

# Unions Must Go Beyond Calling for a Cease-Fire in Gaza

BY

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The growing swell of American unions demanding a cease-fire in Gaza is heartening. But labor will have to take its antiwar commitments further than issuing statements to stop Israel's wanton slaughter.

Four months into Israel's brutal assault on Gaza that has killed over twenty-eight thousand Palestinians, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) — the US labor federation whose member unions represent 12.5 million workers — issued a statement on February 8 urging a negotiated cease-fire to end the violence.

The move came after over two hundred US unions and labor bodies — including national unions like the United Electrical Workers (UE), American Postal Workers Union (APWU), United Auto Workers (UAW), International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT), National Nurses United (NNU), Service Employees International Union (SEIU), National Education Association (NEA), Communications Workers of America (CWA), and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) — had already made cease-fire calls of their own. Many unions, especially at the local level, have also expressed solidarity with the Palestinian liberation movement.

With the backing of the AFL-CIO and the nation's two largest unions (NEA and SEIU), support for a cease-fire is now the mainstream position of the American labor movement. Given US labor officialdom's history of providing substantial political and material aid to the state of Israel — along

with its frequent partnering with US empire (which I examine in my forthcoming book, *Blue Collar Empire*) — this is a remarkable development highlighting the power of rank-and-file organizing to push union leaders on critical issues, and signaling the possibility of building a more internationalist labor movement.

Now, the task for rank-and-file members who successfully organized to get their unions to issue cease-fire statements increasingly is to translate that commitment into concrete action to stop what the International Court of Justice considers Israel’s plausible acts of genocide. Across the US labor movement, networks of pro-Palestine workers are continuing to organize to get their unions to cut economic ties with Israel, put pressure on political candidates and elected officials, and interrupt the flow of union-made weapons and research to the Israeli military.

## Rank-and-File Pressure

“I thank our UAW members for speaking out and pushing us to come out in support of a cease-fire,” Shawn Fain, the UAW’s president, said at a December 14 press conference. “It was the right thing to do.” Fain and the union’s International Executive Board had voted to endorse a cease-fire two weeks earlier, after several locals and UAW Region 6 and Region 9A had already done so — efforts that were encouraged by the newly formed national rank-and-file group UAW Labor for Palestine.



US Representative Rashida Tlaib speaks alongside fellow lawmakers, United Auto Workers president Shawn Fain, and union members and activists at a press conference calling for a cease-fire in Gaza outside of the US Capitol on December 14, 2023, in Washington, DC. (Kevin Dietsch / Getty Images)

SEIU's national leadership similarly called for a cease-fire following months of grassroots member organizing. Last fall, multiple SEIU locals around the country began signing onto a widely circulated labor movement cease-fire petition, and the SEIU-affiliated Starbucks Workers United issued a Palestine solidarity message on October 20 condemning "the occupation, displacement, state violence, apartheid, and threats of genocide Palestinians face." SEIU members with the rank-and-file group Purple Up for Palestine began circulating a petition urging the union's leadership to demand an end to US military aid to Israel.

By mid-December, SEIU's largest affiliate — the 450,000-member 1199SEIU — adopted a cease-fire resolution. Finally, on January 22, SEIU president Mary Kay Henry released a statement on behalf of the union's two million members calling for a cease-fire and for "a sustained end to decades of occupation, blockades and lack of freedom endured by the Palestinian people."

Within the NEA, several locals and statewide affiliates like the Oregon Education Association and Massachusetts Teachers Association endorsed the labor movement cease-fire petition last fall. This apparently prompted the national leadership of the three million-member union to issue a statement on November 7 that seemingly urged a cease-fire but deliberately avoided using the word. "Regardless of what you call it, the killing of innocent people must stop," the NEA statement said.

Soon after, rank-and-file NEA members with Educators for Palestine started a petition and sent an open letter to the union's leaders demanding they more clearly support a cease-fire. On December 8, NEA president Becky Pringle tweeted that "the need for a ceasefire in Gaza is growing" and said "there is no tenable military solution to this crisis." A spokesperson for the union later confirmed to me that "President Pringle's call for a ceasefire is the position of the NEA."

It also took months of rank-and-file pressure for the AFT's executive council to unanimously pass a resolution on January 29 favoring a "negotiated bilateral cease-fire." AFT president Randi Weingarten has long been one of the most pro-Israel voices in the US labor movement. Last fall, as several AFT locals like the Chicago Teachers Union and state affiliates like AFT-Oregon signed onto the labor movement cease-fire petition, and as some of the union's members and locals criticized AFT leadership's pro-Israel positions, Weingarten called for a "humanitarian pause" in Gaza.

On December 13, a group of rank-and-file AFT members interrupted Weingarten at a public event in New York to demand she and the rest of the union's leadership call for a cease-fire. A few weeks later, Weingarten tweeted that she now supported a "bilateral, negotiated ceasefire" – the same position the union's executive council would formally adopt at the end of January.

Although several locals of other unions like UNITE HERE, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) have called for a cease-fire, the national leaders of those unions so far have not followed suit. The national leadership of the 1.4 million-member Teamsters has also been silent on the bloodshed in Palestine. In early November, the rank-and-file group Teamsters Mobilize (TM) brought a cease-fire resolution to the annual convention of the reform organization Teamsters for a Democratic Union. But the measure, which also urged an end to US military aid to Israel, met resistance at the convention and was tabled. TM has since turned the resolution into a petition for rank-and-file Teamsters and supporters to sign.

