

# AFL-CIO LEADERSHIP TRIES TO BLOCK AFFILIATE'S VOTE ON ENDORSING BDS

AFL-CIO leadership cited a procedural rule to tell the San Francisco Labor Council it couldn't even debate a resolution on BDS.

Isaac Scher

October 21 2021, 12:23 p.m.



Hundreds of people are gathered in front of the general consulate of Israel to demonstrate in support of Palestinians in San Francisco on May 18, 2021. Photo: Burak Arik/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

**THE NATIONAL LEADERSHIP** of the largest labor federation in the country is trying to stop one of its affiliates from debating and voting on a resolution that condemns Israeli violence against Palestinians, calls for an end to U.S. aid to Israel, and endorses the Palestinian-led boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement known as BDS.

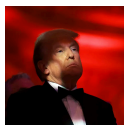
In late September, an AFL-CIO official sent a [memo](#) to the San Francisco Labor Council with the subject line “Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Resolution.” The memo, obtained by The Intercept, said the council “may not hold a vote on [the] resolution and thus any debate is not germane at your meeting,” and it cited a procedural stipulation that appears to disallow local affiliates of the AFL-CIO from codifying positions that do not align with the AFL-CIO’s. Copied on the letter are the AFL-CIO’s highest-ranking officials: president, executive vice president, general counsel, and several directors.

“This is direct censorship,” said Monadel Herzallah, a member of the national committee of the U.S. Palestinian Community Network and a teacher with the San Francisco Teachers Union, part of the SFLC. “And it is a slap in the face to every Palestinian.” He said the AFL-CIO’s leadership seeks to stop the resolution from “the top down.” The leadership knows that the SFLC, which represents more than 150 unions and 100,000 workers, “has a rich, progressive history of supporting movements around the world.”

The AFL-CIO did not respond to a detailed list of questions. Fernando Losada, one of the officials copied on the memo, told the Jewish news outlet J. last month that foreign policy issues are determined at the national level. “Expressions of solidarity [are] always good,” [said Losada](#), a national bargaining director and Western regional field director. “But in terms of setting international policy, that is the purview of the national AFL-CIO through our organizational processes.

There's an existing policy in solidarity with working people in the Holy Land. It does not include BDS."

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The resolution was originally introduced on June 14, weeks after Palestinian resistance to Israel's [planned expulsions](#) of Palestinians from [Sheikh Jarrah](#), a neighborhood in occupied East Jerusalem, precipitated Israeli assaults on Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel proper and drew international attention. On May 18, Palestinian unionists held a daylong general strike and called on trade unions around the world to join them in solidarity. Across the U.S., large contingents of organized labor staged actions for the first time. Unionized teachers, roofers, electricians, tech engineers, janitors, and journalists issued resolutions and statements condemning Israeli violence against Palestinians. In the Bay Area, stevedores in Oakland refused to unload Israeli shipping cargo, as they did during the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2014. Many of the union locals are affiliated with the AFL-CIO. Only one of them, the teachers union in San Francisco, which is part of the SFLC, endorsed BDS – [the first K-12 union](#) in the nation to do so.


**THE SFLC RESOLUTION** endorses BDS “against Apartheid in Israel,” and calls upon President Joe Biden to halt the U.S.’s \$3.8 billion in annual military aid to Israel. The BDS movement is a nonviolent challenge to the corporate and governmental operations of a state that administers a “regime of racial discrimination against the Palestinian

people,” [wrote](#) numerous Palestinian advocacy organizations in a joint report to the United Nations, in 2019. As BDS has gained prominence since its 2006 founding, however, numerous allies of Israel have worked to delegitimize the movement and to conflate it with antisemitism. Thirty-two states in the U.S. have [anti-boycott laws](#) on the books, and the German Parliament [designated](#) BDS as antisemitic.

