

[Read the E-CHIEF \(/eeditions/\)](/eeditions/)

[f \(https://www.facebook.com/TheChiefLeader\)](https://www.facebook.com/TheChiefLeader)

[t \(https://twitter.com/thechiefleader\)](https://twitter.com/thechiefleader) 

[i \(https://instagram.com/thechiefnyc\)](https://instagram.com/thechiefnyc)  [\(/browse.rss\)](/browse.rss)

The Chief

(/)

A VOICE FOR WORKERS

MAIN MENU



[Log in \(/login.html\)](/login.html)

[Subscribe \(/register.html\)](/register.html)

Search



A few of our stories and columns are now in front of the paywall. We at The Chief-Leader remain committed to independent reporting on labor and civil service. It's been our mission since 1897. You can have a hand in ensuring that our reporting remains relevant in the decades to come. Consider supporting The Chief, which you can do for as little as \$3.20 a month (/subscribe/).

Unions, city pension board failing workers' moral call



(<https://zeta.creativecirclecdn.com/chief/original/20240809-121438-25d-phpUiUszC.JPG>)

Rank-and-file DC 37 members in April rallied for divestment from Israel in front of The David N. Dinkins Municipal Building.

COURTESY CITY WORKERS FOR PALESTINE

Posted Friday, August 9, 2024 11:16 am

BY CITY WORKERS FOR PALESTINE

On an early April morning, city civil servants' chants echoed along the otherwise quiet lower Manhattan streets, ricocheting off stone architecture, while their colorful signs and banners with a simple message — “NYCERS Divest from Genocide” — bobbed up and down. Passersby stopped to watch, some giving thumbs up and others cheering. The picketers stood by the entrance to the building, passing out flyers to people heading into work.

Rank-and-file District Council 37 members had assembled in front of 1 Centre St., the location of the New York City Employees’ Retirement System’s (NYCERS) monthly investment meeting. They were bringing attention to a critical issue: our pension system is currently invested in Israeli and American weapons manufacturers and other industries directly tied to the ongoing violence in Gaza.

For months, rank-and-file DC 37 members have been organizing as part of the movement to end the genocide in Gaza and the occupation of Palestine. We came together the way most organizing campaigns do: through simple conversations with

coworkers. Simultaneously in different agencies, DC 37 members were witnessing the horrors of Israel's assault on Gazans and began asking what we, as city workers, could do. Through the chaos of the moment, we found each other, along with others seeking answers to the same questions. It didn't take long to discover the money from our own paychecks is contributing to the violence.

NYCERS administers retirement benefits for over 300,000 active and retired New York City workers. Each month, city workers make contributions to NYCERS. The NYCERS Board of Trustees, in which DC 37 Executive Director Henry Garrido holds a position, is the governing body of NYCERS. The trustees are responsible for investing the assets of the retirement system. The returns on investment are then disbursed to retirees.

Pension funds are among the largest institutional investors globally. U.S.-based pensions frequently diversify their investments with holdings in international equities and foreign treasuries, including Israel. According to data published on the NYC Open Data Portal, NYCERS held over \$115 million in Israeli securities as of January 2023, encompassing government bonds and equity holdings in chemical production, weapons manufacturing and oil exploration. All of these companies are contributing to the carnage in Palestine.

On Oct. 16, the Palestinian Trade Unions called on global labor to stop arming Israel and end their complicity in the ongoing genocide. This demand aligns with our American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees constitution, which states that we are bound "to work with workers in other lands towards the improvement of the conditions of life and work in all countries, towards the diminution of international tensions and a reduction in the use of armed force to resolve disputes." We are reminded of a fundamental union principle: an injury against one is an injury against all. We have more in common with mechanics, farmers, bakers and nurses in Gaza than we will ever have with politicians who want us to ignore this genocide.

Why must our hard-earned wages be wasted on weapons used to kill children in Gaza? Why is our pension not invested in improving peoples' lives? Our ask is straightforward: invest in our futures, not in death.

When we have raised this issue in our locals, we've been met with walls of opposition and indifference from our leadership. We have been deferred, misdirected and browbeaten that Palestine is not a "bread and butter issue," and have been barred from discussing divestment.

Unions are inherently political entities, the most effective tool working-class people have to exert power over politicians and their policies. Our union spends lots of money lobbying, donating and door-knocking for candidates and legislation we believe will advance workers' interests.

To claim unions have no business taking a political stance is not only ahistorical, but silence is a stance in and of itself. By taking no stand on an issue, the union relinquishes members' influence over that issue, conceding working-class power to bosses and politicians who care little about our wages, pensions or lives.

This is not the first time that DC 37 members have fought for freedom and justice. During the civil rights movement, DC 37 members bused to DC to join the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's 1963 March on Washington, D.C. In the 1980s, DC 37 played a pivotal role in City Council bills to ban the buying of products from the South African apartheid regime, and DC 37 members successfully organized to divest city pension funds from companies doing business with South Africa. Then, as now, our members understood that unions are political engines, and that our "bread and butter" fights are intertwined with struggles for civil rights and liberation at home and abroad.

Beyond a ceasefire and divestment, we want a union that will listen to members and allow democracy to dictate our direction. Palestine has galvanized many of us to increase participation in the union, not only because we seek a Palestine free from Israeli occupation; we also seek to increase our union's power. This is now a broader effort to build union democracy and ignite DC 37's labor militancy.

This has always been the purpose of unions; broad movements of ordinary people taking extraordinary action to make their world a better place. A more democratic union is a more militant union, a more militant union is one ready to fight for better benefits, wages and lives of workers here and beyond.

We have heard it more than once at protests and rallies: Gaza will free us all. Our union not only wields influence in our workplaces, but also in our communities and in the world. It is with our belief in the power of labor and solidarity that we issue this call — we demand the divestment of our pensions from all Israeli securities.

We write this op-ed as a letter to fellow rank-and-file members who are seeking a more democratic union and leadership who represents our values. We urge you to talk to your coworkers, join the hundreds of other city workers who have signed the petition in support of divestment, and reach out to the City Workers for Palestine email to get connected with other rank-and-file DC 37 members.

Comments

NO COMMENTS ON THIS ITEM PLEASE LOG IN TO COMMENT BY CLICKING HERE (/LOGIN.HTML? REFERER=%2FSTORIES%2FUNIONS-CITY-PENSION-BOARD-FAILING-WORKERS-MORAL-CALL%2C52880)

OTHER ITEMS THAT MAY INTEREST YOU

You never can tell (/stories/you-never-can-tell,52861)