

The Labor for Palestine Movement



Labor for Palestine is rapidly growing across the United States.

By Gerry Scoppettuolo

The United Electrical Workers union (UE) is today the only remaining international union to have survived the soul crushing anti-communist CIO purge of 1949-50 which expelled nine other unions, among them those which most militantly opposed the legal racist discrimination of their time.

The UE today has a modest membership of but 35,000 down from the 600,000 it had in 1949. Yet on October 20, 2023, punching way above its weight, UE launched a movement within organized labor calling for a ceasefire to Israel's unfolding massacre of Palestinian civilians in Gaza. The national Labor for Palestine campaign that followed continues to expand and today, represents the leadership of nine million union members and to a certain extent, their rank and file.

This is U.S. labor's strongest ever campaign of international solidarity since Jack Sheinkman of the old Amalgamated Clothing Workers launched the U.S. *Labor Committee Against U.S. Intervention in El Salvador* in 1982.

[personal note: in Massachusetts the NLC spawned 25 local solidarity committees including one in western Massachusetts of which I was a part. We met at the headquarters of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) at that time which gave sanctuary to Fenestras, El Salvador's Central Labor Committee in their Washington D.C. headquarters]

The NLC had the power to successfully oppose AFL CIO leader Lane Kirkland's bidding for the Reagan/Kissinger fascist policies in Central America, especially when it came time for congressional funding for the contras in Nicaragua and fascist goons in El Salvador like Major Bob D'Abussion. Kirkland's anti-communism and obsequious devotion to Henry Kissinger and Ronald Reagan led not only to Kirkland's eventual ouster from the AFL-CIO but to the Iran Contra affair of 1987 which nearly toppled Reagan's presidency. Then, as now, right wing massacres abroad funded by the U.S. were deeply unpopular with the masses especially the 1981 rape and murder of four Maryknoll nuns in El Salvador by elements of the National Police followed by the public assassination of Cardinal Oscar Romero by right wing death squads in San Salvador as he was saying mass.

The growth of the current internationalist movement in the past four months has been steady and has proceeded in stages: from local unions to central labor councils, then to statewide union bodies, to internationals and finally on February 8 to the national AFL-CIO itself. This last late entry to the movement was truly a forced concession by the top labor bureaucracy which had failed to stifle the outrage from both its members unions and the rank and file. In its breath, density and youthfulness, street opposition to the current genocide in Gaza resembles the popular revolt against the Vietnam war. During that time, George Meany, racist head of the AFL-CIO, prevailed against major labor opposition to that war.

The current AFL-CIO Executive Board began its dutiful suppression of the UE's campaign with high hopes. The AFL-CIO forced a retraction of the Thurston-Lewis-Mason Central Labor Council (WA) unanimous vote for a **resolution** against the production and transport of arms destined for Israel.

However, the fire then began to spread and could not be suppressed. Soon, two other central labor councils in *right to work* Texas (Austin and San Antonio) also passed cease fire resolutions which were then followed by two CLC's in Massachusetts, one in Monterey, California and one in Troy, New York. Several of these rogue labor councils refused to retract their resolutions. Liz Schuler, AFL-CIO President, and her minions began to read the tea leaves and hear footsteps. Then came a slowly unfolding stampede as more internationals such as SEIU, CWA and the National Education Association passed ceasefire resolutions. On February 8, in a concession to the fires below, the national AFL-CIO issued a terse fifty-two-word statement of support for a ceasefire, return of the hostages, humanitarian aid for Palestinians and a two-state solution.

Not five hours later, President Biden (signaling his awareness of the about face by his biggest political base in organized labor) declared in a press conference that Netanyahu was going "over the top" with the bombing of civilians in Gaza, a feckless rebuke for sure, but a sign that Biden was paying attention to his all important labor constituency.

Finally, 24 hours ago, on February 16, a new national formation, the *National Labor Network for a Ceasefire* declared its existence. As of this writing, only several small independent unions and the powerful Teamsters have not joined the cause. The new ceasefire network's political demands are minimal and may end up constituting a political ceiling for further, and deeper demands. The NLN4C declares on its website that it "supports" *permanent* ceasefire while at the same time asking people to sign onto UE's petition which only calls for an *immediate* ceasefire. Neither campaign calls for the end to the annual \$3.3 billion U.S. gift to the Israeli Defense Forces. More thorough demands come from <https://laborforpalestine.net/> which demands an immediate end to the genocide, and embraces the recent **Urgent Call from Palestinian Trade Unions: End all Complicity, Stop Arming Israel** and to refuse to build or transport weapons destined for Israel.

The new national organization, in its current formulation, may only represent a political ceiling for organized labor opposition to the Democratic Party's stranglehold on the labor bureaucracy. However, popular unrest shows no sign of relenting, and its anger is directed squarely at the Pentagon, Biden and the Democratic party.

UE Postscript:

In 1941 Professor Herbert Morais, communist party leader in AFT Local 5 (Brooklyn College) was fired from his teaching position as part of a vicious anti-semitic and anti-communist purge by the New York State Rapp-Coudert committee targeting Jewish professors. Others among those who were [Max Yergan](#), the first Black faculty member ever hired at one of New York City's public colleges; the brothers [Philip S. Foner](#), [Jack D. Foner](#), [Harry Foner](#), and the English tutor Morris U. Schappes. Morais, after becoming research director of UE in 1955, co-authored *Labor's Untold Story* which still stands as the most widely published and read single volume history in U.S. history.