

# Why Planned Parenthood Workers Revolted Over Gaza



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Planned Parenthood workers organized to expose the limits of the nonprofit industrial complex.

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 6 MIN READ

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**O**n Dec. 5, 2023, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) [released an official statement](#) condemning what they called “atrocities committed by Hamas,” citing violations of bodily autonomy both in Israel and in Gaza and characterizing Israel’s aggression on the Gaza strip as “the war on Hamas.” In the days that

followed, many workers within the national Planned Parenthood organization and its affiliates across the United States organized a response to this statement through a group chat on Signal.

According to Cherry, a PPFA worker who requested a pseudonym out of fear of retaliation, unionized PPFA workers were “really upset” by their employer’s public and internal statements on Israel’s aggression on Gaza. A Signal group was created to work on an open letter that circulated later that month.

The Dec. 5 statement was PPFA’s first public comment about Gaza, but Cherry says, “[PPFA] had sent a couple of internal all-staff emails before that one that very much deprioritized the historical context and experience of Palestinians over the last nearly a century.” Cherry adds, “As workers, we wanted to demonstrate that the PPFA statement does not necessarily reflect those of us in the national office.”

The collectively written open letter was drafted by both unionized and non-unionized PPFA workers, as well as workers from PPFA affiliates. Letter writers urged for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza and unequivocally called Israel’s aggression on Gaza a genocide. Signed by more than 500 patients, volunteers, organizers, health care providers, donors, supporters, and workers, the letter also called out the hypocrisy of the organization’s stance.

“For PPFA to ignore the Israeli government’s war crimes against the Palestinian people stands antithetical to their purported mission to fight for the dignity, safety, and rights of all people,” the letter reads. “We urge PPFA’s leadership to follow the lead of other reproductive health, rights, and justice organizations in calling for a ceasefire and an end to the U.S. funding of the Israeli government’s occupation and genocide in Gaza.”

According to the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), 50 percent of pregnant Palestinian women who were displaced to shelters in Gaza suffered from thirst and malnutrition, and health care

and vaccinations for newborns were scarce. Though PPFA is a member of the IPPF, the latter has no governance power over the former.

In July 2024, the Palestinian Family Planning and Protection Association estimated that miscarriages had risen at least 300 percent since October 2023. If PPFA leadership and its affiliates— independently incorporated local Planned Parenthood clinics supported by PPFA—refused to take a stance for a ceasefire, the letter signers wanted to make clear that not all workers and supporters of the organization were content to be silent in the face of a genocide.

“The other thing that bothered me and made me want to write and sign the letter is that we’re a reproductive rights organization and we were completely out of step with the IPPF,” says Emma, a worker in the national Planned Parenthood office who also requested a pseudonym out of fear of retribution. Emma felt PPFA should be more supportive of the international organization, which called for a ceasefire in November 2023, citing the violation of women and girls specifically.

“The IPPF is a global reproductive rights organization that has been very vocal about the maternal mortality rates [in Gaza], the lack of period sanitation products, [and] how people have to experience C-sections without anesthesia,” says Emma. “Just all these things the PPFA is supposed to be an advocate for and is just completely ignoring, and then when it stopped ignoring what’s going on, it chose to just spout propaganda.”

For some workers at PPFA and its affiliates across the U.S., the lack of reproductive health care in Gaza was difficult to ignore in day-to-day operations. The PPFA’s official statement on Gaza and the lack of internal discussion of the issue was what pushed Aseel Houmsse, research and clinical training coordinator at the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts (PPLM), to organize with other workers, sign the open letter published last December, and send a letter to their affiliate’s equity department.

Houmsse, a first-generation immigrant to the U.S. who is of Middle Eastern descent, says they expected conversations about Palestine to happen in Planned Parenthood employee affinity group meetings due to the organization's commitment to diversity, equality, and inclusion. Houmsse expected those conversations to be "geared toward advancing equity and advancing the idea of health care for all," but was surprised to encounter complete silence about the issue at their affiliate. "That's when I decided to organize with others who were concerned about the silence," Houmsse explains.

