

When Arab-American Detroit Auto Workers Struck for Palestinian Liberation

BY

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In 1973, Arab-American workers in Detroit auto plants walked off the job in protest of the UAW's investment in bonds from the state of Israel. The incident is little-remembered today, but it shows how workers can organize against racism and colonialism — including against the labor movement's investment in the Israeli occupation of Palestine today.

On November 28, 1973, nearly two thousand auto workers walked off the job at Chrysler's Dodge Main assembly plant near Detroit, bringing production to a halt. The one-day strike was unusual in three respects.

First, it was a wildcat action, unsanctioned by the leadership of the workers' union, the United Auto Workers (UAW). Second, the strike was entirely organized by recently arrived immigrants from Arab countries, who until then had been considered by corporate executives as some of the most "docile" workers in the auto industry. Third, the strike was an explicit protest against the UAW's complicity in the colonization and occupation of Palestine, as well as an implicit assertion of dignity in the face of everyday racism and exploitation.

The unauthorized work stoppage that November was only the most dramatic example in a series of actions organized by the UAW's Detroit-based Arab-American members in the early 1970s. Their

efforts received scant attention from the press and labor movement at the time, and today have been all but forgotten.

By remembering their legacy of combining fights against exploitation, racism, xenophobia, and imperialism, workers today can find inspiration to continue the struggle for freedom and justice — both in the United States and abroad.

Detroit's Arab Community

In the late 1960s, with social and political upheavals rocking the Middle East and with the United States simultaneously loosening immigration restrictions, tens of thousands of Arabs — particularly from Palestine, Yemen, and Lebanon — migrated to Metro Detroit, where there was already a small Lebanese population that had arrived decades earlier.

In the early 1970s, approximately 85,000 Arab-Americans lived in the area, especially concentrated in Dearborn (home of the Ford River Rouge Complex) and Hamtramck (site of the Dodge Main plant).

Around this same time, the Black Power movement was sweeping the auto factories.

Protesting racial discrimination, mistreatment by management, and an unresponsive UAW bureaucracy, black workers at Dodge Main formed the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), as detailed in Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin's classic study *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*. DRUM led a series of wildcat strikes and inspired the creation of more revolutionary black caucuses at other plants, which eventually united into the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

Alarmed by this militancy, the auto companies turned to hiring large numbers of Arabs, believing Arab workers would give them less trouble than black workers. By 1973, some 15,000 Arab immigrants toiled in the auto plants. Among them was Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib's father, Harbi Elabed, who migrated from Palestine and worked on an assembly line at the Ford Flat Rock Assembly Plant.

Arab-American auto workers were often placed into the most physically demanding and lowest-paid jobs, and faced linguistic and cultural barriers and encountered racism from shop foremen, union representatives, and public officials.

While some Arab workers joined the black-led wildcats, and while the League of Revolutionary Black Workers publicly supported Palestinian liberation, contact between the two groups remained minimal thanks to management's intentional separation of them on the shop floor. But that would soon change.

Arab Workers Caucus

Energized by Arab nationalism, especially after the 1968 Battle of Karameh, in which the Palestine Liberation Organization claimed its first victory over the Israeli Defense Forces, Arab-Americans in Metro Detroit started forming community organizations to fight back against housing discrimination and other forms of racism.

In August 1973, Dearborn's Arab community marched to protest the police murder of Nagi Daifullah, a twenty-four-year-old Yemeni immigrant in California. Daifullah was an organizer with César Chávez's United Farm Workers who was brutally beaten to death that August by a Kern County sheriff's deputy.

When war broke out in October between Israel and a coalition led by Egypt and Syria, Detroit Arabs were shocked to discover that UAW Local 600, which represented workers at Ford Rouge, had purchased over \$300,000 in State of Israel bonds with union dues money. The investments could be used by Israel for any purpose, including war and occupation. The UAW International owned nearly \$1 million in Israeli bonds, part of its pension portfolio.

On October 13, some 3,000 Arab Americans marched in Dearborn to the Local 600 office, demanding the bonds be liquidated. They held signs reading "Stop US-Israeli Terror Against Arab People" and raised over \$20,000 in donations for war relief. Soon after this action, seventy delegates from nearly every auto factory in the area gathered to found a new Arab Workers Caucus, following the example of their black coworkers.

The caucus learned that on November 28, UAW president Leonard Woodcock would be honored by B'nai B'rith International, a Zionist charitable organization, with its Humanitarian of the Year award at a ceremony in downtown Detroit.

The workers used the event as an opportunity to demand the union divest from Israel. As explained at the time by Ismael Ahmed, a community organizer and future head of the Michigan Department of Human Services, the "newly formed caucus wanted to point out the hypocrisy of this leader who

would force his constituency to finance the murder of their brothers and sisters back home with their union dues.”

The caucus circulated 70,000 flyers in Arabic and English calling on Arab auto workers to join in a wildcat strike on the day of Woodcock’s award ceremony. At Dodge Main, where Arab immigrants comprised upwards of 25 percent of the workforce, 2,000 workers heeded the call and production was shut down. Other plants experienced slowdowns.

