The US Unions Taking a Stand for Palestine

Jeff Schuhrke

In July 2024, nearly ten months into what numerous scholars and legal experts have called Israel's genocidal assault on the Gaza Strip, seven prominent US unions sent a letter to President Joe Biden calling on him "to immediately halt all military aid to Israel as part of the work to secure an immediate and permanent ceasefire in the war in Gaza."

The signatories included the two largest unions in the country—the National Education Association and Service Employees International Union (SEIU)—as well as the United Auto Workers (UAW), the American Postal Workers Union (APWU), the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT), the Association of Flight Attendants, and the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers. Combined, these unions represent approximately six million workers, or roughly half of all union members in the United States.

"As you said on May 31," the union letter reminded Biden, "the Israeli response has 'devastated Hamas forces over the past eight months' and . . . 'Hamas [is] no longer capable of carrying out another October 7th.' Yet it is clear that the Israeli government will continue to pursue its vicious response to the horrific attacks of October 7th until it is forced to stop."[1]

Biden, a close ally of organized labor who often referred to himself as the "most pro-union president in US history," did not offer a public response. But four weeks after the letter, he effectively answered by approving another $20 billion in arms sales to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, right as Gaza's official civilian death toll climbed above forty thousand with no ceasefire or hostage deal in sight.[2] "Union Joe's" professed affinity for the labor movement apparently did not apply when it came to labor's stance on urgent matters of war, peace, international law, and how American workers' tax money is used overseas.

Though it did not convince the president to change his Middle East policy, the labor demand for a US arms embargo on Israel represented an important victory for antiwar and pro-Palestine union members. For months, rank-and-filers had

1. "Members of the National Labor Network for Ceasefire."
2. *CBS News*, "Biden Administration Approves $20 Billion in Weapons."

Labor: Studies in Working-Class History Volume 22 • Issue 3
DOI 10.1215/15476715-12105709 © 2025 by Labor and Working-Class History Association

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been passing resolutions within their locals that endorsed a call to solidarity issued by a coalition of Palestinian trade unions urging organized labor around the world to oppose the manufacture, sale, and shipment of weapons to the Israeli military—weapons being used to kill and maim their members and their families and to decimate their homes and neighborhoods.[3]

Palestine solidarity activists in the US labor movement had already successfully pushed several national unions and the AFL-CIO to come out in support of a ceasefire by the spring of 2024, but top labor officials had avoided calling for an arms embargo until the July letter to Biden.

Some unions and their leaders went even further. APWU president Mark Dimondstein, for example, participated in the large demonstrations outside the Capitol in July 2024 protesting Netanyahu's speech to Congress as the International Criminal Court sought a warrant for his arrest for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Back in November 2023, after the APWU became the first AFL-CIO affiliate to call for a ceasefire, Dimondstein penned a noteworthy essay in *The Nation* expressing his opposition not only to current Israeli policy but to Zionism itself. "Being raised as a proud Jewish American, and facing my share of antisemitism, does not make me a supporter of Zionism," he wrote. "Israel was created at the expense of the Palestinians, who were driven violently from their homes, forced into impoverished refugee camps, refused the right of return, and have suffered generations of trauma, degradation, settler aggressions, and the indignities of apartheid policies."[4]

For his part, IUPAT president Jimmy Williams used his address at that union's national convention in August 2024 to call on the US government "to stop funding the genocide" in Gaza. In response to a resolution submitted by Painters and Allied Trades Local 939 in Dorchester, Massachusetts, calling for "complete divestment" of IUPAT's pension money "from any publicly traded weapons manufacturers, firms, corporations, or other institutions that aid the ongoing illegal occupation of Palestine and the genocide of Palestinians"—a measure the convention delegates voted down—Williams promised that he and the union's leadership would craft "a more responsible investment policy."[5]

Some commentators criticized unions for taking these stands. An illustrative example was Oren Cass, a former adviser to Mitt Romney and founder of conservative think tank American Compass, who took to social media after the IUPAT convention to say that "unions should . . . stay out of politics" and rhetorically asked, "How [do] painters benefit from accusing Israel of genocide?"[6]

3. Progressive International, "Urgent Call from Palestinian Trade Unions"; Schuhrke, "Unions Must Go Beyond."

4. Dimondstein, "As a Union President" and "Rashida Tlaib."

5. *Democracy Now!*, "Painters' Union to Divest"; IUPAT, "Resolution No. 14," 26.

