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## We need to strike for Palestine: Why UAW 4811 matters

Mary Jirmanus Saba | Special to the Daily Californian  
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— *Mary Jirmanus Saba,*  
*UC Berkeley PhD candidate in Geography*

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Since October, the United States has seen unprecedented popular protests in support of Palestine, including from within the labor movement. However, imagine if workers across the weapons supply chain — from academic researchers to workers in production and transport — could actually strike together over Palestine. Imagine if the United Automobile Workers, or UAW, could put its massive strike fund and political clout at the service of stopping the genocide. Perhaps we're not so far from that vision as it might seem.

Palestinian trade unions have called upon U.S. unions to stop all weapons from being traded to Israel. In Belgium, India, Spain and the United Kingdom, trade unions have already said they will not send weapons or workers to aid the genocide. If U.S. workers — including those in the UAW, which represents workers manufacturing weapons — were to join this transnation

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they could drastically transform the material conditions on the ground in Gaza. Without weapons from the United States, Israel says it is concerned it cannot continue its policy of occupation and ethnic cleansing.

Accomplishing this will require us to transform our unions into vehicles for building worker power, independent from business interests and the war-profiteering Democratic National Committee. We will need to build a labor movement led by and prioritizing the needs of its most marginalized members — a labor movement that can strike for Palestine.

This is the vision of our slate “Reform UC-UAW,” composed of Raj Chaklashiya for Statewide President, Dylan Kupsh for Academic Student Employees Statewide Chair, Yağmur Ali Coşkun for Recording Secretary and myself, Mary Jirmanus Saba, for Financial Secretary. We are running for seats on the statewide executive board of the amalgamated University of California UAW Local 4811. We share our vision with reform slates running at other UC campuses: Reform UAW-UCB, Rank and File for a Democratic Union, UCSB4COLA: Liberation and Organize to Win.

Our slate believes that the UAW should take a transformative role in slowing the U.S. war machine and supporting the struggle for a free Palestine. Many of the weapons that U.S. companies sell to Israel are made in union shops, including the UAW. However, an increasing number of workers do not want the product of their labor to be used for genocide.

A coalition of UAW workers across sectors, called UAW Labor for Palestine, has been calling on the UAW International Executive Board, or UAW IEB, as well as regions and locals to immediately divest from Israel. Our demands include supporting workers who wish to stop sending Israel weapons under the “moral injury” framework, divesting university funding sources and transitioning to an economy that focuses on human needs, public health, education, transport and a sustainable planet.

As academic workers, we are deeply entrenched in the war machine: The UC system is heavily subsidized by the military industrial complex. In 2022 alone, it received nearly \$295 million dollars from the Department of Defense for research. However, our colleagues in Astronomy and Astrophysics at UC Santa Cruz — who pledged to stop accepting funding from the Department of Defense — have already demonstrated that it is possible to refuse complicity in militarism.

There is legal precedent and a path forward for divestment from war across the weapons supply chain. These can only grow stronger if the UAW IEB supports them. Unfortunately, the UAW has not boldly supported these demands, even as rank-and-file voices become more difficult to ignore.

So what does this have to do with the UAW 4811 Triennial Election?

The “Union MADE” caucus currently leading our local has styled itself as pro-Palestine, yet they have undercut rank-and-file efforts to fight for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS). After locals and allies at UCLA, UC Berkeley and UCSB signed on to a rank-and-file UAW BDS resolution, Union MADE leadership created a statewide membership vote reiterating their commitment to call for a ceasefire. However, this performative referendum mentioned BDS only in a footnote and failed to commit to practical steps to push UC to divest. The UAW Region 6 Director Mike Miller used the same tactic at the international level, introducing a ceasefire resolution instead of the detailed BDS resolution our Region 6 locals have advocated for. While Miller has recently presented himself as an ally to reform, in 2022 he ran alongside conservative incumbent Ray Curry against Shawn Fain’s “Members United” reform slate.

Even more egregiously, Region 6 endorsed candidate Katie Porter who has continued to support more military aid to Israel for the empty California U.S. Senate seat without a membership vote. All of these actions reflect Region 6’s loyalty to business unionism and its longstanding work to dismantle social justice labor organizing and undermine labor’s independence.

But things can be different.

UAW 4811 — the largest academic worker union in the country’s largest public education system — is filled with engaged workers already exercising transformative pressure. The power to collectively withhold labor is the game changer we need to interrupt the genocide and take back the labor movement for social justice and true worker power.

To do this — as we’ve learned through UAW Labor for Palestine — we will need a courageous local and IEB that is emboldened by and held accountable to an activated membership.

This ambitious vision for our union will not happen as long as our Union MADE leadership continues its performative actions, which fail to substantively challenge a corporate class agenda.

In the years to come, we will need the strike as a tool for collective action to confront fascism, unbridled pandemics and climate change. We will need unions as our vehicles to liberate and transform our planet.

But right now, Palestine needs us, and that means we need to take the concrete step of supporting reformers across UAW 4811 in the triennial elections taking place from May 2 to May 3. We need to take back our union — for the common liberation of Palestine and our own members.

Mary Jirmanus Saba is a filmmaker and PhD candidate in geography. She will be a postdoctoral fellow in film and media at UC Santa Cruz in the fall. She is running for financial secretary of UAW 4811 on the Reform UC-UAW slate.