

The “People’s Conference for Palestine”: No perspective to stop the genocide in Gaza

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This past weekend, the “People’s Conference for Palestine” was held in Detroit, Michigan over three days, from May 24 through May 26. Organizers for the event stated that over 3,500 people attended.

The steering committee for the conference included 15 organizations, among which were the Palestinian Youth Movement, National Students for Justice In Palestine, the ANSWER Coalition (associated with the Party for Socialism and Liberation), Arab Resource and Organizing Society (AROC), Writers Against the War on Gaza, and Healthcare Workers for Palestine.

Despite the peaceful character of the event, police were a constant presence on the streets and outside the convention center. Several Palestinian speakers slated to appear at the event were delayed or were not able to attend in person, due to fascist restrictions imposed on their travel by the US/NATO governments.

The stated goal of the conference, according to a program signed by the Steering Committee, was to provide “a space to assess, strategize and prepare for what is required for us in the next phase of the struggle.” However, the political perspective that dominated did not present a viable way forward.

Several panels did feature harrowing testimony of the situation in Gaza. In a recorded video message, Hind Khoudary, a journalist in Gaza who has been displaced since November 2023 said, “We are not only fearing air strikes, we are fearing famine.” She documented the catastrophic situation produced by Israel’s bombardment and the difficulties confronting journalists, who have themselves been targeted by airstrikes.

In a session titled, “Cutting Ties with Zionism in the Workplace,” former Google worker Ariel Koren discussed her experience trying to fight back against the implementation of Project Nimbus, a \$1.2 billion contract between Google, Amazon and the Israel Defense Forces that provides the military a suite of computer and artificial intelligence tools used to facilitate the oppression and extermination of the Palestinian people.

Koren explained that as part of the contract, Google is required to build “whatever cloud tools and AI tools the Israeli government and military ask for without asking any questions themselves. Google has no right to regulate or oversee or even know anything about how these get used on the ground and which government and military agencies are the beneficiaries of these tools.” Among the tools provided to the IDF are “facial detection, automatic image categorization, object tracking, and even sentiment analysis.”

Taghreed Ahmed, a member of the Palestinian Transport Union, explained that “Israel controls the conditions of workers” and that “over 9,000” workers were taken prisoner by Israel following October 7. While in Israeli custody, many workers were tortured and “over 80” are still missing.

Despite the IDF offensive on Gaza, Ahmed said that after workers were released they asked to return to the city to be with their families.

Before October 7, Ahmed said that over 32,000 workers in Gaza were granted permits to work in Israel, but not a single permit has been granted in over seven months. In order to survive, Ahmed said many working class families have resorted to selling their possessions, including furniture.

Despite the objective and empirical testimony provided by many of the panelists and speakers, the basic political perspective that emerged was thoroughly bankrupt: that of pressuring the Democratic Party.

The opening plenary event set the framework for the conference that followed. References to the crimes of the Israeli regime were combined with a great deal of chanting and slogans.

To the extent that anything was said about the background of the genocide, it was only in relation to the history of the Palestinian struggle. But even here, there was no examination of the essential experiences of this history, including the role of the bourgeois nationalist states in the Middle East in facilitating the repression of the Palestinians by Israel and imperialism.

In her keynote speech, Yara Shoufani of the Palestinian Youth Movement spoke of “historic revolutions” from “the Great Arab Revolution of 1936” ... to “the popular revolution launched in the camps of Lebanon and Jordan”... to “the first and second intifadas.” Another speaker suggested that the “resistance” would last another “100 years” before victory.

To be blunt, the people in Gaza do not have another 100 years. The genocide in Gaza has already led to the deaths of over 36,000 people officially, a significant under-count, while hundreds of thousands are on the brink of famine.

Neither in the introduction nor in any of the panels and plenary sessions was there a single reference to the broader war of which the genocide is a part. In particular, no speakers addressed the escalating US-NATO war against Russia over Ukraine, backed by the Democratic Party, which threatens to develop into a nuclear exchange.

Israel’s genocide, supported by the US and NATO imperialist powers, cannot be defeated by the resistance of the Palestinian people alone, no matter how self-sacrificing. It is necessary to mobilize the international working class, which has the social and economic power to oppose imperialism.

The political perspective presented at the conference, however, worked against this. On Saturday, the conference organizers welcomed a “guest appearance” by Michigan Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib.

In his last social media post before he was assassinated by the US-backed Israel Defense Forces last December, Prof. Refaat Alareer, tweeted, “The Democratic Party and Biden are responsible for the Gaza genocide perpetrated by Israel.” Why a member of the party responsible for not only backing Israel for decades, but murdering Alareer and tens of thousands of other Palestinians, would be welcomed into the conference was never explained.

In her brief comments, Tlaib attacked Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, calling him a “war criminal.” She refused to apply the same label to Netanyahu’s patron and top weapons supplier, President Joe Biden. Instead she appealed to the president she helped elect in 2020, imploring him: “I hope you hear us loud and clear.”

Tlaib did not attempt to provide an explanation as to why the Biden administration and her “colleagues” in the Democratic Party have not only refused to listen to over eight months of sustained peaceful protests, but instead have overseen the police repression of the protests.

Tlaib said it was “shameful” that her “colleagues” voted to send “\$14 billion to the apartheid regime,” while “seniors” in her district ask her, “When are we going to get an increase in Social Security?”

While Tlaib and a few other Democrats voted against providing military funding to Israel, she said nothing about her “yes” vote in the same \$95 billion package to send over \$61 billion to the fascistic Ukrainian government in order to continue the proxy war against Russia.

