

“Labor for Ceasefire” event with Rashida Tlaib: Official “pacifism” in the service of war

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The newly-formed National Labor Network for Ceasefire held an online webinar on February 22, titled “Building Bridges for Peace.” The panel included Democratic Congresswomen Rashida Tlaib and Summer Lee, as well as United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain and National Education Association President Becky Pringle. It was hosted by Juan Gonzalez, a host of *Democracy Now!*, a liberal news program.

The aim of the event was to divert popular opposition to the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza behind toothless appeals to “convince” the Biden administration to support a ceasefire. Panelists attempted to separate the current war from the economic and imperialist interests it serves. They presented US support for the mass slaughter simply as a misguided policy, which could be corrected through appeals to the Biden administration.

“It took several years after the start of the illegal US invasion of Iraq, or further back, during the Vietnam War, for anti-war activity in the labor movement to reach the level that it has already reached in the past four months,” Gonzalez gushed in his introduction to the meeting. “There’s never been such a widespread opposition [from] organized labor to a US-supported war” in the history of the American unions, he said. “While our leaders unflinchingly continue to back this mass slaughter, grassroots movements ... have pressed their local governments to take a stand.”

In fact, the same unions passing so-called “ceasefire” resolutions today only months ago were openly attempting to prevent any expression of opposition to the genocide. After that failed, they have changed their tactics, without altering their basic support for the war and the Biden administration. Notably, not one of the national union resolutions passed in recent months has even acknowledged the Palestinian trade unions’ call for worldwide political strikes to halt the shipment of weapons into Israel.

In his remarks, Fain avoided saying anything at all about what was taking place in Gaza, since to do so would only expose the hypocrisy of his own position. Instead, he cited Martin Luther King Jr. and his opposition to the war in Vietnam shortly before his assassination in 1968. This example supposedly animated the UAW’s decision to support a ceasefire today, he claimed.

The UAW passed a “ceasefire” resolution in December, but in January endorsed Biden for re-election and threw out antiwar protesters from the UAW political action convention where Biden accepted the union’s support. There, Biden gave a warmongering

speech calling for the mobilization of American workers for World War III, declaring that they had to produce “aircraft carrier and tanks.” Later, UAW bureaucrats met with Biden behind a phalanx of riot cops in Metro Detroit, where Fain declared the union would “go to war for” Biden. Fain and the UAW also kept a key defense plant operating without a contract, at a company which supplies parts to Israeli fighting vehicles.

The most critical aspect of the bureaucracy’s support for war is its suppression of the working class, the basic social force which must be mobilized to end war. Biden’s war policy is intimately connected to his close collaboration with the union apparatus at home to impose “labor peace” in the face of brutal corporate attacks.

The auto industry is currently in the midst of a massive jobs bloodbath, made possible by the UAW’s sabotage of a strike and imposition of a sellout contract last fall. Gonzalez falsified this record, claiming Fain and the UAW secured a historic victory, and described Fain as one of the most popular labor leaders in America.

In her remarks, NEA President Becky Pringle was far more open about where her bread was buttered. She sought openly to tie “support” for a ceasefire with the re-election of Biden. “We have to win all the things,” she said. “including the re-election of President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris.” This, she claimed, was necessary “to have a democracy here at home.”

Tlaib and the politics of mass “pressure”

Democratic Congresswoman Tlaib, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), claimed the US government was highly responsive to popular opposition. “Remember that our government has always been an institution that responds to outside pressure,” Tlaib said. “During the Civil Rights movement people marched, they took to the streets. The president of the United States didn’t wake up one day and say, ‘You know what, we’ve got to pass the Civil Rights Act,’ or that segregation is inhumane ... it was because people came together from all walks of life and demanded that change.” Similarly, popular pressure led to the

creation of the industrial unions, and the Clean Air Act, she claimed.

The US government could also be induced by “pressure” to support a ceasefire in Gaza, she continued. “We now have 69 members of Congress calling for a ceasefire because of all your efforts ... we’ll not stop marching, we’ll not stop demanding that President Biden facilitates a lasting ceasefire.”

