

Milwaukee unionists and other activists stand with Palestine during LaborFest 2024

By staff

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Milwaukee trade unionists stand with Palestine. | Staff/Fight Back! News

Milwaukee, WI – On Monday, September 2, the Milwaukee Area Labor Council (MALC) and other unions such as the International Brotherhood of Teamsters

(IBT) and the Milwaukee Teachers' Education Association (MTEA) hosted LaborFest, an annual celebration held in commemoration of Labor Day. Hundreds of workers and union supporters turned out for the occasion.

The first portion of the day's events saw the traditional mass march featuring rank-and-file workers mobilized by unions spanning the spectrum of organized labor, from trades workers to letter carriers to communications workers and everything in between.

A group of trade unionists also marched representing the network Wisconsin Labor for Palestine (WLFP), a statewide association of progressive pro-Palestine union members. The march typically ends at the SummerFest grounds where workers are able to eat and drink and enjoy various forms of entertainment. However, this year, as with the last few years, there was a special guest.

This time, it was Democratic vice presidential candidate and current governor of Minnesota, Tim Walz. Given the current situation in Palestine and the Biden administration's complicity with genocide, which Harris and Walz endorse, Walz's presence at the event spurred some into action.

"I think a lot of people in my [school] district don't quite know what Walz stands for. He works for Israel. I'm a K4 teacher and every time I look at my students it's children like them who are being murdered every day," said Stephanie Spalatin, a member of MTEA and also the Milwaukee Antiwar Committee. "I serve Black and brown communities of Milwaukee. I see the parallels of Palestinian and Black liberation struggles and the connections. We need to educate and demonstrate."

As the LaborFest march entered the final stretch, it was met with a supportive group of protesters, holding pro-labor and pro-Palestine signs and Palestinian flags. Some contingents within the march joined in chanting with the protesters, including slogans such as "Union yes and genocide no" and "Free, free Palestine." There was a large union solidarity group that marched with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) who were particularly vocal in their support for Palestinian liberation. The protest joined the end of the march as it funneled into

the entrance to the SummerFest grounds, but they were met with a police presence that forced them to the other side of the road. The protest continued for some time with speeches and more chanting.

Inside LaborFest, some trade union, anti-war, and student activists snuck in large banners with messages around ending funding for war crimes and to stop arming Israel. Despite not knowing about the banners, event staff, guided primarily by the Democratic Party and the Secret Service, were quick to target and surveil these activists as many were also wearing keffiyehs. The threats of removal for any disruption did not deter the activists from their plans.

As soon as Walz took the podium on the stage, two groups of unionists and other activists stood on their bleachers and unfurled their banners to stand silently and project their pro-Palestine and anti-genocide messages. In a matter of seconds, the staffers stormed them from all sides, aggressively grabbing at both the banners and the people holding them. As they were being escorted out, the 20 activists received some encouraging words from others in the crowd. The activists chanted "Free, free Palestine!" while Walz made sure to thank the Secret Service.

Ryan Hamann, a shop steward with the National Association of Letter Carriers Branch 2 and one of the activists who was thrown out of the event said, "The Democrats talk of their commitment to labor in the U.S., but in the same breath they offer continued unwavering support for the genocide in Palestine, an act which, on top of massacring women and children, is killing Palestinian trade unionists." He continued, "The Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions in Gaza raised the call for trade unionists everywhere, but especially here in the U.S., to work to end the genocidal Israeli campaign. It is our duty to fulfill this obligation to our working-class siblings in Palestine. We will continue the struggle until Palestine is free."

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