

LABOR MOVEMENT

Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson Has No Place at Labor Notes

The Labor Notes Conference will have record attendance this year, but it's showing its limits by opening with a speech from Chicago's pro-cop Democratic mayor, Brandon Johnson. Instead of facilitating the Democratic Party's co-optation of our movement, Labor Notes should be a space for workers and socialists to gather and fight for a class-independent alternative.

Emma Lee and M. Carlstad | April 16, 2024



Ashlee Rezin, Chicago Sun-Times via AP

Thousands of rank-and-file workers, union activists, and socialists are gathering in Chicago the weekend of April 19 for the Labor Notes Conference. After a high-profile strike by UAW at the Big Three automakers and a growing connection between labor and the movement for a free Palestine, the working class is an increasingly important player in national and global politics. Labor Notes will have record attendance of 4,500, and the conference poses an opportunity to advance the workers' movement and take on the bigger fights ahead.

That Chicago mayor **Brandon Johnson** will be delivering the opening address at Labor Notes on Friday is a betrayal to the conference attendees and the labor movement as a whole. As a Democrat loyal to the ruling class and as a mayor who oversees one of the country's most violent and repressive police forces, he hasn't followed through on the "progressive" agenda he ran on, and his politics are incompatible with the interests of the people attending Labor Notes.

On Monday, according to the US Palestinian Community Network when a pro Palestine protest was about to start "the CPD [Chicago Police Department] came out in full force, not allowing protestors to march or protest. As protestors demanded to march and exercise their right to protest, CPD officers started their unprovoked rampage, used violent force, and arrested 13 protesters, including CJP leaders. About half of protestors were released after 12 hours, and the rest are being charged with felonies."

Labor Notes should be a space for the working class to discuss and advance class-independent politics and to build the fighting power of the working class — not push workers into the arms of the Democratic Party. Brandon Johnson has no place at Labor Notes.

From Teachers Union Organizer to Chicago's Top Cop

Brandon Johnson, a former public school teacher, Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) staffer, and county commissioner, was elected mayor last year, replacing the very unpopular, anti-union mayor Lori Lightfoot. He ran on a progressive platform, promising to invest in affordable housing, public schools, and public transportation — paid for by taxing big corporations. Johnson received massive **support** from the teachers union, with former CTU president Jesse Sharkey **referring** to Johnson as "our comrade in office."

But Johnson is no comrade — there is nothing socialist or pro-worker about his agenda, nor has he claimed even democratic socialist politics. While he was once a working-class teacher and union organizer, as mayor, he has taken on the role of overseeing the exploitation and oppression of the city's residents.

For all his progressive rhetoric and promises, Johnson offers nothing progressive to the working class of Chicago.

Johnson heads one of the most murderous and racist police departments in the United States. According to a **report** by the Police Brutality Center, the Chicago Police Department, "on average, kills about 26 times more Black people than white people every year."

The CPD is also responsible for countless murders, such as the killings of Laquan McDonald, a 17-year-old Black high school student, in 2014, Rekia Boyd, a 22-year-old Black woman in 2012, and Dexter Reed, a 26-year-old Black man who was **killed by the CPD in March** when plainclothes CPD officers fired 96 shots in 41 seconds after pulling Reed over for allegedly failing to wear his seatbelt. The officers who murdered Reed **have been named in past complaints before**, and **have not even been suspended**.

Chicago police have been also **trained** in “counter-terrorism” sessions with **Israeli officers**, part of what a report by Researching the American-Israeli Alliance and Jewish Voice for Peace refer to as a “**deadly exchange**.”

While at first Johnson promised to cut \$150 million from the bloated police budget, it didn’t take long for him to reverse course. Johnson’s **2024 spending plan** would “increase the overall CPD budget to nearly \$2 billion, accounting for more than 31 percent of the city’s \$5.7 billion corporate fund, by far the most of any city agency or department.”

The consequences are clear for the city’s overpoliced Black and brown population.

This is part of a much larger pattern of police brutality that extends long before Johnson was elected and shows no signs of stopping under his mayorship. According to the **University of Illinois Chicago**, the cops kill at least one person a month, and each year, 200 people have to be treated in hospitals for injuries caused by law enforcement.

And the working class has to pay for it too. A **WTTW analysis** from earlier this year revealed that “Chicago taxpayers paid \$142.8 million to resolve lawsuits that named 141 Chicago police officers whose alleged misconduct led more than once to payouts between 2019 and 2022.” While the residents of Chicago are brutalized by the CPD, they are also being made to pay to cover it up.

Johnson’s administration perpetuates the same racist police violence that terrorizes the working class of Chicago — in other words, the working-class siblings of Labor Notes conference attendees.

Staging Repression of Pro-Palestine Protests

Since Israel’s onslaught on Gaza ramped up this fall, Chicago has seen major protests in support of Palestinians. Johnson is carefully positioning himself in relation to the movement for Palestine, which has called into question the Democratic Party’s unbridled support for Israel and its complicity in the genocide. Johnson has offered up tepid rhetorical statements in support of a cease-fire, such as when he **broke a tie vote** by the Chicago City Council by voting yes on a resolution calling for a cease-fire. But he remains loyal to the party that has bankrolled the genocide and apartheid state of Israel.

