

How Palestine Led My Coworkers and Me to Unionize

BY

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When my coworkers and I were disciplined for wearing pro-Palestine buttons to work, we realized that our supposedly progressive management wasn't enough to protect our basic rights and freedoms on the job. We needed a union.

After October 7, 2023, like many other queer, leftist baristas around the country, I began wearing a "Free Palestine" pin to work. It was a small gesture of solidarity with the besieged people of Gaza, but what other kind of gesture was there for an average person like me to make?

I wasn't the only one seeking such gestures. As the horrors of Israel's assault on Gaza became clear, throngs of new customers flooded my location of Philz Coffee and its nearly eighty other stores, mostly in California, as they responded to the call for a Starbucks boycott for its lawsuit against its own pro-Palestine union. Philz Coffee was started by Phil Jaber, who immigrated from Palestine and contributed to the third-wave coffee movement with his pour-over techniques before stepping down from leadership in 2021.

Since its founding in 2003, Philz has fostered a culture of acceptance and advocacy, often displaying LGBTQ and Black Lives Matter flags in stores. I specifically applied to work at my local Philz because I believed I would be safe and accepted as transgender in my workplace. Still, like any other barista, I was underpaid and overworked.

While experiencing a big rush of customers at work, at least one of my coworkers would usually get a few laughs by suggesting we should unionize. We all knew we were being exploited and pushed beyond our limits, but this seemed to be the expected state of things. While I had held several research and organizing positions for unions in my own professional and academic history, I had little hope that we could make tangible change to our working conditions by organizing.

After my coworker reached out to human resources at Philz Coffee asking for a public statement condemning the genocide in Gaza, not only were they dismissed, but Philz Coffee revealed itself to be an adversary rather than ally of the cause of justice for Palestine. That rejection would eventually lead to an unexpected development: unionization at Philz.

Take Off the Pin or Go Home

On December 21, 2023, I walked into my 6:30 a.m. shift and was immediately pulled aside by my manager. He told me to take off my “Free Palestine” pin for my own safety. I asked if there was any written rule that could justify this demand. He replied no, but said that I either had to take off the pin or go home. I was clocked in for fourteen minutes before I was sent home.

I was enraged as I left work. But as the hours went on, I received calls and texts from my coworkers who put on their own “Free Palestine” pins at work. Of the nine people scheduled to work that day, five of us wore Free Palestine pins, were instructed to take them off, refused, and were sent home.

In the months prior, I had been attending the Berkeley City Council meetings with some coworkers in an effort to support a resolution calling for a cease-fire in Gaza, which resulted in us being looped into a group chat on Signal of enthusiastic organizers in Berkeley. My coworkers and I immediately told our story to the other organizers on this group chat, who in turn shared it on their social media platforms. Before noon, some of the most dedicated activists in the Berkeley community had rallied to our cause – including a California State Senate candidate, Jovanka Beckles, who posted about our story that very day. Community members left bad reviews on Yelp, made phone calls, and even showed up in person at our store seeking to show support.

Most stunningly, all of my coworkers expressed only love and support for the difficult decision we each faced that day. Those of us who wore pins empathized with our coworkers who could not take the financial risk of losing expected wages, and those who stayed gave us hugs and encouragement as we were sent away, despite the chaos of the understaffed shop we were leaving them. No matter what

choice each of us made, we were all enraged at Philz Coffee for putting any of us in that terrible position.

Over the next month, nine different baristas would be sent home across twelve different shifts, accumulating over thirty-five hours of lost wages due to an unwritten rule prohibiting “Free Palestine” pins in the workplace. We started group chats, shared our story with customers, spoke to news outlets, and defended each other to corporate. A community-led GoFundMe account raised over a thousand dollars to compensate for our lost wages. At the end of January, Philz corporate finally compromised with us and decided we were allowed to wear pins that displayed the Palestinian flag but did not contain the words “Free Palestine.” We relented, many of us having lost more hours than we could afford. But none of us were ready to give up.

One evening in early February, almost the entire staff of our shop, about twelve of us, gathered in my small living room to discuss our response to the events of the previous month. I took all of the lessons I had learned from studying labor history in school and working for unions and shared them with my coworkers. We considered filing charges claiming wage theft for management’s unjust sending us home and had even been approached by lawyers willing to support us. Yet we didn’t feel this would satisfy the frustration felt by the entire staff, not just those who were sent home, and ultimately would not remedy the company’s abuse of power. We wondered: Could our energies be better directed toward collective organizing?

