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Workers celebrate May Day with gazes fixed on Gaza



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Bhairavi Desai, president of the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, spoke about the ongoing conflict in the Gaza Strip at a May Day rally in Foley Square. Workers from various unions gathered at the square and then marched uptown.

ALEX CHAN



Posted Thursday, May 2, 2024 8:20 pm

BY DUNCAN FREEMAN

Since students at Columbia University set up an encampment at their Morningside Heights campus last month to demand that the school sever its financial ties with Israel, hundreds of students at dozens of campuses across the country have followed suit.

Their vigor has also inspired union members in the city, many of whom have been agitating and holding heated debates (<https://www.thechiefleader.com/stories/unions-have-varied-responses-to-israel-hamas-war,51306?>) about the role their organizations should play since the Hamas-led attack into Israel Oct. 7.

On Wednesday, union members and officials most opposed to the war in Gaza spilled into the streets, gathering more than 6,000 strong in Foley Square to dedicate their May Day celebrations to Palestinians.

Many who attended the rally wore keffiyehs — traditional headdresses that are symbols of Palestinian nationalism — waved Palestinian flags and carried signs demanding a cease-fire. They were joined by an assortment of Palestinian, Jewish and left-wing groups that have been a staple at protests in support of Palestinians.

The United Auto Workers, which represents workers at Columbia, NYU and The New School, many who have participated in encampments, had an outsized presence at the rally and leaders of at least two UAW locals spoke at the gathering.

But the crowd included workers from all corners of New York’s labor movement: municipal retirees, leaders from the New York Taxi Workers Alliance as well as rank-and-file members of District Council 37, the Transport Workers Union Local 100, Starbucks Workers United and the Professional Staff Congress. There were no organized counter-protests at the event.

‘We will not shut our mouths’

Speakers focused on the ongoing war in Gaza, which has already claimed more than 34,000 lives, and on the NYPD’s actions on the Columbia campus and at City College Tuesday evening that resulted in the arrests of scores of pro-Palestinian students who were occupying spaces on campus.

“The fight of the Palestinian struggle for many of us, it is what taught us to become activists, it is what taught us to believe in courage, it is what taught us to believe in freedom,” Bhairavi Desai, the longtime president of the taxi union said at the rally.

“There are many of us who in our entire lives have waited for Palestine to be free. We will remain, we will not close our eyes, we will not shut our mouths, we will not put down our fists, we will not continue life as usual because this genocide is not normal.”

On the rally’s edge, two middle-aged members of TWU Local 100 who were sporting jackets with the union’s insignia, said they thought it was necessary for city workers to stand up for the students who were arrested. “All New York City unions should be supporting student protestors who were attacked by the police,” said one of the duo, a bus operator in Brooklyn who declined to provide his name.

Some with PSC hold sick-out

CUNY faculty and other PSC members at the rally participated in a wildcat “sick-out” approved by more than 250 members of the union. An internal group calling itself “CUNY On Strike” helped organize the action, which would likely be found to violate New York State labor law, that prohibits public employees from engaging in work stoppages.

“We organized this sick-out not only because we refuse to condone ‘business as usual’ at our university but also because now is the moment to bring the power of U.S labor — including academic labor — to the struggle for Palestine,” the group wrote in a statement posted on social media.

Several PSC members declined to speak with The Chief at the rally because of legal fears, but one organizer estimated that around 50 members of the union were present at the rally, while others provided emotional and some legal support for the hundreds of students who had been arrested the night prior at City College.

The PSC, whose delegate Assembly voted in December in support of a cease-fire, disavowed the sick out, noting in a statement that the action is illegal and could result in the union being fined or participants being jailed.

The PSC, though, condemned the NYPD’s Tuesday night raid of the student encampment at City College. “NYPD actions at the campus, even before the announced deadline for students to clear the encampment, were escalatory and disproportionate to any threat that the encampment posed,” the union said in a May 1 statement.

The NYPD and Mayor Eric Adams have defended the department’s actions, blaming the unrest at Columbia and elsewhere in the city on outside agitators and saying that police officers exercised restraint when clearing out protestors.

Divestment a goal for some

A small group of DC 37 members gathered near the center of the Foley Square rally holding a “NYC City Workers For Palestine” banner that was also used at a smaller protest of municipal workers (<https://www.thechiefleader.com/stories/psc-calls-for-gaza-cease-fire,51618?>) in December. A Parks Department worker and member of DC 37 Local 375, who gave only his first name, Marshall, said he felt a responsibility to be at the rally because his pension, and the pensions of tens of thousands of other city workers, are invested in Israeli bonds and companies that provide weapons to that country.

“My retirement depending on the murder of children in Gaza does not sit well with me,” said Marshall, who declined to provide his last name due to fears of retaliation from his union or employer. He added that efforts to move divestment resolutions through his local union have been “stonewalled” by leadership. He said he hoped that a focus on university investments in Israel would renew efforts toward divestment.

A spokesperson for City Comptroller Brad Lander said that the city’ pension system is not invested in Israeli bonds or other sovereign bonds, but did not address claims about investments in Israeli companies or respond to workers’ divestment demands.

Following the rally, attendees left the square, marched west on Chambers Street and up Church Street, shepherded along the route by a few dozen police officers, NYPD drones and helicopters overhead.

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