

Workers demand that Planned Parenthood divest, but is the organization listening?

According to internal documents obtained by Prism, the health care organization's leaders were instructed to deny the organization's link to the arms manufacturer Raytheon. More broadly, pro-Palestine employees say they experience retaliation for their views



by Nicole Froio
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Designed by Lara Witt

More than 1,000 patients, volunteers, organizers, doulas, clinic escorts, health care providers, donors, supporters, and workers have signed an [open letter](#) calling on Planned Parenthood Federation of America

(PPFA) to immediately divest from the arms manufacturer Raytheon.

The letter, published June 3, is the result of an exclusive [Prism exposé](#) published May 29 that revealed PPFA's contract with Raytheon for cybersecurity services. The letter also demands that "Planned Parenthood's leadership provide its workers across the federation with full transparency about its business dealings with cybersecurity companies."

Internally and externally, PPFA leadership denies having a relationship with the arms manufacturer. However, documents viewed by Prism tell a different story.

Public denial

A June 5 email from PPFA Vice President of Communications Angela Vasquez-Giroux denies that PPFA has a current relationship with Raytheon, instructing workers speaking to donors, supporters, or partners to point to "expert opinions in [Prism's] story that also state that large complex organizations require complex security systems." An internal memo viewed by Prism provides insight into PPFA's primary concern regarding the revelation that the multimillion-dollar nonprofit contracts with an arms manufacturer: funders. The memo features talking points for PPFA leadership aimed at funders concerned by the reporting.

As part of the talking points, PPFA leadership admits to a past relationship with Raytheon but denies that the weapons manufacturer currently provides cybersecurity services to Planned Parenthood.

In a statement to Prism, a spokesperson for PPFA said the organization values "the importance and the sensitivity" of its staff, donor, and patient data and that PPFA will protect that data "no matter what."

"Given the sheer amount of threats that PPFA faces, public information about our vendors — including security vendors—makes them a focus of attacks by bad actors in their efforts to access private health information and other sensitive data," the statement continued. "Naming vendors provides a blueprint for bad actors seeking to access sensitive information. Planned Parenthood has already been subject to numerous ransomware attacks, which is why we need this level of protection. Prism's reporting will undoubtedly put patients, health center staff, and PPFA's national office staff at risk."

The organization also reiterated that because of its size and the nature of its work, PPFA's security needs are "fairly complex."

"First and foremost, we must ensure any cybersecurity vendor we work with meets our complex security needs," the statement reads. "It is not feasible to find a company that can meet those needs and that does not

do work or have clients that may be objectionable.”

As recently as May 31, an internal page entitled “Managed Security Services Provider” on PPFA’s Intranet cited Raytheon as the organization’s cybersecurity provider. By June 5, the provider was changed to Nightwing.

Nightwing was the cybersecurity and intelligence division of Raytheon, which was [sold in late 2023](#) to private equity firm Blackstone. Though Nightwing was a part of Raytheon, it now operates as a standalone cybersecurity business. Despite the change in name, Prism confirmed through tax records and internal corporate documents with Raytheon officials that PPFA’s original contract for cybersecurity services was signed with Raytheon directly.

Prism also viewed documents that outline the renewal of a three-year contract between Planned Parenthood and Raytheon starting in 2021, stating: “In February 2018, the PPFA Information Security team solicited Requests for Proposal (RFP) from 25 MSSP vendors, and 15 vendors submitted proposals. PPFA ultimately chose Raytheon as the vendor due to their ability to meet all of our service needs across the Planned Parenthood Family. In November 2021, PPFA InfoSec renewed their contract with Raytheon for 3 years.”

Though it is unclear how long PPFA has contracted with Raytheon overall, Prism confirmed that Raytheon’s cybersecurity division, now known as Nightwing, has provided Planned Parenthood’s cybersecurity services for at least the last five years.

A spokesperson for Nightwing told Prism in a statement that to “protect the integrity” of client relationships and the solutions the company provides, the company adheres “to a policy of not discussing any customer-related matters, including the confirmation or denial of any affiliations.”



The statement was written in complete secrecy, absent of the usual reviews. The initial statement by PPFA in October was already lacking, but then to come out and repeat verbatim Zionist talking points was a bridge too far.

— JANE

In a more recent development, Prism viewed internal documents from PPFA showing that the organization plans to contract with IBM for its cybersecurity needs after its contract with Nightwing ends this year.

