



Palestine Solidarity at East End Co-Op with Iris & Fritz of UE 667

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This week, Ian spoke with member of UE local 667, organized workers at the East End Co-Op in Pittsburgh about the origins and goals of their organization and their divestment campaign to remove products from occupied Palestine from the shelves of their co-op.

To learn more about the East End Co-Op and UE Local 667, visit them at:

Facebook: UE Local 667 East End Food Co-op

Instagram: @uelocal667

Website: eastendfood.coop

Online References from the Episode:

MIT Living Wage Calculator: livingwage.mit.edu

BDS Movement: bdsmovement.net

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TFSR: Okay, so I am here with UE Local 667 from East End Food Co-op. Can you all start by introducing yourselves, including pronouns and any affiliations that you feel may be relevant to our conversation?

Iris: Yeah. I'm Iris Powell. My pronouns are they/them, and I just want to have a couple of outs for the Pittsburgh Palestine Coalition, our fellow locals here in Pittsburgh, 696 at Planned Parenthood and 613 at the school for the blind, and our friends at Allegheny Reproductive Health Union and [00/37] unions here in Pittsburgh.

Fritz: Solidarity! My name is Fritz. I use they/them pronouns. I'm a cashier at the East End Food Co-op, where I've worked for the last four years. Together, my comrades and I make up UE Local 667.

TFSR: Thank you very much. Would you offer listeners some background on the East End Co-op along the lines of how long it has been around, and maybe some demographics of the customer base, whatever you're comfortable sharing?

Fritz: Yeah, the East End Food Co-op has been around in one variation or another since 1972. It began as a buying club in the 70s to address poverty in Pittsburgh's East End neighborhoods. Membership was only \$1, and food was distributed at open-air markets, church basements, and homes for the elderly. The project was initially funded by the US Catholic Conference Campaign for Human Development, and after funding ran out, the buying club established a member work shift program managed by three staff members who were funded by AmeriCorps. The 600-member households were required to work two hours a month. So in the 1980s, the East End Food Co-op merged with other organizations, like the Consumer Cooperative of Pittsburgh, and the Semple Street Food Co-op to evolve into a consumer co-op open to the public. And by the early 2000s, the co-op had over 80 employees, 150 active volunteers, and over 10,000 members. Now in 2025, we currently have over 17,000 members, but no volunteers, and under 80 employees. I don't know if Iris wants to add anything to that.

Iris: Just a little contract lore. The first vote to unionize was on September 21, 2015. They finalized the first contract in March of the next year, March 18, 2016; their second contract was in 2018, their third in 2021, and their fourth, which is currently active, was ratified in 2024 and runs out in 2027.

Fritz: So we're in mid-contract area. And regarding the demographics, the customer base at the co-op reflects the demographics of the geography of Pittsburgh's East End; there are multiple working-class neighborhoods, but they're all superseded by rich, white, middle to upper-middle-class neighborhoods. So we get a mix of people.

Iris: Yeah, a broad demographic of melting pot communities and people of all incomes.

TFSR: I asked that question because my understanding is that the East End is a part of the gentrification in recent decades of Pittsburgh.

Iris: Yeah.

TFSR: I frequent the co-op, so I seem to have a neighborhood grocery store vibe, but I just wanted to get that-

Fritz: Yeah, especially with the Rockwell Park developments, there's a lot of disarray that comes from this hyper-development or "revitalization" of the neighborhood. There are so many people who get caught up in the fray of all of it, and a lot of those people come to the co-op for help, and it's a hard battle with management to actually help these people out as workers, but that's another story for another day.

TFSR: Sure. Can you each talk about just the general nature of your work at the co-op? I would imagine you're all taking on a lot of different kinds of tasks.

Iris: We are separated by department, so I'm a dishwasher and a prep cook. I spend a lot of my time just back in the kitchen, washing dishes and cutting it up with the kitchen crew. I romanticized working back of house. Because there's just something about being back, the person who works back of house is my person. Those are my people. My first job was waiting tables, and I was so bad at it. And every time I went back to the dish room and saw the dishwashers having a great time, I was like, "That should be me. And it never was, but this is my second dishwashing job now. And that work itself is not rewarding because it's washing dishes. But that's the work that I can do.

Fritz: That's cool. And you get to choose your own music that you listen to, which is nice. I am the opposite. I work in the front end of the store as a cashier, and I do

bagging, cart wrangling, and lots of other various customer service stuff. And we are subject to the Pandora station of choice, whatever that is. It's nice being the front face of the co-op and welcoming people in and just getting the vibe of everyone that comes into the store. Also, Iris and I are both active in the Union, and we have had many different roles in that sense as well.

TFSR: You may have covered it before, and if you feel you adequately covered that, that's fine, but can you talk a bit about the why and when of the workers' decision to form a union?

Iris: That was a time when neither of us was there. But in my little UE deep dive, I did find that obviously wages were a huge issue before the first contract. A starting wage was \$9 an hour with no path to the top of the wage scale. So with their first contract, they secured a \$1.50 raise with annual raises afterwards, on a 10-year plan to get to the top of the wage scale. So, general working conditions are still a long fight away from being what we would love to see.

