

LABOR PALESTINE

The U.S. Workers Who Went on Strike for Gaza

How one UAW local pulled off a mass strike in solidarity with the Gaza protest encampments, and in opposition to the US-Israeli slaughter of Palestinians.

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Members and supporters of UAW Local 4811—which represents 48,000 academic workers in the University of California system—demonstrate for Palestine on May 23, 2024, as officials declare the rally an “unlawful assembly.”

PHOTO BY QIAN WEIZHONG/VCG VIA GETTY IMAGES

The most significant U.S. labor strike in the past two years in solidarity with Palestinians started with a simple premise. According to Nate Edenhofer, a graduate student at the University of California, Santa Cruz, “Everybody has some sort of vision of how they think the society we live in should be—most of them don’t think of it as being a genocide.” Edenhofer was part of organizing that strike, the only major strike so far from U.S. labor to defend the Gaza protest encampments and oppose the mass killing of Palestinians since Oct. 7, 2023. It included thousands of academic workers across the University of California system, echoing recent tactics of dockworkers—from Spain to Greece to France to Morocco—who have refused to handle military equipment and items they believe will be used against Palestinians.

The strike rolled through one of the largest public university systems in the United States, with 19,780 workers voting to authorize the work action. The University of California campuses became sites of a pitched labor battle and a broader student struggle to stand with Palestinians.

For nearly two years, Palestinian trade unionists have been urging workers—especially American workers, given the role of the United States in arming, funding and politically supporting Israel’s military actions—to take workplace action to stop the onslaught. As recently as April 5, 2025, the General Federation of Trade Unions in Gaza appealed to American unions to strike, boycott, lobby and carry out civil disobedience to “create real pressure to stop this dirty war.”

While the American labor movement has not created anywhere near this kind of upsurge, it has made a historically significant break—at least rhetorically—from the foreign policy of the United States. More than half of all unionized workers are members of unions that called for a ceasefire in the relatively early days before the Biden administration adopted the term (in bad faith). And nearly half are in unions that have called for a U.S. arms embargo on Israel, a far more confrontational position. Taken together, this is a change for a labor movement in which officials have historically tended to hew more closely to the State Department on policy toward Palestine. But none of the trade unionists I talked to believe it has been close to enough, and numerous rank-and-file union members are urging their unions to do more.

When I ask Carl Rosen, then-president of the United Electrical Workers, why his union doesn’t stick to “bread-and-butter issues” and mobilizes in solidarity with Palestinians, he visibly winces. “That ‘bread-and-butter’ logic is one where you don’t even speak up in terms of things that are happening in this society,” he says. “So you don’t think we should be fighting for things like minimum wage or the things that have been won in Europe, like guaranteed four or five weeks vacations? Should we not fight for Social Security to fully support you in old age?”

I sat with Edenhofer and Jack Davies, of United Auto Workers Local 4811—which represents the University of California workers—in the shade of a tree on the University of Chicago campus, where the two had traveled for a conference on labor history. Davies finished his Ph.D. at Santa Cruz and tells me

that people are more willing to act on their best, most aspirational impulses if they feel that it's going to really do something—when it's part of a plan. And union members are best positioned to move quickly during times of emergency if they have deep relationships and have taken risks together before.

“People want to take the steps to make the world the vision that they have,” Edenhofer says. “But they have to feel that they can do it and have other people around them to do it with.”

IT IS A DAUNTING TASK TO convince American workers to be in solidarity with you, says Abdelhakim Elayan, from his home in Ramallah in late June. The U.S. public doesn't know “all the facts,” and words can only do so much, he says. They must “come to Palestine and see with their own eyes” how workers, just to get to their job, “have to get through a fence that's up to 30 feet high, and they have to coordinate with people who coordinate with the occupation, in order to get over that fence.

“They get killed sometimes just to be able to go to work, and that's in addition to the demolition of their homes.

“If representatives from the unions in the U.S. come to visit, we would be ready to receive them and show them in the West Bank and Gaza Strip what's happening.”

Elayan is in the position to offer that invitation. He is the leader of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions, composed of up to 35,000 private-sector workers in the West Bank—including private preschool teachers, bank employees and pharmaceutical workers—though the numbers fluctuate with soaring unemployment. He is one of numerous trade unionists who, despite the challenges, have made urgent pleas for international solidarity.