According to Who Profits, an independent research center that exposes business ties to Israel, [IBM operates](#) the central database and computer system for the Population and Immigration Authority, an Israeli government agency previously known as the Population, Immigration, and Borders Authority (PIBA). Since 2019, IBM has stored the Israeli authorities' system's data, which is used to control and surveil the borders of the occupation and monitor the entry and exit of Palestinians. A subsidiary of IBM, Red Hat Inc., also “works extensively with the Israeli military,” providing storage data centers to multiple units of the Israeli military, [according to Who Profits](#).

“It is misleading at the very least to say that there is no relationship [between PPFA and Raytheon],” said Jane, a PPFA worker in the national office who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retribution. “They are transitioning out of their relationship not because they decided to partner with someone that aligns with their mission, but because their needs were not being met by Raytheon.”

PPFA has dozens of regional affiliates nationwide, covering specific cities, like Planned Parenthood Los Angeles, or entire regions, like Planned Parenthood South Atlantic, which spans 14 locations across North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. While regional affiliates largely operate as their own autonomous organizations, affiliate workers and those in the national office agree: Leadership in the national office sets the tone on political issues, and affiliates must fall in line. PPFA's stance on Palestine is a prime example. Notably, some Planned Parenthood affiliate unions have publicly called for a ceasefire, but no affiliates have spoken out about the genocide.

PPFA's contract with Raytheon is also a prime example of the national office's power to unilaterally make decisions without consulting affiliates who are impacted—and in this particular case, implicated—by its decision-making. As the sexual and reproductive health, rights, and justice movements continue to publicly grapple with PPFA's ties to an arms manufacturer, questions loom about whether it's even possible for a large organization with such unique cybersecurity needs to contract with a company that is not somehow connected to the military-industrial complex. There are no easy answers, but the workers behind the open letter still demand that PPFA divest, arguing that the organization should be transparent about its contracting practices.

“What is the criteria to choose a company to work with, and how is [diversity, equity, and inclusion] embedded in those decisions, if it even is?” said Jessica, another PPFA worker in the national office who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retribution. “Because right now, it seems there is no equity being taken into account with this decision ... What boxes does a company need to check off so that it can be a contractual partner with Planned Parenthood right now? We don't know if that includes not working with companies that harm communities we work with; I don't know if it includes anything to do with protecting immigrants and

their privacy and data from companies complicit in the war machine and the military-industrial complex and the militarization of the border.”

Hostility and retaliation

The open letter sent to PPFA leadership earlier this month is the second letter organized by supporters, donors, workers, and doulas that, among other demands, pushes the organization to support a ceasefire in Gaza.

In December 2023, [a letter](#) with nearly 500 signatures circulated online in response to a statement published by PPFA characterizing Israel’s genocide of Palestinians as “violence in Israel and Gaza.” The statement was widely criticized by activists and organizers outside of PPFA and its many affiliates.

“The statement was written in complete secrecy, absent of the usual reviews,” Jane said. “The [initial statement](#) by PPFA in October was already lacking, but then to come out and repeat verbatim Zionist talking points was a bridge too far.”

The December letter signed by more than 490 PPFA union members, current and former employees, and Planned Parenthood supporters and donors called on PPFA to oppose Israel’s apartheid and genocide against Palestinians and stand by its own assertion that reproductive and maternal health care is a human right.

Individuals who signed on to either of the open letters directed at PPFA were kept anonymous because, among pro-Palestine workers in both the national office and local Planned Parenthood affiliates, there is widespread fear of retaliation. According to Marina, a woman of color who served on the board of an affiliate Planned Parenthood partner for years, some unionizing efforts by Planned Parenthood workers were driven by the organization’s handling of Palestine. National and affiliate workers also say that leadership behaves with hostility toward openly pro-Palestine employees and retaliates against staff for their beliefs.



In my opinion, reproductive justice movements and actors need to keep in mind the main root cause of reproductive injustice of Palestinian women in Palestine, and most devastatingly so for those in Gaza today, and that is the Israeli occupation and apartheid policies imposed upon them.

— AMMAL AWADALLAH

Marina told Prism that she never experienced any problems with affiliate leadership until an email exchange in which she questioned the organization’s position on Palestine. In the email to affiliate leadership, Marina emphasized the lack of maternal health care in Gaza and highlighted that donors and supporters of Planned Parenthood, as well as communities of color that use Planned Parenthood’s services, were struggling with the organization’s position on Gaza. As a board member, Marina wanted to know what the organization planned to do about these issues.

Marina also supported a fellow board member who brought up Palestine during a meeting. The exchange seemed to go over well, but afterward, Marina was asked to meet with board leadership. During the meeting, Marina alleges she was reprimanded for being “disrespectful.” She resigned from the board one week later.

Marina told Prism there is a “racial element” in the organization’s treatment of women of color like her, who are primarily the ones speaking out about Palestine.