After the AFL-CIO-chartered Thurston-Lewis-Mason Central Labor Council in Washington state unanimously adopted a cease-fire resolution on October 18, the national AFL-CIO stepped in to overrule the measure because it did not align with the federation's position at the time. Nevertheless, other central labor councils around the country soon passed their own cease-fire resolutions, including the Western Mass Area Labor Federation, Austin (Texas) Central Labor Council, and San Antonio Central Labor Council. The resolutions in Austin and San Antonio led to the Texas AFL-CIO becoming the first state labor federation to adopt a cease-fire measure in late January, followed by the national AFL-CIO's own cease-fire call a little over a week later.

## **From Statements to Action**

Many Palestine solidarity activists in the labor movement want their unions to go beyond cease-fire statements. They point to the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, as well as to a call to action issued by a coalition of Palestinian trade unions on October 16, which urges organized labor around the world to oppose military aid to Israel and not to manufacture or transport arms for the Israeli war machine. The call has been taken up by unions and union members in countries like Belgium, Japan, the UK, Colombia, Italy, Australia, and Spain.

For US unions like the UAW – which has thousands of members in weapons factories making the bombs, missiles, and aircraft used by Israel, as well in university departments doing research linked to the Israeli military – the Palestinian trade union call to action is particularly relevant. When the UAW’s national leadership came out in support of a cease-fire on December 1, they also voted to establish a “Divestment and Just Transition Working Group.” The stated purpose of the working group is to study the UAW’s own economic ties to Israel and explore ways to convert war-related industries to production for peaceful purposes while ensuring a just transition for weapons workers.

Members of UAW Labor for Palestine say they have started making visits to a Colt factory in Connecticut, which holds a contract to supply rifles to the Israeli military, to talk with their fellow union members about Palestine, a cease-fire, and a just transition. They want to see the union’s leadership support such organizing activity.

“If UAW leaders decided to, they could, tomorrow, form a national organizing campaign to educate and mobilize rank-and-file towards the UAW’s own ceasefire and just transition call,” UAW Labor for Palestine members said in a statement. “They could hold weapons shop town halls in every region; they could connect their small cadre of volunteer organizers – like us – to the people we are so keen to organize with; they could even send some of their staff to help with this work.”

On January 21, the membership of UAW Local 551, which represents 4,600 autoworkers at Ford’s Chicago Assembly Plant (who were part of last year’s historic stand-up strike) endorsed the Palestinian trade unions’ call to not cooperate in the production and transportation of arms for Israel. Ten days later, UAW Locals 2865 and 5810, representing around forty-seven thousand academic workers at the University of California, passed a measure urging the union’s national leaders to ensure that the envisioned Divestment and Just Transition Working Group “has the needed resources to execute its mission, and that Palestinian, Arab and Muslim workers whose communities are disproportionately affected by U.S.-backed wars are well-represented on the committee.”

Members of UAW Locals 2865 and 5810 at UC Santa Cruz’s Astronomy Department have pledged to withhold any labor that supports militarism and to refuse research collaboration with military institutions and arms companies. In December, unionized academic workers from multiple universities formed Researchers Against War (RAW) to expose and cut ties between their research and warfare, and to organize in their labs and departments for more transparency about where the funding for their work comes from and more control over what their labor is used for. RAW, which was formed after a series of discussions by union members first convened by US Labor Against Racism and War last fall, hosted a national teach-in and planning meeting on February 12.

Meanwhile, public sector workers in New York City have begun their own campaign to divest their pension money from Israel. On January 25, rank-and-file members of AFSCME District Council (DC) 37 launched a petition calling on the New York City Employees' Retirement System to divest the \$115 million it holds in Israeli securities. The investments include \$30 million in bonds that directly fund the Israeli military and its activities. "As rank-and-file members of DC 37 who contribute to and benefit from the New York City Employees' Retirement System and care about the lives of working people everywhere, we refuse to support the Israeli government and the corporations that extract profit from the killing of innocent civilians," the petition states.

In an election year when President Joe Biden and other Democratic candidates will depend heavily on organized labor for donations and especially get-out-the-vote efforts, rank and filers are also trying to push their unions to exert leverage on the president by getting him to firmly stand against the ongoing massacre in Gaza. NEA members with Educators for Palestine are calling on their union's leaders to withdraw their support for Biden's reelection campaign until he stops "sending military funding, equipment, and intelligence to Israel," marching from AFT headquarters to NEA headquarters in Washington, DC on February 10 to assert their demand. Similarly, after the UAW International Executive Board endorsed Biden last month — a decision that sparked intense division within the union — UAW Labor for Palestine is demanding the endorsement be revoked "until [Biden] calls for a permanent ceasefire and stops sending weapons to Israel."

As the rank-and-file organizers in these various unions understand, while statements calling for a cease-fire are significant in themselves, they are ultimately only tools to facilitate further organizing and action. Through its collective power, there is much more the labor movement can do to stop the unfolding genocide in Gaza and to push for peace, freedom, and justice for Palestinians and working people everywhere.

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