As the U.S.-Israeli campaign in Gaza continues, Palestinian trade unionists have increasingly insisted that statements are not enough. They asked for material action—to organize against weapons manufacturing, withhold labor, or anything concrete to stop what United Nations experts and leading human rights organizations say is a genocide. “True labor solidarity is demonstrated through actions, not just words,” the General Federation of Trade Unions in Gaza said in its April 5 statement.

Elayan underscores the importance of U.S. labor support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement. “That could be through campaigns,” he says, speaking through an interpreter, “and you could also take action against contracts with companies that benefit from the conflict at the expense of Palestinian blood.” He is wearing a pale blue button-down shirt, and he comes across serious and

humble. He worked in the administration department of a bank for 27 years before recently retiring, and he leads the federation as a volunteer.

“Unions have always been at the front of any movement against occupations, against racism, against all kinds of forms of injustices,” he says.

In the early days of Israel’s onslaught, the United Electrical Workers quickly joined with United Food and Commercial Workers Local 3000, a 50,000-strong union local in the Pacific Northwest, and put out a statement calling for a ceasefire—at a time when such statements were more meaningful, because the term “ceasefire” had been deemed offlimits and “repugnant” by the Biden administration. More than 200 unions and organizations, representing more than half of unionized workers in the United States, went on to sign that message.

Yasmin Ashur, a cashier at an Albertsons grocery store in Port Orchard, Wash., and a member of UFCW Local 3000, told me in June: “I’m proud of my union, that they took that early stand when Biden was president.” She underscored the importance of solidarity “anywhere that there is an aggression, or Goliath.”

This sentiment is echoed by Nidal Rafeedie, vice president of Teamsters Local 1932 in San Bernardino, which boasts more than 16,000 members. He’s also the director of respiratory care at Arrowhead Regional Medical Center, just outside of San Bernardino, Calif. In October 2024, his local became the first and only in the Teamsters to pass a resolution calling for a ceasefire and a “stop to military aid and U.S. resources that are being used to continue these horrific actions.”

Rafeedie is Palestinian American, and he has family in the West Bank and Gaza. An early step of getting the resolution passed, he says, involved showing a PowerPoint presentation to the board and business agents of the local, “just to educate them first on what our history was and what’s going on.” It was a process, he says, but the board was “very supportive of the idea that we need to really control the economics that are going towards this.”

After all, he argues, “What were unions established for? It was for injustices and inequality in the workplace. And when the unions are willing to fight for that, what they tend to forget is that they also have a social responsibility for their society around them.”

IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA system, workers expanded what they were willing to fight for. Late on April 30, 2024, and through the early hours of May 1, 2024, a group of counterprotesters attacked the UCLA Gaza encampment. Members of UAW Local 4811 were among those hit with

fireworks, bottles and sticks, while police and university security stood by for five hours. On May 2, police shut down the encampment by arresting more than 200, and UCLA did nothing to immediately stop civil rights abuses, according to a lawsuit filed in March.

Hannah Appel, a professor of anthropology at UCLA and a member of Faculty for Justice in Palestine, says it's important to get across "the level of violence, extraordinary put-people-in-the-hospital violence. We're talking bear mace, fireworks, wooden boards with nails in them. Like crazy violence. Private security and those police officers stood by for hours while those people sent our students to the hospital. We have one faculty member who has permanent eye damage.

"And then you have the following night," Appel continues. "The encampment survives the attack, and there's an equal, if not escalated, level of state-sanctioned violence. Less-lethal munitions being fired at our students, faculty members driving students with cracked ribs to the hospital."

The violence, says Appel, was "a linchpin [for] what is now an active campaign to unionize tenure track faculty across the other nine University of California campuses," with the exception of UC Santa Cruz, which is already union.

Soon after, UC campuses at San Diego and Irvine began issuing suspension notices to students alleged to have participated in the peaceful solidarity demonstrations.

But while this was the first strike, it came on the heels of other labor mobilizations in solidarity with Palestinians. When all of this unfolded, graduate workers at UC Santa Cruz had already been engaged in their own deep organizing around material support for the U.S. military. On Oct. 16, 2023, the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions had put out a call for trade unionists "to end all forms of complicity with Israel's crimes—most urgently halting the arms trade with Israel, as well as all funding and military research." In response, UC Santa Cruz workers organized to sever ties between the U.S. military and research labs at the school.