This summer, Chicago will host the Democratic National Convention (DNC), which is sure to be the site of massive pro-Palestinian protests as delegates pledge their support for Genocide Joe

in his run for a second term in office. So far, the City of Chicago under Johnson has **denied applications** for permits to protest outside the DNC this August.

Denying protest permits means that heavy repression of the upcoming DNC protests will be likely, conjuring up memories of the 1968 anti-Vietnam War DNC protests, also held in Chicago, which resulted in severe repression of demonstrators by police: over 600 wounded and one civilian killed. While Johnson echoes the calls for a cease-fire, he is effectively staging a situation of massive repression of pro-Palestine protesters in a few short months.

Ahead of the convention, Johnson also helped organize a **“labor truce,”** in which union leaderships have agreed to not strike during the DNC. This restrains workers from standing with pro-Palestine protesters, since they cannot use their power to disrupt the DNC in solidarity with the protests. This collaboration between the Democratic Party and union leaderships is symbolized in Johnson’s speaking at Labor Notes: it’s an attempt to tie our unions to the party overseeing support for the genocide and defang us in moments of struggle.

The activists gathering at Labor Notes are to a large extent the same people who have been protesting on the streets and organizing in their workplaces and campuses demanding an end to the Israeli occupation and genocide in Palestine. These same people who are sure to be mobilizing against the DNC in August — and who are going to face severe repression by Chicago police under Johnson and who will be largely unable to involve their unions in the struggle thanks to Johnson’s truce.

Why is Labor Notes hosting the very mayor who will oversee the repression of its own working-class siblings and who has suppressed labor’s ability to fight the DNC?

The labor movement has a crucial role to play in denouncing the repression faced by workers and students by their bosses, universities, and the state — such as the student organizers at Columbia University who have been **suspended** for their activism and **attacked** by former IDF soldiers and cops on the streets. Our unions need to be anti-imperialist, defending our fellow workers, classmates, and students who are on the front lines fighting for a free Palestine.

Labor Notes’ Potential Lies in Class Independence

Johnson’s presence at the head of Labor Notes clearly expresses the Democratic Party’s efforts to funnel the labor movement and working class back into its arms through a logic of pressure campaigns and lesser-evilism. This strategy aims to address the phenomenon of “dealignment,” in which sectors of the working class are disassociating themselves from the Democrats, and ultimately lead workers back to the polls to vote for Biden in November.

To win back the working class, the Democrats are co-opting the most watered-down demands of the Palestine movement while using the support of the leaderships of the labor movement bureaucracy to their advantage. A clear expression of this was UAW president Shawn Fain’s appearance on a livestream with Genocide Joe and the UAW’s subsequent endorsement of the

incumbent president at the height of U.S. support for Israel — just a month and a half after the UAW’s rank-and-file-led call for a cease-fire.

It has long been the role of union bureaucracies to defang labor movements that have disruptive or revolutionary potential. While Labor Notes is an important site of organizing for workers, its leadership willingly collaborates with these bureaucracies and the capitalist parties they’re plugged into — hosting figures like Bernie Sanders and Teamsters president Sean O’Brien in past years, both of whom went on to restrain or betray various workers’ struggles, and continuing this year with Johnson as the opener and Biden surrogate Shawn Fain for the final day.

But Labor Notes has enormous potential for the working class. As a conference bringing together thousands of workers whose fight against their bosses is inextricably connected to the fight against the capitalist system, Labor Notes should be a space for workers to have serious conversations about strategy, class independence, and self-organization — not to foster illusions in “progressive” Democrats.

The time is ripe for a political alternative for the working class that takes a firm stand against the capitalist system that exploits us and our working-class siblings around the world, and its political representatives in both major capitalist parties. Labor Notes can be an important space for workers to come together to discuss the program of this political alternative, carry out important debates about strategic questions, and synthesize our strategy to build genuine political power for the working class. We need to discuss a working-class party that fights for socialism — a party that defends the gains of the workers’ and social movements in the face of right-wing attacks, a party that fights to halt the bloody imperialist machine with our collective power as workers, a party that can win a better world for the working class and stop the ecological devastation and eternal exploitation that capitalism offers.

This week at Labor Notes, join us in rejecting capitalist politicians speaking at our conference and fighting for a working class party that fights for socialism.

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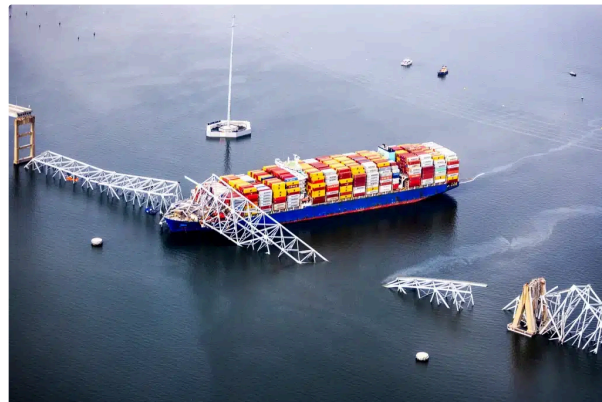
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