

**LABOR MOVEMENT**

## Why Won't PSC-CUNY Stand with Palestine Now?

While other higher education unions are going on strike in defense of their workers and against the genocide in Gaza, the bureaucratic leadership of PSC-CUNY just crushed a resolution calling on the university to divest from Israel and to drop the charges against Palestinian activists arrested on April 30.

James Dennis Hoff | May 24, 2024



Photo: Olivia Wood

On Thursday evening, hundreds of members of the City University of New York (CUNY) faculty, staff, and graduate assistant union — the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) — met to debate a resolution in support of several of the demands of the **CUNY Gaza Solidarity Encampment**, which was violently cleared by the NYPD on April 30.

The resolution was put forward to the PSC-CUNY Delegate Assembly (DA) with support from dozens of rank and file members of the union, many of whom were present at the encampment. It correctly described Israel's assault on Gaza as a genocide and noted the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions' call for labor unions around the world to take up the cause of the Palestinian people. It also criticized CUNY Chancellor Felix Matos-Rodriguez and City College President Vincent Boudreau for authorizing the NYPD raid on the encampment; and it condemned the university for its investments in companies like Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and Northrop Grumman that provide weapons to Israel.

The resolution also directly called on the university to respond to **the original five demands** of the student encampment, to refrain from any further violence against protesters, and to advocate for the withdrawal of all charges against those arrested at City College. In addition, it committed the union to endorse the encampment's demand that the university agree to full financial transparency and divestment from all Israeli companies and institutions, and urged the union to organize to fight against future repression of students, faculty, or staff for pro-Palestine organizing.

Although the union had previously passed a **resolution In Support of the Palestinian People in 2021**, this one was defeated by a large margin (101 votes against and only 55 in favor) in part, it seems, because it put forward a more aggressive demand for divestment than the 2021 resolution. Nonetheless, dozens of supporters sent emails to delegates in the weeks leading up to the meeting urging them to vote yes, over a hundred members showed up online and in person to support the resolution, and a significant number of delegates passionately argued for it.

Many of these speakers noted the heartbreaking fact that there is not a single university left standing in Gaza, while others rejected the idea that an academic boycott of Israel was an attack upon individual academic freedom, especially when so many Palestinian and Arab academics currently living in Israel and Palestine have little or no academic freedom thanks to the existence of and oppression from the Zionist state of Israel. They also rejected the idea that the union was not the right space for such political activism, arguing instead that we must organize against the ongoing genocide everywhere that we can, including in our workplaces, and take up the call by Palestinian trade unions to force our institutions to cut all ties from Israel and to do all we can to stop arms shipments to Israel.

Other speakers highlighted the hypocrisy of promoting “social justice unionism” only for uncontroversial topics, explaining that unions have a responsibility to stand with oppressed peoples everywhere, not only at home, and not only when it is popular among the membership.

Indeed, our union has the responsibility to educate our members about the history of Palestine and the history of the settler-colonial, apartheid state of Israel, and passing the resolution could have been a step toward that.

In true bureaucratic fashion, the Executive Committee of the union, which had expressed unanimous opposition to the resolution weeks before — and had already crushed discussion of an earlier draft at an emergency DA meeting on May 9 — attempted to limit debate from the start, arguing against a motion to move the resolution up the agenda. This ensured that the resolution was not discussed until almost the very end of the meeting, late in the evening.

In arguments against the resolution, the union leadership said nothing about the destruction in Gaza, ignored the political urgency and legitimacy of the political arguments and the demands that the resolution and its supporters put forward, and argued instead that it was simply too divisive to be passed.

President James Davis was the first to speak against the resolution, arguing that “passing this resolution now would be deeply harmful to the union.” Other members of the EC, including PSC secretary and professor of labor studies Penny Lewis, claimed that passing the resolution would “make it harder to win a good contract,” an argument that is as factually incorrect as it is morally repugnant. The worst, however, were those hypocrites who claimed to have supported the Palestinian cause for decades, but nonetheless said they sided with the Executive Committee and would not support the resolution because it was “not the right time” and because the union was “not the right place” for such discussions.

These arguments of the PSC leadership, however, reveal more than just their position on this particular resolution or issue. In fact, they point to what is a much deeper and more fundamental political problem within the PSC, which is that its leaders overwhelmingly view the union as little more than a service provider and lobbyist for its members’ interests, and seek to contain, limit, and co-opt any type of rank and file organization in order to maintain labor peace and the union’s ties to the New York State Democratic Party establishment. But the union leadership’s decades-long strategy of only fighting for bread and butter demands and lobbying the state for crumbs, as almost anyone at CUNY can tell you, has utterly failed. Not only is the university still vastly underfunded despite decades of supporting Democrats, but real wages for CUNY faculty have decreased by more than 30 percent in the last twenty years. And now, in the face of massive repression, the union leadership has refused to even take a stand and mobilize against an ongoing genocide or for its members and students who were brutally beaten and arrested by the NYPD, claiming that such actions would weaken the union.

As we’ve seen [at the University of California](#), however, organizing for Palestine has only made the union stronger. So strong, in fact, that, thanks to a militant rank and file, it was able to quickly take a strike authorization vote in response to the university’s ruthless repression of students and faculty, a move which the union rightly sees as an issue of worker safety. But the strike at the University of California is also a political strike against the genocide in Gaza, and

as such potentially marks a historic shift toward a more militant and politicized labor movement; one that the PSC should be helping to lead instead of cowardly ignoring and turning away from.

All of this points to widening rifts between the union bureaucracy of the PSC and the increasing number of rank-and-file activists who have grown tired of these betrayals. Indeed, many of the non-voting rank and file members who had turned out to support the resolution were appalled by the vote and the leadership's behavior. As one observer, adjunct professor David Klassen, noted:

“At a time when so many students and workers are taking real risks to end a genocide and fight for real justice under the foundational principle that an injury to one is an injury to all, the union leadership has betrayed international organized labor by crossing the global picket line.”

But it is these fellow rank and file workers, not the leadership, who have been organizing for Palestine and a strike-ready union for years, and it is these rank and file members who have the power to change our union, a fact which underscores the ongoing importance of worker self-organization at CUNY and in unions and universities everywhere. At the CUNY encampment in late April, close to two hundred **PSC-CUNY members gathered in an open assembly** to debate how the union could take action to stand with the encampment and with the people of Gaza. Out of that debate came the first ever successful **PSC CUNY sick-out on May Day** in defiance of the **anti-union Taylor Law**, which claims that such actions are illegal. Indeed, that assembly managed in one night to organize more true labor power than the union leadership has in years. Imagine what an even bigger assembly of thousands of rank and file PSC-CUNY members could accomplish for Gaza, for our university, and for our contract struggle when untethered from the bureaucratic limitations of the leadership and its ties to the state and the Democratic Party.

It is clear that the leadership of the PSC has a very different vision for the union than many of the rank and file. If we wish to build a truly fighting union capable of taking real action in defense of our members and of working and oppressed people everywhere, we will have to take our union into our own hands, and build the kind of power and true democratic organization that can educate and activate all the members of our union to take action for Palestine, for a contract with real raises, and build the forces to fight for a free, fully funded CUNY.

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