In an article published in *Long-Haul*, reflecting on lessons from the strike, current and former grad workers wrote, "Even though this organizing was never consciously imagined as strike preparation, we see in retrospect how it cultivated collective commitment among ideologically mixed departments."



On UCLA's campus on May 1, 2024, a peaceful student demonstration in solidarity with Gaza gets assaulted by counterprotesters using fireworks and makeshift weapons.

PHOTO BY SHAY HORSE /NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

But there was other history to draw on, too. UC Santa Cruz graduate student workers went on a wildcat strike at the end of 2019 and into 2020 to demand a cost-of-living adjustment to account for soaring rents. In 2022, they were part of a University of California system-wide strike. This gave them the muscle memory of working together toward ambitious goals.

“We had done this kind of stuff before,” Edenhofer tells me. “We had departments organized. We had our coworkers with us and not isolated. We all knew everybody. We could deliberate. And then, when a lot of people have the same moral principle, what the organizing does is allow people to feel like they can actually act on that.”

UAW Local 4811 has 48,000 members across the UC system and is the largest union of academic workers in the United States. It responded to the crackdown on the encampments by filing unfair labor practices allegations against the university, claiming the university had unilaterally changed its disciplinary policies to target workplace free speech and also took adverse action against workers for exercising the right to peacefully protest working conditions. The university system had previously come under scrutiny, in July 2023, when campus police arrested three academic workers at the San

Diego campus and charged them each with a felony for chalking slogans like “Living Wage Now” on a campus building.

Then came the strike authorization votes. In mid-May of 2024, 19,780 workers voted and a stunning majority—four of five— authorized the local’s executive board to call a strike. These workers included teaching assistants, researchers, tutors, postdocs, project scientists and others. According to a statement from the union, “79% of participating members overall voted yes.”

The union had the formal permission from its membership to put its aspirational demands into strike action.

A BDELHAKIM ELAYAN, IN RAMALLAH, TELLS me it is precisely American workers’ proximity to power that makes their solidarity more important. “If the unions in the United States announce their support for the Palestinian cause, this can affect not only the public opinion in America, but also the international public opinion and the media, and this can really have an impact on their solidarity with the Palestinian issue,” he says. Palestinian workers do not have much leverage to exert, and their economy is in tatters. But workers in other countries do.

I asked Jeff Schuhrke, a labor historian at SUNY Empire State University with whom I often collaborate, what he makes of labor’s response to this call. “The statements for a ceasefire, and especially the call for an arms embargo, were definitely very significant and a break from U.S. labor officialdom’s long history of support for Israel,” said Schuhrke, author of *No Neutrals There: U.S. Labor, Zionism, and the Struggle for Palestine*. “In the ’80s, there were U.S. unions forcefully calling for an end to weapons shipments to El Salvador and to the Contras, so there is precedent for this kind of thing. But not when it comes to Israel.”

He continued: “But I think, for a lot of labor leaders, they took the cease-fire statements and effectively said, ‘Well, we did something, and now we’re done.’” Schuhrke points to a gap, for example, between the UAW’s December 2023 commitment to form a divestment working group and its International Executive Board’s May 2024 vote not to divest \$400,000 the union reportedly holds in Israeli state bonds, despite the urging of UAW Labor for Palestine. He noted that UAW was relatively early in calling for a ceasefire, and by December 2023 its members and leaders were mobilizing to protests and denouncing U.S. support for Israel’s military campaign, in the aftermath of the union’s stand-up strike against the Big Three automakers.

But any gesture toward supporting an arms embargo is an opening that should be welcomed, according to Omar Barghouti, a founding member of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement (BDS), in

a video address to attendees of the Socialism Conference in Chicago. BDS is trying to ramp up its own efforts to build solidarity within the U.S. labor movement, organizer for the BDS movement Olivia Katbi elaborated in an interview, “because it is really important, and we are falling behind, especially compared to the rest of the world.”

Labor for an Arms Embargo, a campaign within the Democratic Socialists of America, is working with union members to try to build union power at the local level to oppose arms shipments. Right now, it’s focused on training members—in hopes of putting real muscle behind the call.

Rafeedie, the Palestinian American Teamster, tells me that U.S. labor has done nowhere near enough given “the severity of the problem.”

