

NEWS | EDUCATION & YOUTH

US Teachers Pushed Their Union to Divest From Israel. What Happened?

A divestment push backed by Palestinian educators came under debate at the American Federation of Teachers convention.

By Marianne Dhenin, TRUTHOUT
July 23, 2024



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Struggle and Solidarity: Writing Toward Palestinian Liberation

As the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) convention kicked off in Houston, Texas, this week, the worsening humanitarian situation in Gaza was top of mind for many in attendance.

“We’re going to show up at [the] convention and do everything we can to organize people around doing something about the genocide,” Ted Cooper, executive vice president of AFT-Oregon, told *Truthout* as he was preparing to travel to Houston last week.

Like Cooper, delegates from union locals nationwide are leading political education and organizing efforts at the convention and calling for AFT, their locals and their pension funds to divest from State of Israel bonds and companies implicated in Israel’s assault on Gaza and its decades-long occupation of Palestine. In doing so, they’ve come up against some of the union’s leadership, who have instead put forth a resolution of their own: one that calls

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health care professionals, at more than 3,000 local affiliates. For the last several years, the union has held State of Israel Bonds in its investment portfolio, valued at a high of \$300,000 from 2013 to 2016. It last purchased a State of Israel Bond in 2017. On its most recent available financial statements, the union held a single State of Israel Bond valued at \$150,000. That bond matured in September 2023, and AFT told *Truthout* it has not purchased new State of Israel Bonds since. Its largest local, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), has held a pair of the bonds worth a combined \$165,000 for over two decades. Nationwide, union locals and pension funds for union-affiliated educators and public service employees hold tens of millions in State of Israel bonds and in the stock of companies whose products and services enable Israel to continue its occupation and its genocide in Gaza.

The Development Corporation for Israel sells State of Israel bonds to raise foreign capital for the Israeli treasury. Bondholders maintain no oversight of how funds are

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Norway Pension Fund Divests From Caterpillar, Whose Bulldozers Are Used by IDF

Members of the AFT have expressed horror in response to what they see as the union's financial support for Israel's ongoing assault on Gaza, which has leveled schools, universities and health care facilities across the Strip. Around 80 percent of schools in Gaza now require major rehabilitation or total reconstruction, according to a preliminary school damage assessment released by the Occupied Palestinian Territory Education Cluster, an entity led by UNICEF and Save the Children. More than 600,000 Palestinian children are being deprived of their right to education as attacks on the enclave continue,

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“We view this very much as the beginning of a campaign and the kind of first step in the political education that needs to happen within AFT on this issue of Israel-Palestine.”

These harrowing data points are cited in one of two proposed resolutions calling for the AFT to redeem its holdings in State of Israel bonds and cease purchasing new bonds. Additionally, the Berkeley Federation of Teachers (BFT) proposed a divestment resolution with a broader scope, which, if passed, would direct AFT to call on teachers’ pension fund managers to divest from companies that facilitate and enable human rights violations, military occupations, apartheid or genocide. The AFT’s International Relations Committee reviewed the resolutions at the convention on July 22. All three divestment-related resolutions were quashed in committee. Sources familiar with the proceedings, who

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organizing as AFT for Palestine last December. “We’re hearing from our colleagues, from educators in Palestine, telling us how horrific it is.... Their conditions of life make their work impossible,” said Sherena Razek, former president of the Graduate Labor Organization at Brown University and a coalition member. “There are educators in Palestine who are asking us, as educators, as their peers, to be in solidarity with them and to intervene in the mechanisms that are enabling that genocide — and divestment is the answer.”

After collaborating on the resolution’s text, organizers at four locals passed parallel resolutions and submitted them for consideration at the national convention. Support Staff United at the University of Vermont Medical Center, where 20-year-old Palestinian American Hisham Awartani was treated after he was shot in a possible hate crime in Burlington in November 2023, was among the union locals that submitted the resolution. The submissions were reviewed at the convention as a single consolidated proposed resolution. AFT-Oregon

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with anti-BDS laws on the books. “Our proposal, if it’s passed, will empower locals in their state to try to organize around whatever type of pension system they have, or whatever kind of retirement system they have and try to work within the landscape of their state,” Pritchett told *Truthout* ahead of the convention.

