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U.S. union members organize to demand their leadership rescind Biden endorsements

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New York, February 5 (RHC)-- UAW Labor for Palestine, a coalition of United Auto Workers (UAW) union members who support the liberation of Palestine, voted unanimously on Wednesday to release an official statement calling for the labor group's leadership to rescind its endorsement for President Joe Biden's reelection. The coalition joins a growing number of rank-and-file member groups leveraging their unions' political cache to pressure the White House to stop abetting Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza. The groundswell of support signals a public shift concerning the occupation of Palestine, which had previously received fairly little attention within the U.S. labor movement.

"It's an unprecedented breakthrough in labor in this country to have resolutions passed, even the weak resolutions which challenge effectively ... the domination and the stranglehold of Zionism within American labor," said Michael Letwin, a longtime anti-war activist and organizer with Labor for Palestine, a coalition of labor organizers and Palestinian rights activists formed in 2004. "There's never been anything like this before."

The resolution vote under UAW Labor for Palestine (a separate entity from Letwin's Labor for Palestine) follows protests during the UAW National Community Action Program conference in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 24, when President Shawn Fain announced the organization's endorsement of Biden. The UAW issued an official call for a ceasefire in Gaza the previous month following pressure from union members to do so.

Johannah King-Slutzky, a union member with UAW Labor for Palestine and a steward at Local 2710, the union's chapter for Columbia University student workers, was among several union members protesting the decision at the conference. During Biden's conference appearance, King-Slutzky and her colleagues were physically reprimanded by security, who dragged her out of the venue by both wrists, as shown in a video posted on X, formerly known as Twitter.

"Something I'm disappointed by is that the international executive board didn't give members an opportunity to weigh in on whether they would have wanted to endorse Joe Biden, given his support for the genocide to continue and materially supporting the genocide by sending weapons to Israel and funding the war," King-Slutzky said. "I think if that had happened, we might have seen a very different outcome."

In a social media post after the conference, UAW Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla stated that UAW's international executive board vote to endorse Biden for reelection was at the direction of President Fain during a closed-door session.

"I certainly feel fortified by the experience," said King-Slutzky, who noted other UAW members had approached the protesters to voice support for their actions. "I do feel confident that UAW members broadly stand behind support for ceasefire. The only question next is like, what is to be done about that?"

Members of the UAW—representing nearly 400,000 active workers employed under manufacturers, nonprofit entities, government bodies, and universities—are not the only union activists acting against their leadership's endorsement of Biden's reelection in support of Palestine. Educators for Palestine is a grassroots mobilization campaign that was launched by dissenting rank-and-file members of the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association (NEA), the latter of which represents some 3 million educators, making it the largest labor union in the country. The campaign's call-to-action items include an explicit demand for the NEA to "revoke our endorsement of President Biden until the following conditions have been met." The same petition commits to withholding future donations toward the NEA's political action committee, an attempt to blunt the union's political power unless the campaign's demands are fulfilled.

Meanwhile, members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the politically influential union representing roughly 2 million public health care workers, have campaigned in solidarity with Palestine through the Purple Up For Palestine collective, a nod to the union's signature purple and yellow colors. The collective's list of demands stops short of a call to rescind the union's endorsement of Biden, which was announced in April last year, but instead includes the demand to "pressure President Biden to end military assistance to Israel."

For Nicole Morse, a gender studies educator and union member of the NEA, their involvement with the Educators for Palestine campaign was another way to tangibly voice their dissent over the genocide in Gaza, as a self-described anti-Zionist Jewish person.

"For educators specifically, we're committed to critical thinking, to caring for children, to supporting young people," said Morse, who is also a member of the local union United Faculty of Florida. "All of that is being attacked right now, as schools in Gaza are leveled, as children are being killed and starved, as universities are being destroyed."

Morse believes the Educators for Palestine campaign has opened up conversations around what union members should be able to expect of their leadership, even if everyone may not agree with it. "More and more, the labor movement in the U.S. is waking up to realize that our unions are institutions that are built by us and built for us," said Morse. "And if we can't question them ... if we can't work to make them better, then they're not unions."

Labor organizers have a history of taking up progressive causes, but the Palestinian struggle has not garnered much support in the past, in part because of U.S. labor's deep ties with the Israeli government. According to Letwin, the tides began to change in the aftermath of the Israel Defense Force's (IDF) weeks-long attack on Gaza in 2014.

The invasion, an act of retaliation after three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped and killed by Hamas, resulted in the IDF killing more than 2,300 Palestinians and injuring 17,000 others, as later revealed in a report by the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The magnitude of casualties, the highest recorded at the time since 1967, pushed more awareness of Israel's occupation of Palestine into the mainstream.

In response to Israel's 2014 attack on Gaza, Labor for Palestine issued an appeal to labor unions to support the Palestinian trade unions, which have repeatedly called for U.S. labor to upend its collaboration with the state of Israel and support the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement. Other union bodies began to take official stances against Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories: the first Block the Boat initiative was carried out by the Arab Resource and Organizing Center, an organizing group serving working-class Muslims and Arab people in the San Francisco Bay Area, alongside the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 10 at the Port of Oakland where union workers refused to handle cargo shipments for Israel, a solidarity initiative that has continued and spread across the globe. Local unions also began issuing resolutions in support of Palestine. For example, members of the UAW 2865, which represents graduate students at the University of California, passed the first pro-Palestine resolution of its kind by a mainstream union, according to Letwin. (The resolution was ultimately nullified by its leadership.)

But it wasn't until the IDF's October 2023 invasion of Gaza that Letwin said support for Palestine "really broke way open in labor." Letwin, who is also part of the recently formed UAW Labor for Palestine group, said the Palestinian struggle constitutes a labor issue for many reasons, but chief among them is the fact that the Palestinian trade unions have called on the U.S. labor movement's support.

"Unions are supposed to be about solidarity and respecting picket lines. We walk picket lines, we don't cross picket lines, and the Palestinian trade unions have repeatedly put up a picket line against Israel," Letwin said. "If we're going to be true to what union solidarity is supposed to be about, we have to respect and honor that picket line."

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