Houmsse and other workers wrote an internal letter to the equity division of PPLM that they say was "rejected immediately with no feedback." Houmsse felt not only the organization-wide silence and its general chilling effect, but its particular impact on workers with roots in the Middle East and North Africa. Houmsse found PPFA's response "incredibly disappointing," before adding that it "goes against the idea of how we need to talk about the uncomfortable things."

This continues a pattern Houmsse has witnessed all their life: a systemic refusal to discuss Palestine in left-wing and liberal spaces. "[T]hese... groups... are meant to tackle uncomfortable conversations in a way that's functional."

That is the reason Houmsse thought it important for unions and workers to come together and sign the open letter to PPFA leadership. "What I love about unions is that they provide, ideally, a sense of psychological safety," Houmsse says. "I think especially when we work in areas that are highly stressful like an abortion clinic, for instance, I think it's really nice to know that there is an entity out there that has your back, that is able to keep your security, safety, all these things in mind." (Neither PPFA nor PPLM responded to YES! Media's requests for comment.)

## **Autonomy and Cybersecurity**

PPFA leadership ignored the first open letter. In May 2024, I wrote a *Prism Reports* feature breaking the news that PPFA had a cybersecurity contract with Raytheon, a notorious corporation that, according to the American Friends Service Committee, makes “missiles, bombs, components for fighter jets, and other weapon systems used by the Israeli military against Palestinian civilians.”

The story raised questions about whether liberal nonprofit organizations defending human rights should work with a company that manufactures military weapons. In addition, PPFA workers were concerned about their lack of participation in the hiring of a company that handles data essential to the daily operations of reproductive health care.

“Seeing [the connection between Planned Parenthood and Raytheon] laid out so directly was devastating,” says Casey, a unionized worker from an East Coast affiliate who requested a pseudonym. “I can speak for my fellow union members and workers [that], generally, we love this work. To know that our labor was, in this very direct way, going to this frankly evil company was just horrible. The next day in the clinic, we were all crying and were like, ‘Alright, what can we do?’”

The collective despair motivated PPFA workers to send another letter to leadership in July, this time demanding PPFA’s divestment from Raytheon as well as “full transparency about its business dealings with cybersecurity companies.” Workers requested a say on the cybersecurity company hired to handle highly sensitive data that could, in some cases, further marginalize Planned Parenthood clients who are undocumented or could be criminalized for getting an abortion. The letter also charged the organization with “co-opting the language of freedom and self-determination while maintaining relationships with warmongers and military arms profiteers.”

For Emma, PPFA’s contract with Raytheon exposed a gap of values between workers providing on-the-ground reproductive health care and PPFA leadership. “I won’t deny that Planned Parenthood

affiliates provide so many health care services, but it's the workers who ... are on the ground doing that," Emma says. "There definitely should be a distinction, but as a larger institution, I'm not even disappointed. I'm furious."

The fractures over Gaza and the Raytheon contract made distinctions between leadership and workers clearer. While leadership seemed preoccupied with putting out neutral messaging on Israel's siege on Gaza to protect the organization, workers were watching videos of children, men, and women being massacred and disabled by weapons closely related to their workplace's choice of cybersecurity provider.

According to Casey, organizing with unionized and non-unionized workers, as well as Planned Parenthood supporters and donors, has offered PPFA workers opportunities to learn from each other and clarify how workers in the U.S. can show up in solidarity with Palestine.

"It really gave us learning and growing opportunities to better understand the idea of solidarity and what unions do," Casey says. For them, this movement was evidence that unions are more than an "insurance policy for workers—they exist to build our working-class power." And it made them realize how workers have "so much power collectively, but we have to get to that place where we believe that and can mobilize it."

This can be true for unions across the U.S. "We can [all] mobilize to make material changes for Palestinian liberation," Casey says.

The Palestinian solidarity movement within Planned Parenthood is an example of how working-class power can be used to clarify connections between struggles, even when they seem to be disconnected from our own workplace, geographically or otherwise. Through organizing and community building, Planned Parenthood workers helped expose the nonprofit-industrial complex operating within the U.S. empire, demonstrating how diversity, equity and

inclusion efforts fail when imperialism and colonialism aren't tackled head on.

By reminding their employer of the organization's own mission, organized workers and unions pushed for rights and justice outside U.S. borders.

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