6. Oren Cass, "When I suggest unions should focus on representing workers and stay out of politics, I get lectured that a labor movement must exercise political power to advance economic interests. / But I'm still not entirely clear on how painters benefit from accusing Israel of genocide?," X (formerly Twitter), August 29, 2024, https://x.com/oren_cass/status/1829321307831275801.

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Of course, it is not at all unusual for unions to take positions on contentious social and political issues that matter to their members. In the 1950s and 1960s, several unions lent their resources and political clout to supporting the civil rights movement, with unions like the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees and Local 1199B confronting segregation and white supremacy head-on by backing strikes of long-exploited African American workers in places like Memphis and Charleston. In the 1970s and 1980s, many unions used the power of collective bargaining to secure antidiscrimination protections for LGBTQ members. The American Federation of Teachers passed resolutions at its national conventions opposing state laws and school district regulations that sought to punish gay and lesbian educators, while various UAW and SEIU locals successfully negotiated for employer health plans to be extended to domestic partners.[7] In recent decades, American unions have also advocated around a host of other political matters like immigration reform, reproductive rights, climate justice, and police accountability.

Similarly, the US labor movement has historically been anything but silent or uninvolved when it comes to foreign policy controversies. Throughout the Cold War, anticommunist officials in the AFL-CIO worked hand in hand with the State Department and Central Intelligence Agency to undermine leftist worker movements around the world in the name of "containment." At the same time, more progressive elements in US labor have frequently taken meaningful action to oppose oppression overseas. At the height of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, for example, West Coast dockworkers with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union boycotted South African cargo, while the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists and New York Labor Committee Against Apartheid forged critical networks of international solidarity with the African National Congress and its allied trade unions.[8]

US labor has also frequently intervened in the century-long turmoil in Palestine—but almost always on the side of the Zionist movement and state of Israel. The AFL first formally endorsed the Zionist dream of establishing a Jewish "national homeland" in Palestine at its 1917 convention—part of Samuel Gompers's effort to demonstrate labor's patriotic support for US entry into World War I by echoing President Woodrow Wilson's calls for the self-determination of European nations living under oppressive empires.[9]

From the 1920s to the 1940s, American union officials—both Jews and non-Jews—became increasingly enamored with the Labor Zionist movement in Mandatory Palestine as embodied by Histadrut. Functioning as both a Jewish-only trade union federation and a conglomeration of Jewish-exclusive farms, housing

7. See Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*; Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*; Frank, *Out in the Union*.

8. See Schuhrke, *Blue-Collar Empire*; Carew, *American Labour's Cold War Abroad*; Scipes, *AFL-CIO's Secret War Against Developing Country Workers*; Cole, *Dockworker Power*; Webb, "U.S. Worker Movements and Direct Links Against Apartheid."

9. Polishook, "American Federation of Labor," 231–42.

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developments, banks, hospitals, clinics, and transportation networks, Histadrut aimed to lay the economic foundation for a future Jewish state.

