor for Palestine, a collective of rank-and-file UAW members, was critical of the NLNC's comparatively tepid demands for a ceasefire. As her group has [pointed out](#), the initial call for labor support from Palestinian trade unions [called for more](#) than a ceasefire, additionally demanding an "end all forms of complicity with Israel's crimes—most urgently halting the arms trade with Israel, as well as all funding and military research."

As Saba put it: "We are unionists. We don't cross picket lines, we walk picket lines. And the call from Palestine is to not send weapons to Israel." Anything less is "politically insufficient."

The UAW is a prime example of the tension between calling for a ceasefire and calling for a fundamental shift in U.S.-Israel policy, the geopolitics of the contested region, and even foreign policy as a whole. On [Jan. 24 at the UAW's national conference](#), Fain, who was elected as a reform candidate last year, announced the union would be endorsing Biden, despite calling for a ceasefire the previous month.

"One day, you're calling for a ceasefire, the next, you endorse a candidate that's funding the genocide," said Marcie Pedraza, a member of UAW Local 551, which represents autoworkers in the Chicago area. "I don't want another four years of Trump, but ... there has to be another way."

According to Saba, the decision to endorse Biden occurred behind closed doors with no input from rank-and-file members, despite a letter that was signed by [more than 600](#) UAW members that called for UAW leadership to only [support pro-ceasefire candidates](#). Protesters were [aggressively removed from the conference](#). For Saba, learning that the UAW would endorse Biden "felt like a betrayal," she said.

Beyond critics from the left in the UAW, some rank-and-file members were also angry about the endorsement because they support Trump. "It feels like it's not a very tactically smart decision," she said.

On Jan. 31, Labor for Palestine released a letter calling on UAW leadership to [rescind the endorsement](#). But [Fain has continued to avoid meeting with the Arab Caucus](#) of the UAW, despite their repeated efforts to do so. “It feels like the leadership of these unions wants to put a cap on what’s possible,” Saba said.

And, it appears, in some cases, more is possible. In January, Pedraza’s union, Local 551, which is comprised of Midwest autoworkers, adopted a statement calling for stopping the manufacturing of and sending weapons to Israel, taking action against “complicit companies,” and pressuring “governments to stop all military trade with Israel, and in the case of the U.S., funding.” Dozens of other union locals in the UAW as well as other unions like [SEIU Local 1020](#) released similar statements earlier on.

However, when it comes to Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS), activists have for years faced significant pushback from opponents—including both the Trump and Biden administrations—who decry the movement, claiming it is antisemitic. Some [36 states](#) have some kind of anti-BDS legislation in place. With the pro-Palestine movement now gaining momentum, political opponents have also intensified their tactics, from college campuses to the chambers of Congress to the streets.

In November, some members of the Association of Legal Aid Attorneys in UAW Local 2325 sued to stop a vote on supporting BDS in their union, and the New York Supreme Court temporarily blocked it. Though the vote ultimately went through and the resolution passed by a significant majority, the union local is now [under investigation](#) by the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. In addition, local governments have introduced [legislation limiting the right to protest](#).

Undeterred, UAW Labor for Palestine has also been conducting outreach with unionized workplaces who manufacture weapons sent to Israel. But those efforts are in early stages, and there is still work to be done in cultivating connections with these factories, said Saba. “If we’re going to get to the place where ... people in weapons shops or people in logistics can answer the calls from the Palestinian trade unions to stop sending weapons to Israel,” she said, “it’s going to be in coalition with community groups.”

Some of the group’s outreach has involved education and events to help people understand their connection to what’s going on abroad.

“When it comes to the question of Palestine ... I think Americans are now finally realizing, it doesn’t just touch those of us from or in the area, it touches everybody because that \$3.8 billion could go to health care, it could go to ending the pandemic, it could go to child care,” said Saba.

Political education is an important tool across the movement, beyond labor, and across the broader public, said the pro-Palestine activist who goes by Octo. Along with Writers Against the War on Gaza, Decolonize This

Place, and the Palestinian Youth Movement, she co-organized an autonomous direct action that shut down the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York City earlier this month.

The MOMA disruption has been just one of countless direct actions that have [blocked highways](#), [government buildings](#), and [bridges](#). Some 500 activists gathered at the MOMA on Feb. 10, where they dropped banners that said “[Free Palestine from the river to the sea](#)” and “Ceasefire Now” and called out MOMA board members for their complicity in the genocide. Most wore masks.

As the event press release stated, “We refuse art as a smokescreen for genocide and demand the immediate removal of board members with direct ties to genocide, apartheid, and settler colonialism.”

Though the MOMA event was not organized by labor, current and past MOMA employees, some a part of UAW Local 2110, [released a letter](#) a few days after the protest calling for a ceasefire and for the government to stop arming Israel.

“Amid all the sites that are being targeted or disrupted right now, I think adding MOMA and art institutions to the list shows us that all our oppressions are connected, all of our institutions, this whole system,” said Octo. “It’s not just a ceasefire. It’s about ending the siege, ending the occupation, ending this whole system of settler colonialism.”

At its crux, both Octo and Saba spoke to the importance of a “Just Transition” from an economy based on war to one based on peace.

“We want to be making things for the benefit of society, not just for wars and the profits of a few,” Saba said.