“I mean, there’s still a genocide going on,” he says in late November 2025. “And a ‘ceasefire’ has happened, but it’s not really a ceasefire—it’s a strategic implementation of a slow depopulation of Gaza. In countries like Colombia and Spain and Ireland, the labor movement has dictated to the government to take strict actions of blocking weapons. Labor here has an uphill battle right now, especially with the leadership of America. But we need more.”

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, union leadership decided to embrace the “standup strike” model that the UAW employed in the fall of 2023 to take on the Big Three automakers. In a stand-up strike, instead of workers walking out all at once, strikes roll from one workplace to the next, catching employers off guard.

The strike started at UC Santa Cruz the morning of May 20, 2024, then spread to UCLA and UC Davis the next week, then UC San Diego, UC Santa Barbara and UC Irvine. The union issued the demands of amnesty for all who faced discipline, such as suspension notices, and the right to free speech. It also called for divestment from companies that profit from Israel’s brutality, disclosure of funding and investments, and to “empower researchers to opt out of funding sources tied to the military or oppression of Palestinians.”

Many thousands of workers participated, including not just members of UAW Local 4811 but some additional faculty, lecturers and other university employees. At UC Santa Cruz alone, grad workers verified that 12,500 grades could be withheld if the strike continued until the university’s grading deadline. “There was a large contingent, not nearly as large as we would want it, but plenty of faculty, who were trying,” Appel says. “We were list-building. We were trying to figure out, department by

department, which research assistants or teaching assistants were in danger. Were they going to get paid? We had a liaison group with faculty and UAW.”

The strike came to an end on June 7, 2024, in response to a temporary restraining order issued by an Orange County Superior Court judge. “We ultimately found ourselves unprepared to defy the restraining order,” the workers wrote in *Long-Haul*.

IN *SOLIDARITY*, LEAH HUNT-HENDRIX AND Astra Taylor pose the concept of “transformative solidarity,” which they say is “a means and an end, the process of struggling together and a way of describing a kind of society that is more just and mutualistic.” Transformative solidarity, they argue, “points us toward the fundamental fellowship of humankind, connecting us with others despite apparent differences.”

There are plenty of mottos organic to the American labor movement that capture this particular meaning of solidarity. “An injury to one is an injury to all,” for example. Or the famous line from Eugene V. Debs, “While there is a lower class, I am in it, while there is a criminal element, I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.”

I heard this principle articulated compellingly by Ash Bohrer, a member of Jewish Voice for Peace-Chicago, in an [interview](#) on the *Citations Needed* podcast that aired June 19. Bohrer was one of six members on hunger strike to demand Israel stop starving Gaza and the United States stop arming Israel.

“We’re willing to stand up for Gazans we have never met,” Bohrer said, “because we believe in modeling the future that we want to live in, where all people are able to live where they are and be able to do so in a world full of justice and freedom. And what that requires is solidarity, and sometimes solidarity requires sacrifice.”

Katbi underscores that this entanglement is material and urgent, and best understood in terms of complicity and responsibility. “If the U.S. stopped shipping the weapons and supplying the funding, Israel would not be able to maintain its genocide,” she says. “So outside of the federal government, U.S. workers are really the only ones with the power to stop it.”

For Elayan, the idea is simple: If workers won’t defend you, who will? It’s 8 p.m. Ramallah time, and he says he’ll speak with me as long as I need. “We see our suffering and our conditions to be part of a larger picture of workers around the world who also would face similar conditions,” he says. “I would like to

ask unions in America to consider the Palestinian cause part of their cause that seeks justice and humanity.”

Jack Davies says that the biggest barrier to pulling off labor actions in solidarity for Palestine was creating conditions where workers feel “we can wage a fight that’s actually worth the struggle and sacrifice. Asking people to walk off their jobs is different from other actions. Workers need to have reason to believe that the demands are meaningful and the strategy under discussion is adequate to win them.

“When considering walking off your job, even if the issues at stake are evidently more important than your own livelihood, people are unlikely to take this on in large numbers if they can reasonably conclude that it won’t have much or any effect on those issues.”

Davies talks quickly, like he can barely contain his excitement: “When people believe an action is realistic, they can go really far. Once you’re taking those actions, it’s sometimes quite shocking how far a group of even previously skeptical workers might go.”

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