

Labor support for Palestine

Rank-and-file activists in the US are standing in solidarity with Palestinians by marching, rallying, passing resolutions, and even attempting to block arms shipments to Israel. They often find themselves butting heads with AFL-CIO bigwigs.

STEVE HOFFMAN | JUNE 2024



Labor For Palestine sponsors a rally on March 2, 2024, at Union Square in New York City. PHOTO: Labor For Palestine

Union members across the United States see what millions of pro-Palestine protesters see — the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the decades-long occupation, and the nefarious role of their own government in the injustice. They are appalled, so they naturally express solidarity with their oppressed siblings in Gaza and the West Bank.

The newly energized activists are sporting their union colors in rallies and marches in countless cities. Some are taking bolder actions like joining in efforts to block ships that are being loaded with arms headed to Israel.

In November a U.S. Navy ship, the *MV Cape Orlando*, was destined to deliver military aid to Israel. In Oakland, the ship was confronted by a protest organized by the Arab Resource and Organizing Center. Members and retirees of International Longshore Workers Union (ILWU) Local 10 took part in the action.

ILWU folks are drawing on their history — in the 1980's they supported the international boycott and divestment campaign that targeted apartheid. Then ILWU Local 10 members would not unload ships from South Africa. Today dockworkers in Italy, Belgium, India, and other countries are refusing to handle arms shipments bound for Israel.

At this point, many rank-and-file members are attending rallies calling for a cease-fire and an end to U.S. military funding and arms. At a labor-sponsored rally in Seattle on April 27, several speakers decried using their tax dollars to fund what they characterized as a genocide. They gathered at the Federal Building, where the crowd called out Washington state Congressional representatives for recently voting to send another \$26 billion in military aid to Israel.

Taking a stand

Several large unions have written open letters and passed resolutions that call for a cease-fire in the war on Gaza, including United Food and Commercial Workers Local 3000, which represents more than 50,000 workers in the Pacific Northwest.

But a cease-fire is a very limited demand. After all, previous cease-fires never stopped Israel from blockading Gaza and occupying the West Bank.

Two months into the war, Organized Workers for Labor Solidarity issued a statement that went further. It called for stopping Israel's attacks, ending U.S. military aid to Israel (a demand now popular throughout the movement), and stopping all harassment of pro-Palestinian voices on the job, in schools, or by the FBI.

Also, United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 2320 passed a far-reaching resolution. Emily Woo-Yamasaki, a legal service worker in New York City and a Local 2320 member, explains what is going down. "It was only through rank-and-file pressure that the national UAW called for a cease-fire. Then the ranks were up in arms when UAW endorsed Biden, and many are now organizing to push the union to rescind that endorsement."

She goes on to describe what members are doing. UAW represents university academic employees, some of whom have joined the protest encampment at Columbia. Lawyers who are members of her local have provided free legal assistance.

A UAW local in Los Angeles representing workers at UCLA is considering a strike to stop the university's attacks on pro-Palestine protesters.

Rank and filers in another big organization, Service Employees International Union, have formed Purple Up 4 Palestine (a reference to SEIU colors). They call for leaders to stand against genocide and support the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement against Israel.

Union tops freak out

All this solidarity with Palestine has caused major heartburn for AFL-CIO officials. The national labor federation has a long history of supporting Israel, in line with how they have often been a pillar of support for U.S. foreign policy. Also, they are not about to take any position independent of the Democratic Party.

AFL-CIO tops consider foreign policy to be strictly their domain, so they threatened retaliation against any central labor council that passed a resolution or wrote a letter questioning U.S. support for Israel's war. The message was out — discussion of this issue is not sanctioned.

But edicts from on high will not be the last word. The young workers who are spearheading labor's resurgence are not concerned with the leadership's conservative State Department-approved approach. They are more likely to join a protest encampment and collaborate with radicals to push hard for their new-found unions to fight for workers everywhere. Now they urgently want to stop the genocide in Palestine.

Labor needs young workers' energy and heart-felt solidarity. This is one genie officials should not try to put back in the bottle.

Visit the [Labor for Palestine National Network \(http://laborforpalestine.net\)](http://laborforpalestine.net) to learn how unionists across the U.S. are supporting Palestinian workers.