We imagined not only a workplace that allowed us to openly support a free Palestine, but also one that paid us a livable wage, provided reasonable benefits, properly staffed each shift, and safeguarded us in criticizing corporate leadership. We wanted to unionize, and we wanted to do it independently.

The entire staff of Philz Coffee in Berkeley is particularly young, the oldest of us being twenty-six. We researched what affiliating with an established union would look like compared to an independent effort. We understood the benefits of resources and legal representation that could come with an established union, but we also saw a bureaucratic institution that sparked skepticism in our shared youthful, leftist anger. We had received tremendous community support through our conflicts at work and felt confident in our united motivation to make this a member-led effort. That night, every person in attendance signed a pledge card in agreement to be represented by the independent union, Philz Coffee United.

On February 20, 2024, we officially filed with the National Labor Relations Board, turning in authorization cards showing 83 percent support for the union. But in the coming weeks, chaos ensued at our store at the hands of management — as it does for so many workers after announcing their intention to unionize.

The Boss Pushback

Our manager pulled people into one-on-one meetings, illegally threatening that the company would withhold the upcoming mandatory \$20 minimum wage increase for fast food restaurants in California. Posters were pinned to our news board displaying coercive and false information about unions and our upcoming election. A barrage of corporate employees, including the CEO, showed up at our store, attempting to manipulate our votes. An email was even sent out just six days before our election to each employee at our store, stating that the company had not decided whether or not to renew its lease at our location, and they just wanted to let us know.

We were understaffed and overworked every day. Yet none of this fazed us. We held weekly meetings, formed committees, developed a social media presence, and even held bake sales outside our store to share our story and raise funds. We struggled to keep our union-related conversations at work to a minimum and relied heavily on texts, group chats, calls, and FaceTimes to discuss each detail of our organizing.

On March 19, 100 percent of eligible employees — sixteen of us — at Philz Coffee in Berkeley showed up to vote for the in-person NLRB election, and every single one voted “yes.”

This victory was beautiful. However, soon after our election, the storm of finals season crashed into our staff, over half of whom were students, including myself. The time and energy available to us for this effort shrunk, and without legal representation or dedicated resources for negotiation efforts, we ended up stalling our own union’s progress. We are now being forced to reckon with our decision to unionize independently, which many encouraged us to do, given our shop and company size and glowing community support. The members of our union have diverse skills and experiences, but we are still just early-twenty-somethings trying to find our place in this world. Between school, work, rent, food, health care, and pleasure, our priorities and capacities are splintered, and truthfully, I am not sure what the future holds for Philz Coffee United.

From Palestine to a Union

Still, we pulled off a successful unionization, which begs several questions: Why would baristas in Berkeley, California, risk their financial security to support those being oppressed on the other side of

the world? How did the same passion that fostered a global call for a cease-fire in Gaza produced a successful coffee shop unionization? How does the prohibition of wearing “Free Palestine” pins in the workplace and the exploitation of employees exhibit the same system of power that is actively devastating Palestinians in Gaza?

I can hold the truth that I am incredibly privileged as a white American living in California while Palestinians are massacred in Gaza and still recognize that my own suffering is linked to the suffering of Gazans through capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, and racism. These are the terms that echoed in each conversation I had with my coworkers during those months.

This solidarity allows us to hold the complicated truths of hierarchical levels of suffering and privilege while still recognizing and naming its common source. But it is ultimately liberation that is the magnetic force drawing all members of oppressed communities together. We see one another’s pain. We see one another’s fight.

I am unsure if history will deem the efforts of Philz Coffee United successful, given the struggles we have faced in rallying ourselves toward negotiations. Perhaps the members of Philz Coffee United will come back together with an even greater force, conduct fierce negotiations, and rally other stores to join. Alternatively, it is possible that, as early-twenty-somethings, this effort will dissolve as we all work toward different life goals.

Regardless, this experience transformed each of us into activists and organizers with concrete understandings of labor rights and the unionizing process. While I deeply long to see Philz Coffee United succeed, I understand that the larger labor movement is a marathon, not a sprint. We have each gained skills and knowledge that we will bring with us into our future work environments. And our commitment to achieving a free Palestine is as strong as ever.

CONTRIBUTORS

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