“You’ve done all this work in DEI and engaged a board that is more diverse. But you clearly just want diverse members, not diverse perspectives. There’s no trust,” Marina said.

During her time as a board member, Marina also raised larger questions with affiliate leadership regarding PPFA’s relationship with the global health care provider International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), of which PPFA is a member. IPPF has released [several statements](#) about Israel’s escalating violence in Gaza in light of [Israel’s destruction](#) of a reproductive health care clinic in Gaza.

Conditions are only worsening in the region, according to Ammal Awadallah, the executive director of the Palestinian Family Planning and Protection Association (PFPPA), an IPPF local member association in Palestine. According to Awadallah, 64% of Gaza’s 36 preexisting hospitals are wholly non-functioning, and all

pregnant women in Gaza continue to be at severe risk of delivering in unsafe conditions, having no choice but to give birth in shelters, tents, or homes “with no professional medical assistance or hygienic settings.” Those who do reach a health care center or hospital are dismissed within a few hours after giving birth due to limited resources and overcrowding. An estimated 15,000 pregnant women are at risk of starvation, Awadallah said, while 65% of those who’ve given birth did not receive any form of postpartum care.

The number of women who experience miscarriages also **remains very high**, and some women are not even aware they are pregnant until they experience a miscarriage. Many others continue to face irregular periods, likely due to stress, anxiety, and malnutrition.

“This is one of the main reasons why PFPPA provides services directly to internally displaced women from Gaza, directly in their place of shelter, in order to overcome the challenge of them having to put themselves in danger to travel—even if only a few kilometers away—to receive essential [sexual and reproductive health] services, which at many times they may not even be aware of being life-saving,” Awadallah said.

The executive director clarified that the Palestinian Family Planning and Protection Association and Planned Parenthood Federation of America are both member associations of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, but they are entirely separate legal entities. PPFA does not work in Gaza or anywhere else in Palestine, and Awadallah said her organization has received “immense support” from IPPF.

“In my opinion, reproductive justice movements and actors need to keep in mind the main root cause of reproductive injustice of Palestinian women in Palestine, and most devastatingly so for those in Gaza today, and that is the Israeli occupation and apartheid policies imposed upon them,” Awadallah said. “In order for Palestinian women and girls to be supported for reproductive justice, they must first have their basic human rights be protected and respected ... [A]ll human rights defenders, actors, stakeholders, and activists need to demand for a full and immediate ceasefire as a first step for the sufferings, loss, and injustices to end. We need everyone to take action to do what is right for humanity.”

Given the work that IPPF and its associated members are doing in Gaza, Marina told Prism that she expressed to PPFA that it should be in solidarity with IPPF, but she said that her opinion was shut down by affiliate leadership.

“Reproductive justice is rooted in the idea of collective liberation,” Marina said. “That’s the whole point. You can’t advocate for reproductive health, rights, and justice for all while excluding Palestinian women—this repeats the same mistakes white feminists have always made. Planned Parenthood’s selective engagement will go down in their list of regrets. Eventually, they’ll have to apologize for their statements, and people of color will say, ‘We told you so.’ It’s white feminism at its finest, and I’m done with it.”

Another woman of color, Louisa, who works in the national PPFA office, told Prism that she was retaliated against for asking her manager questions about Planned Parenthood’s role in supporting a ceasefire.

“In my department, I’m getting retaliated against because I have shared my frustration with [how] the statements that have gone out are really mediocre,” she said. “I shared in an internal setting with senior leadership that as organizers, we have the responsibility to organize internally to create change just as we ask our supporters and volunteers to organize externally to create change.”



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Louisa’s intervention was followed by a meeting with senior leadership, which she characterized as an “honest conversation” where she reiterated that Planned Parenthood organizers should internally push the organization to call for a ceasefire.

Louisa had been working toward a promotion. But shortly after speaking to senior leadership about the need for Planned Parenthood to call for a ceasefire, she alleges leadership chose not to recommend her for the promotion. According to Louisa’s direct supervisor, senior leadership expressed concerns that, if promoted, Louisa would yell at the CEO about Gaza during a meeting. Louisa understood this as a racial microaggression, where a woman of color was seen as aggressive by white leadership.

“Senior leadership perpetuated the racist notion that I would be aggressive and combative if I were to be promoted and in spaces with the senior leadership. I shared reasonable feedback and critiques that they ended up blowing out of proportion,” Louisa explained, noting that she’s come to view PPFA as a hostile work environment for women of color—especially those who disagree with national leadership.