That evening, about a thousand protested outside Cobo Hall, where Woodcock was being honored at the \$100-a-plate B’nai B’rith dinner attended by both the mayor of Detroit and chair of General Motors. Holding signs that read “Dispose of the Bonds” and “Jewish People Yes, Zionism No,” the Arab protesters chanted “don’t abuse workers’ dues” and “no more bombs, no more bonds.”

They were joined by leftist groups like the Spartacist League and Revolutionary Union, as well as some of their black coworkers who wanted to show solidarity after being asked how they would feel if the UAW invested in apartheid regimes like South Africa and Rhodesia.

The protesters had hoped to confront Woodcock on his way into the event, but the UAW president snuck in through a back door.

Afterward, about 500 wildcat strikers at Dodge Main received disciplinary notices, and those most recently hired — particularly Yemenis — were terminated. The union did nothing to protect them.

UAW secretary treasurer Emil Mazey dismissed the protest as a communist conspiracy and argued that the purchase of Israeli bonds was simply a good investment for the union. Walter Dorosh, president of Local 600, said he would help liquidate the Israeli bonds in exchange for no further public protests against union officials.

The Arab Workers Caucus continued organizing, comparing UAW officers who had “sold out” to corporate capital with Arab political leaders who had acquiesced to US imperialism. The caucus delegates to the 1974 UAW constitutional convention in California, who put forward a program calling not only for disposal of the bonds, but also for more workplace rights, the hiring of language interpreters at the auto plants, and the dismissal of any union officers or staff found guilty of discrimination.

“UAW should stand firmly in support of all workers and people struggling in Africa, Asia and Latin America,” the caucus’s program read. “In the Middle East, UAW should support the principle of

establishing a secular, non-theocratic, democratic state in Palestine for all people, Jews and Arabs, and stand against any outside intervention.”

The convention’s resolutions committee, chaired by Dorosh, ignored all of these demands. Nevertheless, by organizing among the rank-and-file over several months, the Arab Workers Caucus convinced multiple UAW locals to dispose of their own Israeli investments, resulting in the liquidation of \$48,000 in bonds by 1975, according to Ahmed.

As historian Pamela E. Pennock explains in *The Rise of the Arab American Left*, the caucus went into decline in the years following the 1974 UAW convention before disbanding. Arab-American auto workers continued organizing against workplace abuses and racial discrimination – often alongside Black workers – through community organizations and leftist groups.

Unions and BDS

Nearly fifty years after the Arab wildcat at Dodge Main, the UAW and other US unions continue to support Israel, both financially and politically – even as Israel’s human rights abuses against Palestinians have become more blatant.

In 2004, union members and organizers from New York City Labor Against the War and the community organization Al-Awda New York united to form Labor for Palestine, with the explicit goal of “reclaim[ing] the legacy of working class solidarity with Palestine in the United States” as epitomized by the 1973 Arab auto workers’ wildcat strike.

Labor for Palestine has called on US unions to support Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) – a Palestinian-led global movement to nonviolently pressure Israel to end the occupation.

Like the Arab Workers Caucus, some of the first US unionists to adopt BDS were from the UAW rank and file. In December 2014, the 14,000-member UAW Local 2865, comprising graduate student workers at the University of California, voted to endorse BDS. The measure included a demand that the UAW International divest from Israel.

After determining the vote was fair and democratic, in late 2015, the UAW’s International Executive Board nevertheless nullified Local 2865’s BDS measure after being pressured by a corporate law firm representing companies doing business in Israel.

Local 2865 appealed to the union’s Public Review Board. In the meantime, thousands of UAW graduate workers at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (Local 2322) and New York University (Local 2110) also voted to endorse BDS in April 2016. But that May, the Public Review Board upheld the nullification.

The UAW’s suppression of rank-and-file support for Palestine is emblematic of the wider crackdown on BDS in the United States, with thirty states adopting anti-boycott laws in recent years. In this repressive environment, other unions have been reluctant to endorse BDS, with the notable exceptions of the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America and the Industrial Workers of the World.

It is estimated that US unions, labor councils, and the AFL-CIO hold a total of \$5 billion in State of Israel bonds. In 2006, members of the Connecticut AFL-CIO, with help from Labor for Palestine, started a campaign to get the state federation to dump its \$25,000 in Israeli bonds.

By 2010, the Connecticut AFL-CIO had completely divested from Israel – a “small but satisfying victory,” in the words of Stanley Heller, the unionist who spearheaded the campaign. Five years later, the state federation passed a resolution calling on the national AFL-CIO to adopt BDS.

As imperialism fuels war and oppression in the Middle East and around the globe, and as systemic racism and xenophobia run rampant here at home, the story of the Arab Workers Caucus serves as a reminder to the US working class that even if the institutions meant to represent us are complicit, we don’t have to be.

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