

U.S. labor leaders on Capitol Hill push President Biden for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza

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Washington, December 15 (RHC)-- Influential labor leaders in the United States have joined progressive legislators in the United States Capitol to push the administration of President Joe Biden to support a ceasefire in war-torn Gaza. In a news conference on Thursday, representatives from United Auto

Workers (UAW), United Electrical Workers and the American Postal Workers Union framed their appeal as part of a long history of labour movements supporting human rights at home and abroad.

“We know unions provide a bridge toward fighting all forms of hatred, phobias, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, Islamophobia and more,” said Shawn Fain, president of the UAW. “Now it’s time for the rest of our elected leaders to step up and do what it takes to end the violence.”

The news conference was organised by Democratic Representatives Cori Bush and Rashida Tlaib, who introduced legislation in October calling for a ceasefire. Over 18,700 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza so far, amid an ongoing Israeli military offensive.

“As an activist and organizer and a proud daughter of a former union member, I know that the foundational message of every guild is to stand with the people, to fight for their dignity and to advocate for those most marginalised,” Bush said at the press conference. “Our humanity needs a ceasefire, and that is precisely why I’m so happy to have unions here today to join in this fight, because we know that unions know how to organise. Unions know how to mobilise and galvanise and energise.”

Both the Congress members and the labour leaders used the press conference to underscore the political power that unions wield. The UAW, for instance, represents an estimated 400,000 active members, while the American Postal Service Union boasts 330,000 workers. They hinted there could be consequences for Biden at the ballot box, should he fail to heed their call for a ceasefire.

“As the U.S. funds Israel’s campaign of terror, we, the workers, are footing the bill for the massacre of innocents in Palestine,” said Janvi Madhani of the United Electrical Workers. “This is the time for workers to leverage our labour power and electoral power to stand in uncompromising solidarity with the cause of Palestinian freedom.”

Judy Beard, a representative of the American Postal Workers Union, indicated that her organisation’s call for a ceasefire reflected wider views among the U.S. public. “As a union that stands for equality, social justice, human labor rights and international solidarity, we unite with millions of good people [and] members of Congress,” she said. Her union first announced its support for a ceasefire on November 8th.

Biden has long touted himself as the “most pro-union president in American history.” But while he enjoyed the endorsement of both the UAW and the American Postal Workers Union during the 2020 presidential race, his unwillingness to call for a ceasefire could alienate the unions as he seeks reelection in 2024.

The Democratic president has been reluctant to criticize Israel’s military offensive in Gaza, citing the country’s “right to defend itself” in the wake of an October 7 attack that left 1,200 people dead. But the subsequent war on Gaza has killed thousands, many of them women and children. Entire neighbourhoods have been levelled, with United Nations experts warning of a “grave risk of genocide” in the Palestinian territory.

The spiralling humanitarian crisis in Gaza has provoked widespread outcry. Even Biden has warned that “indiscriminate bombing” could cause Israel to lose public support.

Still, many within Biden’s own party have criticised him for his “unwavering support” for Israel. As of Wednesday, an estimated 62 members of the U.S. Congress have called for a ceasefire, according to the Working Families Party, a left-leaning political group. A Reuters/Ipsos poll released last month also showed 68 percent of Americans supported calls for a ceasefire. That number was even higher among Democrats alone.

As the 2024 presidential race nears, surveys show Biden falling behind his chief Republican rival Donald Trump in key swing states like Michigan, which boasts large Arab and Muslim American communities. A

Bloomberg News/Morning Consult poll released this month showed Trump leading Biden 46 percent to 42 in a one-on-one matchup in the state.

But Biden has made strides in trying to woo Michigan's relatively large body of union workers. An estimated 14 percent of "wage and salary workers" in the state belong to a union, higher than the national average of 10 percent. In September, Biden flew to Michigan, where he became the first sitting U.S. president to visit a picket line of striking UAW workers.

The auto union, at the time, was in the midst of its first-ever strike against all of the "Big Three" car companies: General Motors, Ford and Stellantis. The strike was also the union's longest in nearly a quarter century, and it resulted in higher wages and better benefits for auto workers.

But Trump also sought to appeal to auto workers during the strike, holding a rally a day after Biden's appearance on the picket line.

The UAW has yet to endorse a candidate for the 2024 race. With its headquarters based in Detroit, Michigan, it has significant sway in so-called "Rust Belt" states, where manufacturing has been a historic driver of the local economy.

"I call on the rest of the labor movement to join us in this mission for peace and social justice for all of humanity," Fain, the UAW president, said on Thursday, pushing other union leaders to join the call for a ceasefire.

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