The growing anti-Zionist movement in the U.S. is, in many ways, shining a brighter light on the long-existing systemic issues that discourage women of color with more radical politics from pushing their institutions toward more liberatory positions. At best, when women of color speak out on Palestine within PPFA and its

affiliates, workers say their perspectives are ignored. At least two sources referred to PPFA as “an extension of the Democratic Party,” citing the upcoming presidential election as one of the main obstacles for the organization to demand a ceasefire.

“Whether they like it or not, Planned Parenthood has effectively become a wing of the Democratic party,” Jane said. “It was an open secret that the Biden-Harris campaign told Planned Parenthood Action Fund, NARAL [now Reproductive Freedom for All], and Emily’s List that they would not do a *Dobbs* event unless they endorsed Biden-Harris for 2024.”

Jane went on to say that PPFA’s contract with Raytheon is emblematic of how closely intertwined Planned Parenthood is with the neoliberal establishment.

“At the end of the day, it’s not about making a better world; it’s not about changing the structures that are creating all the systemic inequity within this country. It’s what makes folks money,” Jane said.

The internal pushback against women of color’s pro-Palestine stance emulates decades-old power dynamics in feminist movements between women of color and white women. There is an incentive for PPFA to outwardly appear diverse and inclusive. Internally, however, leadership can take advantage of the lack of power women of color have within historically white repro organizations like PPFA.

“The gag is these white women have their boots on our necks because many of us don’t have the privilege to just up and quit our jobs,” Jessica said.

Out of touch

Workers who signed the divestment letter told Prism that PPFA’s relationship with Raytheon shows the ignorance of leadership regarding the protection of staff and patients of color.

Planned Parenthood prides itself on serving undocumented immigrants who are often unable to access health care services because of their immigration status. Workers say that relying on a company like Raytheon to provide cybersecurity is a betrayal of those marginalized communities.

“It would not just be a symbolic gesture to divest from Raytheon and to commit to not working with these companies [because] there are immigrants who come to Planned Parenthood,” Jessica said. “Raytheon is part of [militarizing the U.S.-Mexico border](#), and they play an instrumental role in criminalizing immigrants. Both internally at the organization and externally from critics, divesting is being framed as a symbolic gesture

because [cybersecurity] is embedded in the military-industrial complex. Planned Parenthood has a duty to find alternatives—especially if they say that they put a lot of thought into who they choose to contract.”

While it’s true that Planned Parenthood needs robust cybersecurity due to targeting from anti-choice right-wing extremists, workers question whether Raytheon is the right choice due to potential conflicts of interest, given that Raytheon also [provides services to federal immigration agencies](#).



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– JANE

“The point is that an organization that says it serves everyone regardless of their immigration status has been handling sensitive patient information in collaboration with the company that helps our government criminalize immigrants,” Jessica said. “So the fact that this relationship has existed for years is contrary to what Planned Parenthood has promoted ... For whom is Planned Parenthood protecting patient privacy? It’s certainly not for immigrants in the U.S.”

Experts agree that PPFA has complex cybersecurity needs, but workers say that the organization’s decision to choose a company that directly contributes to the military-industrial complex and the criminalization of undocumented immigrants demonstrates that it’s really the protection of white women that PPFA prioritizes.

“Maybe for a white woman with citizenship who doesn’t face any level of criminalization, it might be beneficial that Planned Parenthood works with a defense company to keep their patient data safe,” Jessica said. “But the war machine, policing, and even working with Congress [are] concessions that actively harm our communities. All of these violent systems have always existed historically to protect white women; they will never protect those of us whose own lives or our families’ lives have been devastated by companies like Raytheon or by politicians that Planned Parenthood supports.”

Workers told Prism there should have been more transparency regarding PPFA’s decision-making around cybersecurity and its public stance on Gaza, especially because these choices have major repercussions for staff and patients.

Ashlyn Preaux is a former Planned Parenthood volunteer in South Carolina who still has several friends who work for PPFA affiliates. She told Prism that many of the organization's frontline workers felt "disappointed" by the revelation that PPFA contracts with Raytheon.

"The recurring theme that I've heard from them is that they can't say anything, and they can't speak out because they might just lose their jobs for saying anything about Gaza," Preaux said. "People who work at different affiliates have no idea what's really going on. A lot of them had no idea about this contract with Raytheon."

More broadly, PPFA workers and others in the sexual and reproductive health, rights, and justice movements say that PPFA leadership is "out of touch."

"Decisions are constantly made without the input of organizers and people who have these areas of expertise," Jessica said. "People who write on their computers all day and spend time leading board meetings and conference rooms in these really nice, pristine offices, they don't know what's happening on the ground, period."

Can PPFA divest?