Histadrut leaders actively sought the financial support of US unions to carry out this work. Because Labor Zionism prioritized class collaboration and nation-building over class conflict and proletarian revolution, it naturally appealed to many of the AFL's antiradical "business unionists." Labor Zionism and the work of Histadrut also impressed many of the CIO's more liberal and progressive unionists because it put certain socialistic ideas into practice, such as establishing cooperative enterprises and implementing social welfare programs, showcasing the possibilities for building a worker-centered society. Virtually no American union officials at this time seemed to be concerned that Histadrut was systematically discriminating against and economically marginalizing indigenous Palestinian workers and peasants.[10]

Thus, throughout the interwar years, US unions donated millions of dollars to Histadrut's efforts to construct the economic basis for a Jewish state in Arab Palestine. In the aftermath of the Holocaust—which appeared to confirm the Zionist argument that Jews would never be safe without a state of their own—AFL and CIO leaders in 1948 intensely lobbied President Harry Truman to send weapons to Zionist militias in Palestine and to immediately recognize Israel upon its founding.[11]

In the Cold War decades, the AFL-CIO's hawkish anticommunist officials recognized Israel as a crucial bulwark against Soviet influence in the geostrategic and oil-rich Middle East. They also regarded Labor Zionism as a positive, worker-led economic development model that could be emulated across the Third World as an alternative to communism. Therefore, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the US labor movement invested millions more dollars in Israel by purchasing state bonds.

Every time the country was at war with its Arab neighbors—such as in 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982—American union officials like George Meany, Walter Reuther, and Lane Kirkland would issue public statements expressing unwavering support for Israel, condemning its enemies, and calling on the US government to increase military aid to the country. Amid Israel's bloody invasion of Lebanon and siege of Beirut in 1982, the AFL-CIO Executive Council even went to the trouble of taking out a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* announcing, in all caps, that "THE AFL-CIO IS NOT NEUTRAL. WE SUPPORT ISRAEL."[12]

But in more recent decades, younger generations of US workers have become more sympathetic to the cause of Palestinian freedom. One of the earliest and most remarkable displays of Palestine solidarity within the labor movement came in November 1973, when approximately two thousand Arab American autoworkers

10. See Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*; Glazer, "Language of Propaganda"; Fromer, "'Other' Pro-Israel Lobby."

11. See Hahn, "Influence of Organized Labor"; Howard, *Sewing the Fabric of Statehood*; Fromer, "'Other' Pro-Israel Lobby."

12. See Hahn, "Influence of Organized Labor"; Howard, *Sewing the Fabric of Statehood*; Schuhrke, "US Labor Has Long Been a Stalwart Backer of Israel"; Fromer, "'Other' Pro-Israel Lobby"; *New York Times*, "Organized Labor Speaks Out on Lebanon."

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staged a one-day wildcat strike at the Dodge Main assembly plant outside Detroit to demand that their union, the UAW, divest its holdings in Israeli state bonds. "Purchase of Israeli bonds is regarded by these workers similarly as would a UAW investment in racist South Africa . . . be regarded by black workers," local Arab American leaders explained at the time.[13]

Over the past year, the UAW under the leadership of democratically elected reform president Shawn Fain has been at the forefront of US labor's Palestine activism. Fresh off of the union's high-profile strike victory at the Big Three automakers in fall 2023, Fain generated more headlines on December 1 that year by publicly calling for a ceasefire in Gaza and release of all hostages, crediting the union's rank and file for pushing him to do so. In July 2024, the UAW was one of the unions that demanded an arms embargo and protested Netanyahu's visit to Congress. During the Democratic National Convention the following month, where Fain took the stage and called Donald Trump a scab, the UAW also urged party leaders to respect the Uncommitted movement's request that a Palestinian American be allowed to give a vetted speech to try bringing alienated Muslim American, Arab American, and antiwar voters back into the Democratic coalition—a request the Kamala Harris campaign denied.[14]

The UAW has also defended the free speech of protesters on university campuses amid the draconian crackdowns on Palestine solidarity encampments, which included swarms of heavily armed riot police brutalizing students and faculty alike. With numerous students facing suspension and expulsion for participating in the protests—which, for student workers, jeopardized their employment—the UAW and other academic unions pushed back by turning to contractual protections, labor law, and even strike action.

