

**Joe Biden**

## **Rank-and-file union members back campaign to ditch Biden over Gaza**

Wisconsin coalition of low-wage workers and immigrants push back in anger against president's handling of Gaza war



📷 Joe Biden in Milwaukee last month. Photograph: Scott Olson/Getty Images

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### **Alice Herman in Madison, Wisconsin**

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In **Wisconsin**, a campaign by anti-war voters to abandon Joe Biden during the Democratic primary has found an ally in the labor movement - but not from its traditional leaders.

Instead, the Listen to Wisconsin campaign, an effort inspired by the Michigan campaign to reject Biden during the primary over his military support for Israel, has earned the support of rank-and-file trade unionists and a statewide coalition of low-wage workers and immigrants angry about the president's handling of the war.

"Individuals in labor have been very active," said Janan Najeeb, a Wisconsin organizer spearheading the Listen to Wisconsin campaign.

Israel's war on Gaza has laid bare a divide within the labor movement - which has played out largely between union leaders in the AFL-CIO, the largest US labor federation, and the movement's rank and file, many of whom have vocally opposed the war and turned to their unions as an avenue for political action.

In the wake of Hamas's bloody incursion into Israel and Israel's military response, which has so far killed more than 31,000 Palestinians, union members have drafted resolutions calling for a ceasefire and action by the Biden administration to pressure Israel to end the war and lift its siege on Gaza.

In Wisconsin, they're using the 2 April primary as a tool to increase the pressure on Biden. Workers affiliated with the grassroots group Wisconsin Labor for Palestine have allied with the Uninstructed campaign, helping organize a 30 March rally at the capitol and phone-banking to get out the vote. At a small Biden campaign event on 26 March at Madison Labor Temple - a meeting space for local unions - union members handed out leaflets encouraging workers to vote "uninstructed" in the primary.

“We’ve gotten changes in wording - now they’re willing to say ‘ceasefire,’” said Barret Elward, a member of the union representing faculty and staff at the University of Wisconsin, of the Biden administration. “But I mean, it’s just pablum, it’s just messaging, it’s just a PR thing. Nothing has changed on the ground.”

The Uninstructed campaign has also picked up the support of a powerful network of immigrant and low-wage workers in Wisconsin.

“We should not be giving all of this money to this genocidal war,” said Christine Neumann-Ortiz, the executive director of Voces de la Frontera, whose advocacy arm has come out in support of the Listen to Wisconsin campaign.

For members of the Latino voter network, Neumann-Ortiz said, voting “uninstructed” is also a way to voice their disapproval of Biden’s rightward shift on immigration. This year, Biden has touted legislation to crack down on the southern border and limit the number of asylum seekers accepted on a daily basis there, and even used the pejorative “illegal” in his State of the Union address.

Instead of adopting an increasingly rightwing rhetoric and policy toward immigration, Neumann-Ortiz said, Biden should use his executive authority to expand protections for undocumented immigrants and campaign on protections for immigrants that his administration has implemented - like a 2023 measure the Department of Homeland Security quietly passed to protect non-citizen workers whose workplace rights have been violated from deportation.

“You’re not going to win those Trump supporters, but you are definitely eroding and alienating your own base,” said Neumann-Ortiz.

During the 2022 midterms, Voces de la Frontera Action poured its resources into mobilizing support for **Democrats** at the ballot box, with volunteer members directly contacting nearly 30,000 voters in their network and reaching 30,000 more through phone-banking and door-knocking, according to the organization. In 2020, Voces supported Biden’s presidential run.

Now, the group has turned its efforts toward promoting the Uninstructed campaign with mailers, door-knocking and social media promotion.

“It’s so important that in the months ahead, that he respond to the demands that are being made on Gaza, and for Latinos and immigrants, who he needs to reaffirm his commitment to,” said Neumann-Ortiz.

Meanwhile, nearly every major US union has refrained from endorsing the protest vote, and Wisconsin’s affiliated unions have largely followed suit - underscoring the split within the labor movement over Israel-Palestine.

On 11 October, the AFL-CIO released a statement condemning the massacre of civilians on 7 October and voicing concerns about “the emerging humanitarian crisis that is affecting Palestinians in Gaza”.

The union called for a “swift resolution” to the conflict, but refrained from calling for a “ceasefire” and made clear that labor councils within the federation were not to issue their own resolutions on the subject. When a council in Washington state passed a resolution on 18 October calling for a ceasefire and opposing “union involvement in the production or transportation of weapons destined for Israel”, the federation **stepped in** to overrule the resolution.

The United Auto Workers union in December **called for a ceasefire** and announced it would explore divesting from military manufacturing jobs, prompting other US unions to adopt stronger demands.

In Wisconsin, members of the South Central Federation of Labor - a federation of unions within the AFL-CIO - introduced a ceasefire resolution in October that passed in late January, calling on the AFL-CIO to “use its influence to get the US to suspend further military aid to Israel that prolongs this conflict”. On 8 February, the AFL-CIO issued its own [statement](#) urging a ceasefire, stopping short of calling for reduced military assistance to Israel.

With few exceptions (the union representing graduate student workers at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, has endorsed the Uninstructed campaign), traditional unions in Wisconsin, which have formed a bastion of support for Democrats, have largely stayed out of the fray.

Jacob Flom, the president of the union representing workers at the Milwaukee Public Museum, who sits on the board of the Milwaukee Area Labor Council and is a vocal opponent of Israel’s war in Gaza, said the Wisconsin Labor for Palestine coalition aims to push Wisconsin’s unions to take a stronger stand in defense of Palestinian workers.

“As trade unionists, we feel like it is our obligation to stand in solidarity with them and to pressure our electeds and our unions to do more and to do better to stop the US support for the genocide in Gaza,” said Flom.

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*Editor, Guardian US*