The question remains: Can an organization like PPFA, which is constantly under attack, successfully protect sensitive patient data without relying on a company like Raytheon? Planned Parenthood doesn't seem to think so.

In a statement to Prism, a spokesperson from PPFA maintained that the organization does not currently have a relationship with Raytheon and reiterated that vendors are chosen based on the organization's complex security needs.

"Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) is constantly under attack from malicious actors and has invested heavily in security operations—something that the organization will continue to do," the spokesperson said in an email. "As a general practice, PPFA seeks out firms that have the capability to work with large and complex organizations. PPFA works with a number of vendors for a variety of services, including cybersecurity."



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— JESSICA

But there are many values-aligned groups that PPFA could work with, including the [Digital Defense Fund](#), which specifically provides cybersecurity support to the abortion access movement. Providing cybersecurity for a high-value target like PPFA will always be complex, according to Nicole Lopez, director of tech at the abortion fund [Midwest Access Coalition](#) (MAC).

Lopez, who is also co-organizer of [Techies for Reproductive Justice](#), a coalition of “abortion-minded technologists,” said that by investing in a values-aligned provider, PPFA could change the cybersecurity game for social justice organizations. This is largely because of the organization’s multimillion-dollar budget, which allows it to set standards for contracting with values-aligned companies across the sexual and reproductive health, rights, and justice movements.

“[V]alues-aligned providers do exist, though they might typically serve smaller-scale clients,” said Lopez, explaining that because anything can be built with tech, there’s an opportunity to create solutions with justice in mind. “At the very least, IT providers exist that serve a larger scale and that are not weapons manufacturers within the military-industrial complex—even if they may have customers within the war industry.”

MAC, an abortion access organization that has 14 employees and a handful of volunteers, uses [Personified Tech](#), a cybersecurity provider that “value[s] varied perspectives in working to build a more inclusive world and workplace.” Although Lopez admits MAC has much smaller security needs than PPFA, she argues that the national health care provider could steer the demand for values-driven development.

“At Techies for Reproductive Justice, we are trying to lead with values-driven development, and that means putting the values first,” Lopez said. “And I think that having a values-aligned tech provider is actually a major boost to your security because they are also going to do what they can to protect your infrastructure and to protect your data, and they’re going to see you as a customer that is worth prioritizing.”

According to Lopez, who also writes policy for MAC, the abortion fund tries to minimize feeding into unjust tech systems as much as possible. As one example, Lopez said MAC is creating procurement policies around using refurbished tech in hopes of minimizing the [impact of cobalt mining](#) in places like Congo that are currently experiencing violence, displacement, and other abuses.

Just as there can be no ethical consumption under capitalism, Lopez said it's "generally true" that there is no ethical tech and that it's nearly impossible to use, build, or secure tech without interacting with the military-industrial complex. But deciding not to try because "everything is bad" is also not a good approach.

"Maybe it's not possible to find an IT provider meeting the scale and unique needs of Planned Parenthood that doesn't touch the military-industrial complex," Lopez said. "But in the case of Raytheon, there's a difference between your IT provider having customers involved with the military-industrial complex, weapons industry, Israeli apartheid, and occupation, versus being a weapons manufacturer. Just like [the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement] teaches us to focus on specific targets instead of trying to seek the perfection of boycotting hundreds of companies simultaneously, I think we can draw lines at investing our IT infrastructure budget into vendors that are more directly tied to genocide."

PPFA's stonewalling of employees asking questions and the organization's reluctance to publicly acknowledge its ties to Raytheon make it hard for repro workers and technologists to propose solutions. Daly Barnett, a staff technologist at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a nonprofit organization that defends civil liberties in the digital world, said that providing some transparency around PPFA's decision-making to contract with the arms manufacturer could be a powerful motivator to steer the information security industry toward more ethical practices.

"I wish it were as clear cut as just making the most ethical decisions, but there are so many other factors that come into play, like what specific services are they looking for? Which information security companies do that the best? Which ones can do it the best at scale? Which ones do it at a price point that they can actually afford without compromising their other services to the patients or their staff? So I can't answer how they should be making that decision; I'm just glad that there is a recognition that transparency needs to be a key part of this decision-making process," Barnett said.

It's unclear if PPFA will heed the call to divest or if the organization will make more of an effort to be transparent with employees about the companies it contracts with. For now, sexual and reproductive health, rights, and justice workers continue to contend with how deeply tied information technology is to the military-industrial complex and what it means for their movements.

As the humanitarian crisis continues to worsen in Gaza, Awadallah told Prism that at the very least "everyone, with no exceptions" needs to "take a firm stand against the genocide and injustices being faced by all people

in Gaza,” she said. “We need to remember that no one is free until everyone is free.”

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