

Home » Stop imperialist war and occupation » UAW members to top leaders: Divest from genocide!

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By Martha Grevatt posted on November 20, 2024



In the morning of Nov. 12, a new group, Engineers Against Apartheid, held banners and signs and gave speeches outside the United Auto Workers headquarters in downtown Detroit. The main banner read: “Unchain the UAW! Divest from Israel now!”

These automotive engineers have joined groups such as UAW Labor for Palestine and United All Workers for Democracy in calling on the UAW International Executive Board (IEB) to vote to divest all union funds from Israel Bonds. The union’s current investments in bonds that fund the Zionist war machine have an estimated value of \$400,000.

Many of the engineers are part of Detroit’s sizable Arab and Muslim communities. They are not unionized and would be more likely to organize with the UAW if it divested from Israel. Their action was timed to coincide with the meeting of the IEB, which took place from Nov. 12-14. Engineers Against Apartheid held another demonstration on Nov. 14, the last day of the IEB meeting.

UAW Labor for Palestine, a rank-and-file group with hundreds of members, has been pushing the IEB to act in solidarity with Palestine for over a year. It has taken the lead from the over 30 Palestinian trade unions and professional associations that issued a united call in October 2023 to end all complicity with and stop arming Israel



UAW calls for ceasefire

On Dec. 1, 2023, the UAW took a big step forward when it issued a statement calling for a ceasefire in Gaza and pledging to form a “Divestment and Just Transition working group to study the history of Israel and Palestine, our union’s economic ties to the conflict, and explore how we can have a just transition for U.S. workers from war to peace.”

Two weeks later UAW President Shawn Fain reiterated the union’s position at a press conference outside the White House. He was joined by other union leaders and Congressional Reps. Cori Bush and Rashida Tlaib.

Since the press conference in December, the UAW issued a statement May 1 supporting the student solidarity encampments demanding colleges and universities divest from Israel. The union called for all legal charges and academic disciplinary action against encampment participants — many of whom are UAW-represented graduate student workers — to be dropped.

In July the UAW and several other unions called for an arms embargo of Israel and endorsed the demonstration in Washington, D.C., protesting Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu’s speech before Congress.

All of these actions represented a sharp break with the U.S. labor movement’s long history of supporting Israel and maintaining ties with the Zionist labor federation Histadrut and its supporters in the Jewish Labor Federation. These progressive positions were a rebuke of the Democratic Party and President “Genocide Joe” Biden.

UAW needs to divest

However, the UAW’s stances over the past year have been marked by inconsistency. Not long after the December press conference, the union gave Biden an embarrassingly glowing endorsement. It does not appear that the “Divestment and Just Transition Working Group” has made any progress whatsoever. UAW-represented workers continue to build weapons and conduct research for Israel at universities.

In May, when an IEB member motioned for the board to pass a divestment resolution, there were only three votes in favor out of a possible 14.

Over the past few weeks hundreds of rank-and-file members called and emailed their regional directors — who sit on the IEB — urging them to pass a divestment resolution. UAW Labor for Palestine put out a news release and held an online press conference centering rank-and-file voices calling on the union to divest.

The UAW has an opportunity to set a historic precedent by becoming the first U.S. labor organization to divest from Israeli apartheid. Yet the issue was not brought up at the November meeting.

Reasons for not divesting are weak. Opponents say it would cost too much in fees to withdraw from the fund holding the Israel Bonds or that the rank-and-file members in the automotive industry don’t support it or don’t care.

But none of the groups organizing the campaign for union divestment from genocide are throwing in the towel any time soon.

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