For example, the UAW-affiliated Harvard Graduate Students United filed Unfair Labor Practice charges against the university for unilaterally changing policies related to campus protests and violating student employees' right to have a union representative on hand during disciplinary meetings. More dramatically, UAW Local 4811—representing forty-eight thousand graduate workers and postdocs across the University of California system—staged a strike on six campuses between May 20 and June 10, 2024, to demand an end to similar unfair labor practices, to protect academic freedom, and to support the pro-Palestine protesters' calls for university divestment from companies profiting off the war on Gaza. The work stoppage, which occurred even though the union contract and its "no strike" clause were still in effect, was halted only after an Orange County judge issued a temporary restraining order on Local 4811.[15]

13. See Pennock, *Rise of the Arab American Left*, 180–87; Schuhrke, "When Arab-American Detroit Auto Workers Struck for Palestinian Liberation."

14. Rubin, "Democrats Refused to Give Palestinian Americans DNC Speaking Slot"; Simon, "DNC Didn't Let a Palestinian American Speak."

15. Eidelson, "Harvard Gaza Protest Response"; Har, "University of California Academic Workers"; Gorman, "California Public University"; Current and Former Grad Workers, "From the Camp to the Picket."

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The UAW has similarly been targeted by the McCarthyite effort to smear any pro-Palestine advocacy as antisemitism—a tactic increasingly embraced by antilabor Republicans and the same billionaire-funded law firms and think tanks constantly working to defund and disempower unions. As journalist Derek Seidman has revealed, the relentlessly anti-Palestinian lobbying group AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) is funded by many of the same billionaire donors who fund notoriously antilabor groups like the Job Creators Network, the Center for Union Facts, the State Policy Network, and the Manhattan Institute.[16]

Just as they have historically used red scares around international controversies like the Bolshevik Revolution and the onset of the Cold War to divide the labor movement and bust unions, procorporate and right-wing forces are now whipping up a frenzy around Palestine solidarity activism in service to their ongoing attempts to decimate organized labor.

For example, after the members of the UAW-affiliated Association of Legal Aid Attorneys (ALAA) in New York City democratically voted to pass a Palestine solidarity resolution in December 2023, two disgruntled bargaining unit members filed a lawsuit against the union with the help of the so-called Liberty Justice Center, the same law firm behind the *Janus* decision. Alleging that the ALAA's resolution was antisemitic, the suit seeks to allow the plaintiffs to opt out of paying agency fees to the union and extend *Janus*'s "right-to-work" provisions to private nonprofit employers that receive any government funding. This summer, a federal judge dismissed the lawsuit.[17]

Further, in 2024, Republican Representative Virginia Foxx—a devoted Trump ally who then chaired the House Committee on Education and the Workforce—demanded that the ALAA present documents related to the membership vote on the Palestine resolution and threatened to charge the union's officers with contempt of Congress if they refused. ALAA leaders, with the national UAW's backing, stood their ground against this overreach and did not comply. In September of that year, Foxx's committee released a report alleging that "caustic, antisemitic ideology" had "consumed many unions" like the UAW. To remedy this situation, the report recommended that Congress pass national "right-to-work" legislation—conveniently the same goal the antiunion lobby has championed for decades.[18]

As this already repressive environment becomes worse under the second Trump administration, and as anti-Palestinian and antiunion forces increasingly merge together in the United States, the labor movement will likely continue to speak out on the destructive violence in Palestine and other questions of social justice both at home and abroad. Given the growing antiunion repression targeting opponents of the Gaza genocide, as well as organized labor's long history of bolstering Israel (often at the expense of Palestinians), such advocacy is as practical as it is ethical. ■

16. Seidman, "Some of AIPAC's Biggest Donors."

17. Schuhrke, "Anti-Union Lobby's Newest Weapon"; Thomas, "NYC Legal Aid Union Defeats."

18. New York Civil Liberties Union, "Congressional Subpoena over Pro-Palestinian Speech"; Committee on Education and the Workforce, Press Release; Republican Staff Report "Union Misrepresentation."

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