

TEMPEST

SF educators strike for Palestine

by **Alex Schmaus**

Alex Schmaus reports on labor actions for Palestine in the Bay Area and one high school that educators shut down on May Day. Names have been fictionalized to protect the participants.

Educators at Downtown High School in San Francisco went out on strike for Palestine to mark May 1, International Workers' Day. All of them belong to United Educators of San Francisco (UESF), the union that represents classroom teachers and other frontline educators in San Francisco public schools—and every UESF member at Downtown High participated in the strike. None of them reported to work, leaving the principal on campus by himself.

The strike was organized by autonomous rank-and-file workers.

Tempest spoke with these educators as they rested in the shade of the pollarded sycamores in Civic Center Plaza after marching from the Mission District with hundreds of other labor movement and Palestine solidarity activists.

Karl, a UESF member at Downtown High, said, “We, as a school, all decided to protest today...we’re out in support of a free Palestine and against U.S. involvement and money toward Israel.”

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Another UESF member at Downtown High, Rosa, brought a flier calling for strikes in solidarity with Palestine on May 1 to a union building committee meeting and proposed that they organize one themselves. Rosa said, “My husband and I were going to Labor for Palestine meetings. The whole thing there is, ‘How are you organizing your work sites?’”

Labor for Palestine (<https://laborforpalestine.net/>) is a nationwide network of labor movement activists that organizes to support the Palestinian-led call for **boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS)** (<https://bdsmovement.net/>) against Israeli occupation and apartheid.

The **Bay Area chapter of Labor for Palestine** (<https://linktr.ee/bayarealabor4palestine>) is especially active. The group organized a demonstration of more than a thousand labor movement activists in Oakland on December 16 calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. That demonstration was endorsed by the Oakland Education Association (OEA), UESF, and other local unions and workers’ organizations such as UAW 2865, UNITE HERE Local 2, and the ILWU Local 10 Young Workers Committee. In February, Bay Area Labor for Palestine organized a mass meeting of more than two hundred unionists at Westlake Middle School in Oakland. The participants of that meeting resolved to organize strikes and other job actions for Palestine on May 1.



Banner of May Day strikers from San Francisco Downtown High School. Image by the author.

Hundreds of workers in the Bay Area were able to organize some response to the call for solidarity on International Workers' Day, and public school educators were especially responsive.

OEA members at multiple school sites in Oakland walked out of afternoon professional development meetings to join a demonstration at the Federal Building.

Tempest exchanged text messages with one of these OEA members, Claudia, who organized an afternoon walkout at Piedmont Elementary School. Claudia explained that about three-quarters of OEA members at Piedmont Elementary participated in the walkout. Claudia wrote:

It's refreshing to see unions out in the streets in solidarity with Palestinians and in opposition to our tax dollars being used to fund a genocide. Educators have a special perspective on what the future holds...I am desperate to protect that future for our kids.

Claudia was concerned that management intimidation tactics, including threats of docked pay and write-ups for absenteeism, would deter her coworkers, but ultimately they showed courage and determination. Claudia wrote, “Once we arrived together at the rally, I felt relieved. It always lifts my spirits to take action and to be in the streets with like-minded people.”

At Francisco Middle School in San Francisco, where I work as a special education instructional aide, the UESF union building committee organized a small lunchtime demonstration alongside the students' FMS 4 Liberation club. Educators and students gathered together in the school garden, now covered in pro-Palestine murals and slogans, such as “from the river to the sea,” where they enjoyed Moroccan tea, took group pictures, and made signs.

The garden teacher, known by some students as Ms. Celery, exchanged texts with Tempest about the lunchtime demonstration. Ms. Celery wrote, “Students gathered...to make banners and signs to contribute to the ongoing encampment at SF State [University] to demand an end to the genocide in Palestine.”



Students at Francisco Middle School demonstrate for Palestine. Image by Ms. Celery.

There were other actions organized in response to the call for strikes and job actions by Bay Area Labor for Palestine. However, the educators of Downtown High in San Francisco are the only ones that I am aware of that were able to organize a unanimous strike action.

A third UESF member at Downtown High, Angela, spoke with Tempest about the conditions and culture at Downtown High that made such an exemplary strike action possible. Angela said:

I feel really happy to be at a school where we all share similar values and where we're willing to take action to be in solidarity with others... Our ethnic studies unit this semester is "Resistance and Solidarity," and those are not just empty words... We have deep and long-lasting relationships that are not transactional. We're honestly invested in each other and each others' struggles and causes. We have a lot of connections to Palestinian communities and [we] are deeply inspired by the resistance movements we see happening.

Downtown High is an alternative school and relatively small—there are 22 UESF members who work at the site—but the educators there are setting a big lead.

The unanimous strike for Palestine they organized on International Workers' Day was perhaps the most advanced political action ever undertaken by UESF members.

When asked if they understood the example that they have set for other UESF members and the labor movement more broadly, Angela said:

I think we hadn't really considered that. Our consideration was, "How do we take a meaningful action together in terms of stopping the war machine and this ongoing genocide?"

Even if it was not the intention of the Downtown High educators to assume a leadership role, we should attempt to follow their lead anyway. We should do so in ways that make sense for the particular conditions we face in our own workplaces, with both the urgency and the patience required, but we should do so nonetheless. Disruptive, often extralegal, political action by workers in and around the workplace, is the most powerful potential weapon at our disposal in the struggle for international solidarity and for justice in Palestine.



Part of a mural at Francisco Middle School. Image by the author.

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