In telling the SFLC not to debate a resolution on BDS, the AFL-CIO cited the following rule: “Central labor councils, as chartered organizations of the AFL-CIO, shall conform their activities on national affairs to the policies of the AFL-CIO, on state matters to the policies of their respective state federations, and, if applicable, on regional matters to the policies of their respective area labor councils.”

**AFL-CIO 2021 BDS**  
Contributed by The Intercept

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**MEMORANDUM**

TO: Officers, Executive Board, Employees and Affiliates of the San Francisco Labor Council

FROM: Maya Goines, Director, Federation Oversight and Training *MEG*

DATE: September 20, 2021

RE: Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Resolution

It has come to my attention that the San Francisco Labor Council intends to debate a resolution to support boycott, divestment, and sanctions against Israel at

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The letter does not specify what policy an endorsement of BDS would contravene, and the federation did not respond to a question about its policy on boycotting Israel. But AFL-CIO leadership has come out against BDS in the past. In 2007, the AFL-CIO’s leaders [signed a statement](#)

opposing BDS. “Some of them have retired or died since the statement was first put out,” said the labor historian Jeff Schuhrke, a lecturer at the University of Illinois Chicago. “But there’s been no shift in policy since then.”

In 2009, then-president of the AFL-CIO Richard Trumka explicitly [called](#) anti-Zionism antisemitic. The AFL-CIO and its affiliates have purchased millions of dollars in Israeli bonds. “Invest,” said then-secretary Trumka in 1999, “in the bonds that are such a tangible link between our movement and the continuing struggle to nurture and protect the State of Israel.”

Decades ago, when two AFL-CIO affiliates [joined a committee](#) opposing bank loans to apartheid South Africa in 1977, national leadership did not get in their way. (Not until 1984 would the national AFL-CIO take its first action against South Africa, [banning goods](#) imported from the country.) “When you go back and look” at those affiliates’ boycotts, Schuhrke said, “you won’t find AFL-CIO officials jumping in and waving obscure rules in people’s faces to try to derail things.”

**THE LEADERSHIP’S INTERVENTION** comes after several [months of delays](#) within the SFLC. On June 14, the council voted by a slim margin to table the resolution 42-38, according to a source granted anonymity to speak about internal proceedings. A subcommittee was formed to “try to find common ground” on the resolution, the source said.

Leaders of the SFLC met with national representatives of the AFL-CIO after the resolution was tabled, according to Rudy Gonzalez, a member of the SFLC’s executive committee. Two senior officials – international director Cathy Feingold and Losada, the bargaining director – told SFLC leaders that the resolution was divisive, said Gonzalez, who also co-chairs the subcommittee on the Palestine resolution. They recommended that the SFLC try to change the AFL-CIO’s policy on boycotting Israel at the national convention, scheduled for June 2022.

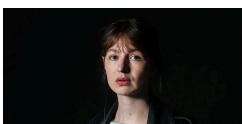
“That change in policy would have to originate within an affiliated council or an affiliated national union,” said the source. “In the case of SFLC, it’s a catch-22.” (Feingold and Losada did not respond to requests for comment.)

The subcommittee has not found a compromise. And the AFL-CIO’s letter levies considerable pressure on the labor council. The council’s pro-Palestinian unionists are pushing for a vote, and one of them intends to bring the resolution at the SFLC’s next meeting, on October 25. “If people want to symbolically do that, they can, but it would be out of order” given the AFL-CIO’s directive, said Gonzalez.

**“To suddenly see a labor organization trump the membership? That’s problematic to say the least.”**

Frank Lara, vice president of the San Francisco Teachers Union and an incoming delegate of the SFLC, said the memo contravenes basic union principles. “I want to believe that unions are one of the most democratic institutions,” he said. “To suddenly see a labor organization trump the membership? That’s problematic to say the least. If you’re the president [of the AFL-CIO] sending daily emails saying ‘Stand up for Black lives,’ and then you say ‘Don’t touch this issue,’ I think any educator would see this as terrible pedagogy and politics.”

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