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Within Local 375, members are silenced, booted from meetings

Union's Troman dismissive of Gaza concerns, members say



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Members pushing for a cease-fire resolution in Local 375 are affiliated with the City Workers for Palestine group. The local's members say that leadership has stifled their attempts to introduce a resolution calling for a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip, going so far as to remove members from meetings for asking questions about the topic.

DUNCAN FREEMAN/THE CHIEF

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BY DUNCAN FREEMAN

The Civil Service Technical Guild's May general membership meeting degenerated into a cacophonous argument when two rank-and-file members were muted and then kicked out of the virtual meeting after trying to ask questions of a representative from the New York City Employees' Retirement System.

The representative was there to speak with members of District Council 37's Local 375 about the changes to the Tier 6 retirement plan included in this year's state budget and answer general questions from members about pensions. But when Louisa Chang, a Local 375 member who works as a city planner, attempted to ask the rep a question about divesting from the pension system's investments in Israeli bonds and companies during a question-and-answer session, she was muted by the meeting's chair at the direction of Mike Troman, Local 375's president, according to several union members who were present.

The members said a livid Troman screamed "mute her" multiple times as Chang spoke. When Chang unmuted her mic and attempted to finish her question she was removed from the meeting. Minutes later, another union member, Emily Sun, was also muted by the chair and eventually removed after asking about how decisions on pension investments are made.

Sun and Chang are part of a group of rank-and-file members of Local 375 who have been trying to advance a motion within the union calling for a cease-fire in the Gaza Strip and for the city's pension funds to divest from Israeli bonds or military companies. The local represents more than 5,000 engineers, architects, planners and scientists.

After Chang was kicked out, Sun said, many members who weren't a part of the group pushing for a resolution spoke up in her defense, including by asking why she wasn't allowed to finish her question, imploring Troman to let her conclude and writing messages of support in the communal Zoom chat insisting that the question was on-topic.

"People are going to fall on very different sides of the issue of divestment, on the issue of cease-fire." Sun said. "But there are many folks within the local who want to commit to having that transparent dialogue and have some kind of commitment to democracy where we can get to a point where a vote could potentially be held."

"At the very least," Sun continued, "people should be able to say what they want to say, and I think that there's an understanding that the way the local president has controlled these meetings has been very frustrating and difficult for folks across the local to tolerate."

Part of a pattern

Members of the group, who are involved with the cross-union coalition City Workers for Palestine (<https://www.thechiefleader.com/stories/psc-calls-for-gaza-cease-fire,51618?>), have been circulating a petition (<https://actionnetwork.org/petitions/dc-37-rank-and-file-demand-nycers-divest-from-israeli-securities/>) among DC37 members that calls on NYCERS to divest from what they say are millions of dollars in Israeli

securities. They say that Troman's actions in the general membership meeting in May were only the latest in a months-long pattern of stifling members' ability to propose motions regarding a cease-fire or divestment.

Since one Local 375 member brought a motion calling for a cease-fire in an internal delegates assembly meeting in February, Troman has used various tactics to prevent members from bringing motions about the topic, members said.

"Delegates have been working to put forward a cease-fire motion in the local for almost four months," said Jack Lundquist, a Local 375 member and delegate who made the initial motion at the February meeting. "Every time we've tried to bring forward a motion we've lost quorum."

The February motion was debated but never put to a vote because of a lack of quorum. At the delegate assembly the following month, Lundquist said that Troman "filibustered," for over an hour. By the time the meeting got to the section where motions could be brought, so many delegates had left that there was no longer a quorum.

Prior to the April delegates meeting, Troman required all members who wanted to attend to submit personal information, including home addresses, to union leadership beforehand, demands that significantly reduced the number of delegates at the meeting. One delegate, Reyna Wang, wasn't allowed to attend after submitting her information. Wang said that given Troman's tactics she wasn't surprised that he silenced Chang and Sun.

"It's one thing to say that this isn't the best forum to ask questions about investments, but it's another thing to completely berate these people and shut them down," Wang said. "A lot of people were pretty disturbed by the behavior and a lot of people who hadn't seen it before were very surprised by it."

Troman did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Other calls for ceasefire

Arthur Schwartz, a longtime union lawyer who's worked on cases concerning Local 375 in the past, said that he's hearing of more instances of leaders of DC37 locals muting members in virtual meetings or removing them altogether. "Unless somebody is speaking out of order or being unruly you can't [remove someone]," he said. "If this was an in-person meeting you couldn't do that without getting security."

Members of other DC 37 locals have had far less trouble proposing cease-fire resolutions. Isaac Kirk-Davidoff, a member of Local 371 who works in the Parks Department, made a motion calling for a cease-fire in January. It was quickly voted on without disruption.

Kirk-Davidoff said he was surprised when the motion came up for a vote because he expected that leadership would block it entirely, as has occurred in Local 375.

"We brought a motion, leadership opposed it, it was voted down narrowly and most people didn't vote," he said. "The president dealt with it straightforwardly."

Members of the social work chapter of Local 768 also voted to enact a cease-fire resolution late last year without issue. That resolution was later rescinded however.

And in March, the international executive board of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the parent union of DC 37 and its locals, passed a resolution calling for an "immediate negotiated cease-fire," and the "release of all hostages." It's one of several international unions, including the United Auto Workers, to call for a cease-fire.

Members of Local 375 who have been pushing for a similar resolution say that organizing within their union around the issue has led to more members becoming engaged.

"It's brought a whole new level of rank-and-file engagement and grassroots pressure against local leadership," said Chang, the first Local 375 member to be kicked out of the general union meeting. "It's something that hasn't really been seen in a while, that kind of activation around labor organizing, and I think Palestine was that spark."

Lundquist, who proposed the initial cease-fire motion in February, said that the Gaza conflict "is mobilizing members in a way that I haven't seen in my time and it's taking place in the context of an upsurge in interest in local union activity."

Troman's resistance, he said, "has not deterred members passionate about this issue from organizing. It's just made folks realize just how much work we have to do."

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