In reality, the Democrats have largely responded, and continue to respond, to anti-genocide protests with naked repression. Leading Democrats joined Republicans in the House of Representatives to censure Tlaib, the only Palestinian-American in Congress, based on bogus charges of “anti-semitism.” At the same time, the Democrats have joined hands with extreme-right and genuinely antisemitic Republicans such as Elise Stefanik to launch witch-hunts against university protests.

Tlaib specializes in concealing the class character of the Democratic Party and its crimes. She was the leading promoter of the “uncommitted” campaign during the Michigan primaries, which urged workers and young people to cast a protest vote against Biden, claiming this would pressure him to change course on his administration’s support of Israeli’s genocide in Gaza.

Tlaib presents the US political system, despite individual corruption—she cited in particular the financial ties between members of Congress and defense contractors—as a basically neutral arena, able to serve the interests of the oppressed. According to her, the masses supposedly always win out in the end in Washington.

This picture flies in the face of reality. Tlaib’s “examples” of the legal recognition of the industrial unions and civil rights legislation all date from more than a half century ago. This fact only underscores that the Democrats long ago abandoned any program of limited social reforms, which were largely the byproduct of the semi-insurrectional industrial upheavals in the decades following the 1917 Russian Revolution. Indeed, the Democrats’ facilitation of genocide is a sign of how far to the right this capitalist party and the entire political establishment have gone.

Tlaib and union bureaucrats like Fain promoted pious wishes about “peace” and “reforms.” But for more than three decades, successive US governments, whether led by Democrats or Republicans, have been waging endless wars in Iraq, Somalia, the Balkans, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Yemen and other countries. At home, they have waged a social counter-revolution to destroy whatever remains of past reforms for even longer.

The Democratic and Republican Parties are supporting the war in Gaza not because of some political accident. US imperialism, a declining and crisis-ridden power, sees the war as a critical component of its struggle for world hegemony. Through its support for the Israeli military, Washington hopes to reimpose direct forms of colonial rule over the Middle East, including the reconquest of Iran, in order to deny access to this key region of the world—which is not only rich in natural resources but straddles key world trade routes—to its rivals in Russia and China.

The horrors in Gaza are part of an accelerating global conflict, including the US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, and well-advanced plans for war with China, which one high-ranking general predicted could break out next year.

Writing during World War I, Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin pointed to the process through which imperialism recruited union bureaucrats and political opportunists who were “socialists in words and imperialists in deeds.”

Obviously, out of such enormous superprofits (since they are obtained over and above the profits which capitalists squeeze out of the workers of their “own” country) it is possible to bribe the labor leaders and the upper stratum of the labor aristocracy. And that is just what the capitalists of the “advanced” countries are doing: they are bribing them in a thousand different ways, direct and indirect, overt and covert.

This stratum of workers-turned-bourgeois, or the labour aristocracy, who are quite philistine in their mode of life, in the size of their earnings and in their entire outlook, is ... the principal social (not military) prop of the bourgeoisie. For they are the real agents of the bourgeoisie in the working-class movement, the labor lieutenants of the capitalist class, real vehicles of reformism and chauvinism. In the civil war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie they inevitably, and in no small numbers, take the side of the bourgeoisie.

Today, more than a century after Lenin wrote these words, the salaries, stock market investments and other financial resources of top trade union bureaucrats like Fain and Pringle put them in the top 5 percent of income earners in the US. This affluent stratum is a major constituency for imperialism, directly benefiting from the vast sums derived from the super-exploitation of the working class in the oppressed countries and within the US itself.

The integration of the union bureaucracy into the state and its war preparations is exponentially greater than it was in Lenin’s day. To fool the workers, they preach “reformism” without reforms and “peace” while working with the Biden administration to wage war abroad and impose savage austerity and labor discipline on the working class at home.

The National Labor Network for Ceasefire claims it includes unions “representing” more than 9 million members. But the last thing it wants is a real mobilization of the working class that would directly challenge the Democratic Party and the political establishment as a whole.

That requires a struggle to free workers from the domination of capitalist politics in all of its forms, to mobilize it against the capitalist system, the source of war, on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.



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