The resolution sought to end pension fund investments in companies such as the Denver, Colorado-based Palantir Technologies, which supplies artificial intelligence-powered targeting capabilities to Israel’s military and intelligence agencies. When the proposal was put to a vote of BFT membership earlier this year, Pritchett said it garnered overwhelming support. “The members are crystal clear that they do not want to retire off of profits earned from the genocide of Palestinians.”

Following the announcement of proposed resolutions ahead of this week’s convention, the General Union of Palestinian Teachers published an open letter on its Facebook page on July 10, thanking the AFT locals for

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in that.” The Right to Education Campaign at Birzeit University published a similar statement on July 21.

“As educators, as K-12 teachers, as health care workers, as professors, we need to be at the forefront of this fight for justice in Palestine.”

When the AFT’s International Relations Committee convened on July 22, the proposed divestment-related resolutions faced a well-organized opposition. Delegates on the AFT’s so-called Progressive Caucus spoke in favor of proposed Resolution 30: for the union to release a statement calling for “lasting peace, security, and self-determination for Israel and Palestine.” The statement backs a two-state solution and asserts that Israel’s “cause of war — self-defense [– is] just.” That resolution passed out of committee and will now go to the floor for a vote

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for procedural reasons because it was deemed to cover issues similar to those of Resolution 30 despite its significant substantive differences.

Leadership figures in the UFT and AFT and members of the Progressive Caucus have long been criticized for strengthening the union's ties with Israel. Former UFT and now AFT President Randi Weingarten has a personal record of aligning with liberal Zionist groups, including serving on the board at J Street, a pro-Israel policy organization. She is also a leading voice within the Jewish Labor Committee, which has long opposed BDS. On July 16, Weingarten took to the social media site X to back Resolution 30.

Organizers with AFT for Palestine also faced a hostile media climate heading into the convention this week. When Daniel Segal, former president of the Claremont Colleges chapter of the American Association of University Professionals (AAUP) and a member of the state coordinating committee of Jewish Voice for Peace in

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the book of proposed resolutions. Publications, including *The Jerusalem Post* and *The New York Post*, were quick to lob accusations of antisemitism at organizers and union leadership. Around the same time, executive council members began receiving thousands of intimidating e-mails demanding that they condemn the resolutions.

Segal told *Truthout* that these campaigns perpetuate a dangerous conflation, equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism. “It’s not anti-Jewish to say that there should not be a state in which you have 12 million people under the rule of the state, and all of those who are Palestinian have less rights, or no rights, no citizenship, as compared to the Jewish citizens,” he said.

While this year’s proposed divestment resolutions were quashed in committee, organizers remain committed to pursuing their aims. They see the resolutions and this year’s convention as part of a longer process. “We view this very much as the beginning of a campaign and the kind of first step in the political education that needs to

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until we get this done,” said Miller. “As educators, as K-12 teachers, as health care workers, as professors, we need to be at the forefront of this fight for justice in Palestine.”

Note: This article has been updated to clarify that AFT’s last remaining State of Israel bond matured in 2023, and AFT says it has not purchased new State of Israel bonds since.

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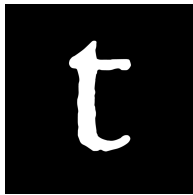
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MARIANNE DHENIN

Marianne Dhenin is a *YES! Media* contributing writer. She covers social and environmental justice and politics.