The deliberate omission of Ukraine on the part of Tlaib and the conference organizers was not a mistake. By presenting the genocide in Gaza, which is one front in the US/NATO global re-division of the world that includes Ukraine and the conflict with Iran and China, as an isolated episode, the organizers and participants could present different factions of the capitalist ruling class, and their adjuncts in the trade union bureaucracy, as “allies” to the Palestinian people, and to the “revolution.”

Joining Tlaib at the conference was her sister, Layla Elabed, who, alongside Party for Socialism and Liberation co-founder and ANSWER National Coordinator Brian Becker, led the penultimate plenary on Sunday, titled “Uncommitted Votes and the Fracturing of the Two Party System.”

As the WSWS has previously explained, the purpose of the Uncommitted campaign is to promote the illusion that the Democratic Party and Biden can be “pressured” from below via symbolic votes or empty ceasefire resolutions. Organizers for the Uncommitted campaign, including Elabed, who told the *New York Times* in February that she “has not ruled out” voting for Biden in November, have been clear that the purpose of “uncommitted” is not to “Abandon Biden” or the Democratic Party, but to “push” him to adopt their position.

Despite tens of thousands of people voting “uncommitted,” the Biden administration, with the support of both the Democrats and Republicans, continues to send weapons to Israel which are being used to ethnically cleanse Rafah. This did not prevent Elabed from presenting the campaign as a success. Speaking next to Becker, she said it sent “a clear message to Biden and the Democratic Party.”

Elabed said, “This is our way of telling Joe Biden he is being held accountable. That he needs to do, in order to save...if he really believed in saving his re-election, if he really believed in fighting fascism, if he believed in fighting for democracy, then he should be pro-Palestinian. He should be demanding a ceasefire now.”

Elabed cautioned against breaking with the Democratic Party, “before November we have a number of primaries happening, state house elections and congressional and senate seats. We need to protect our ceasefire candidates, if anything you come out and you vote and you send people like Rashida and [Missouri Rep.] Cori Bush and our pro-peace anti-war folks back to Capitol Hill and back in our state house.”

Lending support to Elabed and the Democratic Party’s electoral campaigns, Becker replied, “I want to shout out the Listen to Michigan campaign, and the Uncommitted campaign because given the available

options, which are so limited in this tortured form of democracy, these women the other organizers have used the electoral arena to register something that Biden couldn’t ignore, which is the majority of the base of the Democratic Party in particular says ‘no’ to his policy in Palestine.”

Working in tandem with the Democrats to divert energy towards protest stunts, and away from building an independent movement in the working class, Becker later revealed that the same forces behind the Palestine Conference will be organizing a June 8 demonstration at the White House.

Several panels at the Palestine Conference featured the words “labor” and “Zionism” without ever critically examining the role of the US-based trade unions in supporting US imperialism and Israel’s genocide. There was no discussion on current UAW president Shawn Fain’s endorsement of “Genocide Joe.”

The conference featured various “reform” union factions, including Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), and several current and retired union bureaucrats, including UAW Local 4811 president Rafael Jaime and former president and bargain chair of UAW Local 909 in Detroit, Frank Hammer.

UAW Local 4811 comprises 48,000 graduate student workers and researchers in the University of California. Pressure from the rank-and-file compelled the UAW to initiate a strike, but the apparatus has sought to limit it to a handful of campuses, employing the “stand-up strike” tactic used to shut down the auto strike last year. It has also done nothing to inform autoworkers and other members of the union outside California about this highly significant political strike against the genocide in Gaza

Speaking in a panel, “The Role of Labor Unions in Palestinian Struggle,” Jaime tried to take credit for “organizing” the union in order to put it into a position to strike.

The chasm between workers’ desire to fight and the union bureaucrats’ reticence was present throughout Jaime’s comments. After joining what would become Local 4811 in 2016, Jaime admitted that even by 2018 “most workers didn’t even realize they had a union. And so, what we were able to win in 2018 was very limited.” Turning to the current struggle, Jaime said,

I think that the media will focus mostly on the strike and make it seem like all you have to do is press a button and it happens. And I just want it to be, very emphasized, that the work that’s taken to organize, to be able to actually respond to the moment with this kind of action, it’s been years of tireless work.

Near the end of his presentation, Jaime listed the various circumstances through which the union was prepared to call off the strike: “If the university doesn’t resolve its [Unfair Labor Practices], if it doesn’t guarantee the right to peacefully protest, allow protesters to speak up for justice in Palestine, then more campuses are going to go out on strike.”

Throughout his entire presentation Jaime never once mentioned that UAW President Shawn Fain endorsed Biden and stood by as UAW members protesting the genocide were dragged out of the convention where this nomination was announced.

The perspective advanced at the “People’s Conference for Palestine,” in which ANSWER and the PSL play a dominant role, is a dead-end. It is not through appeals to the political establishment and the trade union apparatus that the fight against the genocide must be developed, but through a political struggle in the working class.

For nearly eight months, millions of people around the world have taken to the streets, campuses and government centers to demand an end to the genocide. Despite the overwhelmingly peaceful character of the protests, thousands have been arrested and assaulted by police.

Young people and workers opposed to the genocide, outraged by the

daily atrocities, sickened by the support for Israel's actions by the Biden administration and the imperialist powers, confront serious political questions that require serious and revolutionary answers.

The perspective of "pressuring" governments and corporations to adopt more humanitarian policies has proven to be less than useless. At the same time, the trade union apparatus, integrated into the state, is working to suppress the class struggle and subordinate workers to the ruling class policy of global war.

As WSWWS International Editorial Board Chairman David North explained in a lecture in March on the suicide of Aaron Bushnell, the basic and urgent task is to mobilize "the only social force which actually has in its power, in its objective role in the whole process of capitalist production, in its position in the forces of production, its potential economic strength, its global character, the ability to bring capitalism to its knees, to destroy the very foundations of militarism."

The political program upon which the struggles of the working class must develop is the program of socialist revolution.



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