

The War on Gaza Is a Labor Issue

Workers in the U.S. can't look away from Israel's assault on Gaza—our labor is helping fuel the war machine.

PAUL STAUFFER FEBRUARY 13, 2024



UAW President Shawn Fain talking about the union's call for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza on December 14, 2023. Brandon Mancilla of the UAW earlier announced the union's position.

PHOTO BY KEVIN DIETSCH/GETTY IMAGES

As the U.S. government helps arm and fund the genocide in Gaza carried out by the Israeli military, the connections between global capitalism and the war machine have become abundantly clear. Yet, for most U.S. workers, the atrocities facing Palestinians can seem disconnected from everyday life.

A The starvation Gazans face after Israel's systematic denial of food and water shipments, for example, isn't directly felt by the agricultural worker harvesting chickpeas in Idaho. The airstrikes that have murdered at least 25,000 Palestinian children have all been detonated too far away to be felt by the nurse at Penn Hospital in Philadelphia. The bulldozers that crushed civilians outside Kamal Adwan Hospital don't profoundly threaten the machinist leaving her shift at Caterpillar in East Peoria, Ill.

The fact that Israel is risking the permanent destruction of Gaza's only water aquifer—if the military follows through on its threat to pump seawater into Hamas's tunnel system—didn't factor into my work as a union plumber as I pumped thousands of gallons of high-pressured potable water down sewer lines to clear blockages.

The shop is still open. We have bills to pay, so we go to work, same as always, just trying to get by in an economy where it has become increasingly harder to do so.

So when the average working person in the United States sees the extreme violence Israel is inflicting on Palestinians half a world away, I think they can be forgiven for telling themselves it has little to do with them.

But the truth is, it has everything to do with us.

The agricultural worker in Idaho may not realize it, but the chickpeas he harvests may be sold to Sabra—jointly owned by PepsiCo and the Strauss Group, Israel's largest food and beverage manufacturer. Penn Hospital is partly funded by donors to the University of Pennsylvania, some of whom have threatened to pull their donations because they think school officials haven't done enough to quiet pro-Palestinian voices on campus. The bulldozers that crushed displaced Palestinians as they hid in their tents in Gaza were Caterpillar D9Rs, manufactured in East Peoria.

While I was on the job clearing out those sewer lines here at home, in Gaza, at least 96% of the enclave's water supply was unfit for human consumption and only 30% of the population had access to proper sanitation. The taxes I pay, along with other working people across the country, are used to fund arms and military aid to Israel.

It is imperative for all of us to make these connections clear. Instead of spending on housing programs, healthcare, childcare and abolishing student debt, the U.S. government has spent \$3.8 billion annually in military aid to Israel, money that has gone to enrich weapons manufacturers and corporate bosses who profit from colonial violence abroad.

The Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions put out a call for international solidarity not long after the siege on Gaza began in October 2023. A global movement of workers and labor unions together pushing back against the ongoing genocide has the power to pressure Israeli-affiliated companies to divest from supplying the Israeli war machine—and could force politicians to back away from their unconditional support for Israel and demand an immediate cease-fire.

The list of U.S. labor unions that support the Palestinian cause is growing, from the American Postal Workers Union and the United Electrical Workers to United Food and Commercial Workers Local 3000, Service Employees International Union Local 1199, the California Nurses Association and the United Auto Workers.

“It is a product of our belief in humanity that innocent civilians must be protected,” UAW President Shawn Fain said this past December at a D.C. press conference calling for an end to the violence in Gaza. “We cannot bomb our way to peace. The only path forward to build peace and social justice is a cease-fire. As the UAW, we take pride in our history of standing up for justice at home and around the world. The world has seen enough slaughter and devastation.”

Unions have also demanded Democratic politicians (who count heavily on the labor movement for support) stop taking money from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, an the Israel-at-all-costs organization preparing to spend exorbitantly in the upcoming election cycle to oust politicians openly calling for a cease-fire, including Reps. Cori Bush (D-Mo.), Summer Lee (D-Pa.) and Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.).

While our numbers grow, many more workers still need to join the struggle. Meanwhile, the ruling class in Israel sees in Gaza a ripe opportunity to expand their geopolitical and economic power. This past December, calling openly for the forced removal of the majority of the Palestinian population from Gaza, Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich remarked that “most of Israeli society will say, ‘Why not, it’s a nice place, let’s make the desert bloom, it doesn’t come at anyone’s expense.’”

Because they are so heavily intertwined, anything that benefits Israel’s ruling class mutually benefits the American ruling class. As our exploitation increases, our common enemy—the ruling class of bosses and billionaires—grows stronger and more formidable. We must do everything within our power to end this genocide now.

Please consider supporting our work.

I hope you found this article important. Before you leave, I want to ask you to consider supporting our work with a donation. *In These Times* needs readers like you to help



sustain our mission. We don't depend on—or want—corporate advertising or deep-pocketed billionaires to fund our journalism. We're supported by you, the reader, so we can focus on covering the issues that matter most to the progressive movement without fear or compromise.

Our work isn't hidden behind a paywall because of people like you who support our journalism. We want to keep it that way. If you value the work we do and the movements we cover, please consider donating to *In These Times*.

DONATE NOW

PAUL STAUFFER is a union plumber and writer from Peoria, Ill.

Have thoughts or reactions to this or any other piece that you'd like to share? Send us a note with the Letter to the Editor form.