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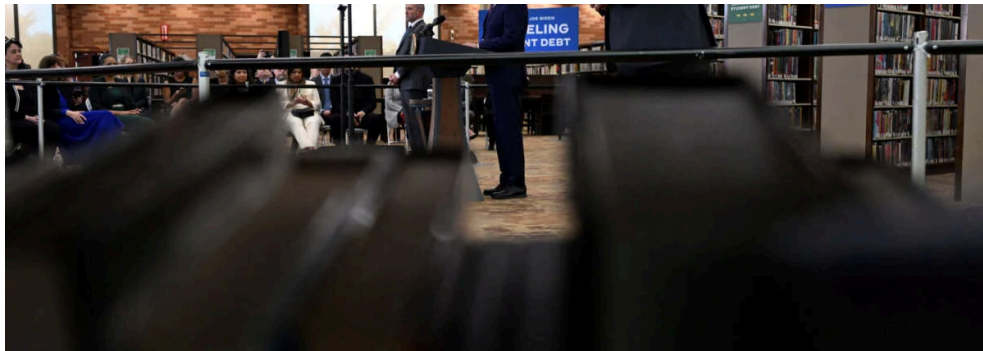
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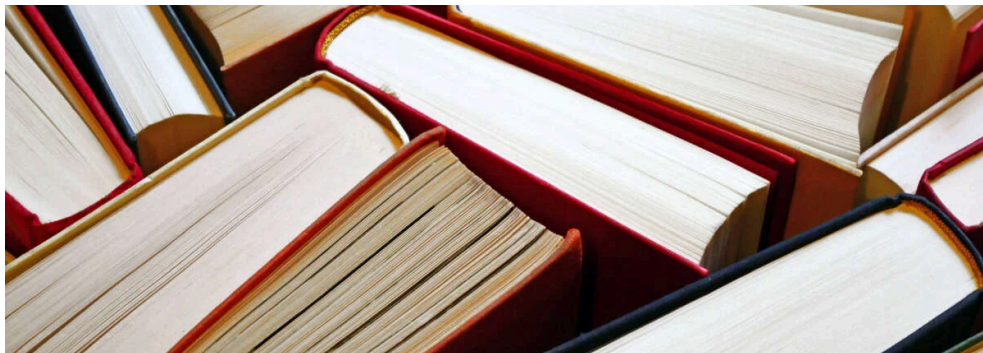
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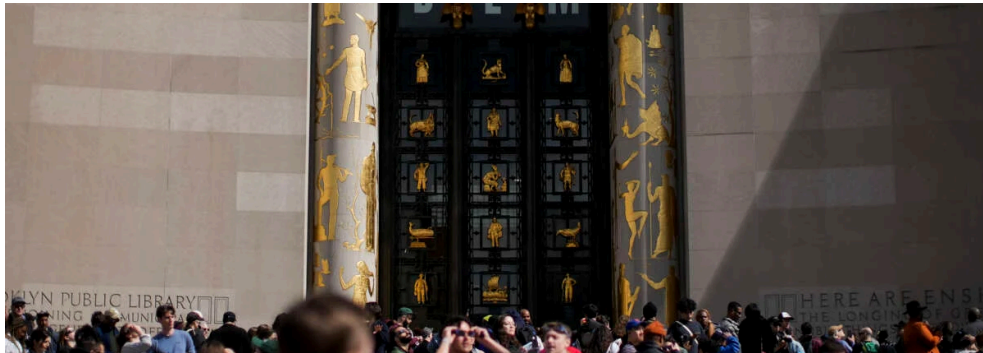
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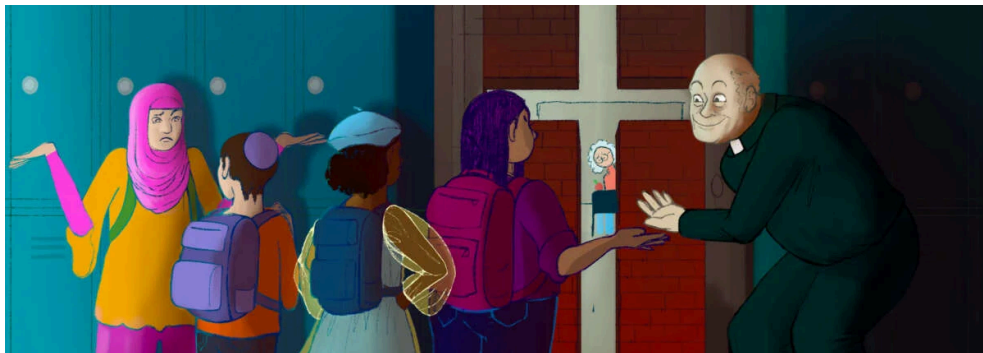
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