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ACTIVISM

Pittsburgh's East End Food Co-op workers are pushing to boycott Israeli goods

Workers and members of Pittsburgh's East End Food Co-op are calling for a referendum to boycott Israeli-sourced products in the store. They hope their campaign will become a model for co-ops across the country.

BY [KATE DAHER](#) - DECEMBER 8, 2024 - 5



COLLECTING SIGNATURES FOR THE “CO-OPS AGAINST GENOCIDE” BOYCOTT PETITION AT THE EAST END FOOD CO-OP ANNUAL MEETING ON NOVEMBER 14, 2024. (PHOTO: GEORGE WAKSMUNSKI)

At the November meeting of the Pittsburgh East End Food Co-op (EEFC) Board of Directors, UE local chief shop steward Fritz Geist read aloud a petition organized by union and co-op members advocating for a member-owner referendum to boycott Israeli-sourced products in the store.

Inspired by the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions (BDS) movement and acting in line with the international union’s (United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America) solidarity with Palestine, the local co-op workers launched their BDS campaign last July after they voted to end the co-op’s relationship with Israeli products. The workers are determined to collect 500 signatures to present a petition to the co-op board by February, allowing a democratic vote by the co-op owners and members.

The “Co-ops Against Genocide” boycott petition opens with a poignant quote from Northern Irish peace activist and Nobel Peace Prize co-recipient Betty Williams: “Peace in our world is everybody’s business.” The petition reads:

“Should EEFC implement a boycott of all Israeli-sourced products until and unless Israel 1) immediately ends all wars and 2) ends its occupation of any foreign land in adherence with international law? Yes/No.

Both petition supporters and their opponents—those who wish the entire BDS movement would cease to exist—have been attending EEFC meetings to voice their support for or opposition to the petition.

Supporters of the Zionist project declare that they will quit the co-op if Israeli goods are discontinued. In one meeting, Julie Paris, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Director of StandWithUs, claimed that she now feels “unsafe” and “unwelcome” in the store due to the democratically organized petition drive. “No one should feel unsafe in our store,” said a board member.

Pro-Israel talking points have been repeated and amplified throughout several meetings attended by this writer. Supporters of the petition drive and the BDS movement, in general, have been labeled “biased,” “supporters of Hamas terrorism,” and “antisemitic.” According to these speakers, the Zionist project is a “democracy” that generously employs “people living in the West Bank, in [Israeli] factories and fields.” When confronted with Israel’s deplorable human rights record, which violates international law, the Zionists claim that the reports are “lies.” In one of the more egregious exhibits of anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab racism, a speaker claimed that Israel is fighting “barbarism,” mimicking a claim made by Israeli historian Benny Morris, who once referred to Palestinians as “the barbarians who want to take our land.”

“We gave you Gaza, and look what you’ve done,” cried another supporter of Israel.

However, despite the vitriolic attacks, the co-op workers are determined to continue the campaign to rid their store of Israeli-sourced products.

Exhibiting his *Jews for Palestine* button, which he regularly wears to work, a co-op employee said he receives friendly nods from the customers. “You don’t speak for me or all Jews,” he told his opponents at the November meeting. Others explained that Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) and B’Tselem, the Israeli Human Rights organization, are critical of Israel and its genocidal policies toward Palestinians.

There is no more compelling place, such as a food co-op, or a time like now, during the Gaza genocide and the onslaught of war against other countries in the region, to strengthen the BDS movement against Israeli products. Member-owned cooperatives, rooted in democratic decision-making and community values, are uniquely positioned to lead this effort. Co-ops have long served as hubs for ethical commerce and social justice, making them ideal platforms to amplify solidarity movements and effect meaningful change.

Unlike traditional grocery stores, food co-ops empower their members by giving them a direct say in product selection, fostering community engagement, and supporting sustainable practices.

At the same time, boycotts have served as powerful tools for organizing within and on behalf of marginalized communities to challenge systems of oppression, both in the U.S. and worldwide. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56 hundreds of Black domestic workers refused to support a segregated bus system in Montgomery, Alabama until its racist practices were eradicated. This demand for equal treatment under the law forced the Montgomery transportation system to desegregate, sparking a nationwide boycott aimed at white-owned businesses and culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Later, spurred on by the Civil Rights and labor movements of the 1960s and 1970s, agricultural workers, under the leadership of César Chávez and the United Farm Workers (UFW), demanded a boycott of grapes and lettuce to protest unsafe and unfair labor conditions. The boycott inspired thousands to stand in solidarity with the workers and their

union. Of course later, the international boycott movement that helped bring down the apartheid government of South Africa would go on to influence and inspire the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement to end international support for Israel’s oppression of Palestinians and pressure Israel to comply with international law.

Speaking about the EEFC boycott petition, UE Chief shop steward Fritz Geitz said, “Not only do we want our store to join our sister store in Olympia, Washington, and divest from Israeli goods, but we also want to inspire co-op workers across the country to follow our example and help end the oppression of the Palestinian people.”

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