

U.S. Labor and the Israel-Gaza War

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The U.S. labor movement is struggling with the controversial question of how to deal with the Israel-Gaza War. While the leadership of the AFL-CIO, the nation's largest labor federation, has lined up with President Joe Biden and the Democratic Party, which has supported Israel and calls only for a humanitarian pause in the fighting, some local unions have come out in support of a ceasefire, oppose U.S. funding for Israel, and decry Israel's apartheid state.

On October 11, the AFL-CIO issued a statement that condemned Hamas and its terrorism, but did not mention Israel's attacks on Gaza and it has issued no statement since. Though it did express concern "about the emerging humanitarian crisis that is affecting Palestinians in Gaza and throughout the region." Finally, it called "for a swift resolution to the current conflict to end the bloodshed of innocent civilians, and to promote a just and long-lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians." The AFL-CIO has reminded its affiliated unions that they may not take positions on the Israel-Palestine questions because only the AFL-CIO leadership has the right to speak on foreign policy questions.

Nevertheless, a number of local unions, especially teachers' unions have passed resolutions in support of a ceasefire. The Minneapolis Federation of Teachers' Israeli-Palestinian Resolution of October 25 took a strong position touching on a variety of issues related to the war: "MFT mourns the loss of innocent life in Israel and occupied Palestine. We categorically reject violence against all civilians whether Israeli or Palestinian. We therefore call for an immediate ceasefire to allow humanitarian aid into Gaza and to de-escalate the conflict. As Americans, we also condemn the role our government plays in supporting the system of Israeli occupation and apartheid, which lies at the root of the Palestinian Israeli conflict." The MFT also called for repealing the state's anti-Boycott, Divest, Sanction legislation."

In response, the Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota and the Dakotas sent the local school board a letter signed by 800 people that condemned the MFT's resolution as "antisemitic." Some Jewish parents in the district condemned the MFT resolution for encouraging antisemitism that will put their children in danger.

The Oakland Education Association (OEA), a teachers union, passed a resolution that called for solidarity with Palestine and condemned the "genocidal and apartheid state of Israel." Then it posted on social media a statement that the union was "standing unequivocally in support of Palestinian liberation." The resolution said that OEA would distribute educational materials for teachers to use in classrooms to teach about Palestinian liberation.

In reaction, the Oakland chapters of the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League and Jewish Community Relations Council denounced the OEA positions on Israel-Palestine, accusing the union of being antisemitic and of encouraging Hamas terrorism. The union then responded by moderating its position, issuing a statement saying: "As unionists, we are moved by calls for solidarity from civilians in both Israel and Palestine. We are committed to continuing the

conversation within our union as we engage in our democratic processes. Our union unequivocally condemns anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. We call for the release of hostages held by Hamas. We mourn the loss of life, and we add our voices to a growing collective calling for a ceasefire.”

Some locals want to go further than mere words. Labor Notes, the labor education center, organized a discussion involving several local union officials and hundreds of rank-and-file activists on how to organize around support for Palestine. The participants discussed passing resolutions, co-sponsoring rallies and demonstrations, refusing to handle military shipments, and organizing jobs actions among workers involved in shipping military supplies.

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