

U.S. federal workers risk livelihoods in push for course change on Gaza war

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Washington, DC – When your children ask you what you did during the war in Gaza, what will you say? That’s how one federal government employee in the United States described her motivation for organising her colleagues around a “day of mourning” on Tuesday to recognise more than 100 days of war in the Palestinian enclave.

She and a group of federal workers, acting anonymously under the name Feds United for Peace, agreed to take leave from their jobs en masse, in a demonstration against the rising death toll in Gaza and the U.S.'s role in the war.

The move is the latest underscoring the discontent within President Joe Biden's administration. Biden has voiced "rock-solid and unwavering" support for Israel, despite mounting human rights concerns over its months-long military campaign in Gaza.

More than 24,200 Palestinians have been killed in the fighting, and nearly 1.9 million displaced.

"When your kids ask you, 'What did you do?', we don't want to say that we just watched from the sidelines. And we hope that everyone who has a conscience looks at this situation and takes it upon themselves to not watch from the sidelines," said the organizer, who added that she had more than 15 years of experience in the federal government.

She and a second organizer spoke to Al Jazeera on condition of anonymity for fear of professional repercussions. They said the group represents employees — both career professionals and political appointees — across 27 government agencies, including the White House and Congress.

"We are really not activists. There may be, among our group, people who are political appointees, but we're not political in any way," said the second organizer. "This group really grows out of this immense frustration and sadness at seeing the war continue for so long — the massive death and destruction unfolding in Gaza over the last 100 days," he said.

Members of the Biden administration have repeatedly voiced frustration with the president's stance and called for a ceasefire in Gaza, including through public statements and open letters. There have even been high-profile resignations. State Department official Josh Paul left his post over Biden's handling of the war, as did Tariq Habash in the Department of Education.

Habash had been the department's only Palestinian American political appointee at the time of his departure. He later told Al Jazeera that leaving was "the only thing" he could do in the face of a U.S. policy that has had a "near-daily dehumanising effect" on Palestinians.

Nevertheless, Washington continues to provide military aid to Israel, without setting "red lines" to limit its use. An estimated \$3.8 billion is earmarked annually for the country, with Biden bypassing Congress twice last month to approve further sales of weaponry.

The Biden administration has recently called on the Israeli government to shift towards more targeted operations with fewer civilian casualties, but Palestinian American advocates have said those words ring hollow without more decisive action. Biden also provoked the ire of Palestinian rights supporters after he questioned the death toll provided by authorities in Gaza.

That is why the latest move by federal employees "is not something that is coming out of the blue", said Jasmine El-Gamal, a foreign policy analyst and former Middle East adviser at the Pentagon. "We've seen months now of federal employees, both in the executive branch and the legislative branch, trying to bring attention to the fact that there is a huge level of dissent within the Biden administration and from people working on Biden's campaign as well, against his policies when it comes to Gaza," El-Gamal told Al Jazeera.

One of the organizers for Feds United for Peace told Al Jazeera: "As a federal workforce, we are prohibited by law from striking, and so this action was never a strike."

"It was never designed as a walkout. It was designed as a day of mourning. And employees took different types of leave for this day of mourning and used it in different ways," she said, adding that

watching the “horrors unfold” in Gaza “has taken a tremendous toll on people who care about what’s going on.”

“This was also an opportunity for people to just take a day and take care of themselves in order to continue their work and the struggle,” she said. “Even though we are trying to protect ourselves, I think each one of us recognises that we’re putting our livelihoods at risk,” said the second organiser. While the organizer did not say how many were participating in the walkout, he did say that participation “has exceeded expectations.”

Many, however, are keeping a low profile, “as a result of perceived intimidation.”

The group is appealing for the Biden administration to support an immediate ceasefire, stop undermining international efforts to hold Israel accountable, prioritise the entry of humanitarian goods into Gaza and help facilitate the release of captives.

“We went into public service to serve the United States, to try to reflect what is best about the United States,” said the first organizer. “And so in this particular case, we feel it is a moral obligation and a patriotic duty to our country to use the means at our disposal to try to urge a course change in the White House policy.”

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