Fritz: Yeah, and that also, the decision to unionize came at a time when the co-op was becoming more corporatized. They were merging with NCG, the National Cooperative of Grocers. NCG is this big conglomerate that services co-ops all over the country, and as our East End Co-op became more involved with them, the NCG started making a lot of suggestions that became decisions that staff weren't really a part of those decision-making sessions. And one thing that was big was the NCG suggested that they get rid of the volunteer program, which frustrated a lot of workers as well as volunteers, and they felt their power was being taken away from them. So the decision to unionize came after that call to get rid of that program. And that those two things are related.

Iris: And they were very close together, too. It was 2014.

TFSR: 2014 that happened. Okay. Can you speak to any victories or defeats sustained under your tenure in the Union? And I'm wondering in what ways you are plugged into the broader goals of UE organizing?

Fritz: So wages, as Iris has said before, have been the main focus of our organizing since I started working at the co-op, around four years ago. When I started four years ago, our starting wage was \$12.50 an hour. And by the time we negotiated our current contract in 2024, we successfully got it up to \$18.45 an hour with incremental annual wage increases. So now, our wage is \$18.95 an hour for starting, which is great, but it's still not a living wage in Allegheny County. The living wage

is still \$21.13 an hour, according to MIT's living wage calculator. You should check that out, because it's a really cool gadget. You just type in your zip code and your household size, and you can get what a living wage should be. In Allegheny County, that's \$21.13, so we still have a long way to go anyway. So our wages go up automatically at least 2.5% a year with our last contract. This jump allows us to focus on the larger issue of transforming the co-op into a conduit for working-class liberation. Once workers have respect and dignity at work and they're paid well, we'll be able to have more autonomy, which is a tentative UE organizing, where the members run the Union. And our goal is for the members to run the co-op.

TFSR: That's great. Tell me a little bit about the active campaigns on your docket currently.

Iris: As chief steward of the Union, I'm pretty busy right now. We just recently suffered a wrongful termination of one of our members, as we were sharing. But what came after that was a flurry of emergency meetings and an eventual march on the boss with myself and eight other individuals, which was really, really cool to be a part of, really cool to be able to look at that and say that we did that for our co-worker. While that co-worker was wrongfully terminated, we had just voted to bring another wrongful termination to arbitration. We're struggling with our relationship with management at this current point, especially regarding their lack of respect for the contract. This employee was wrongfully terminated for the Paid Time Off Policy that is outside of our contract, and days after, we voted to bring that case to arbitration. Someone else was also wrongfully terminated for another entirely different, bogus reason. So what that looks like going forward now is we have filed a grievance for this most recently terminated employee. We have a pressure campaign related to that and to a broader movement to fight against the current management's adversarial relationship with us. And then obviously, our boycott campaign, which has been going on for the past year. It's been humming away in the background of everything.

Fritz: Other equally important cases are we're trying to solve some issues regarding career development at the co-op. Bargaining unit members have had a lot of trouble, either advancing to a "higher position" or advancing to a different department; just any movement has been difficult. And then also getting management to stop doing our bargaining unit work that is contractually ours. The co-op is a pretty top-management-heavy organization. There are 18 or 19 managers to 44 bargaining unit members, and oftentimes the management ends up doing the work that we should be doing instead of hiring more bargaining unit members. So anyway, there's a lot of stuff going on. At the end of the day, we want respect and dignity at

work. And we also want the co-op to be a fair, ethical place where workers as well as customers, just everyone involved, are respected.

Iris: And it is a lot of work to sometimes feel like you're just talking to a wall when we deal with management but taking inspiration from the UE constitution of aggressive struggle, all of these things that we're undertaking are the aggressive struggle, and that's how we're going to win rights, is through the aggressive struggle.

TFSR: **With that in mind, it sounds like you are dealing with as much pain as the standard union stuff, but alongside that, you are dealing with this very public-facing issue of the boycott, which is why I initially reached out. Can you talk about the how and why of plugging into Boycott, Divest, Sanction efforts, and within the context of the inventory, what products in the inventory would be affected by the divestment?**

Fritz: Sure. We believe that endorsing and applying BDS aligns with our co-op's end statement. And I could read you two parts of the end statement that apply: the East End Food Co-op exists to create an ethical and resilient food infrastructure as well as a vibrant, dynamic community of happy, healthy people. So in July of 2024, our local voted unanimously to endorse BDS. We decided to begin this endorsement by campaigning for a boycott referendum to get Israeli-sourced products off the shelves, and we started this baby organization called Co-ops Against Genocide, because we want other co-ops to follow suit, or at least be inspired. BDS upholds the simple principle that Palestinians are entitled to the same rights as the rest of humanity. We know that ending our co-op's complicity in Israel's ongoing genocide is an effective form of solidarity with the Palestinian struggle, and that's why we're doing it. We don't have too many products on the shelves that are "made in Israel." There are some: Field Day tahini is one brand of tahini that's from Israel. Gluten-free ice cream cones from Edward and Sons are another. There are a few olive oils. So I would just suggest checking the bottles when you're in the store. The kicker is that in the wintertime, we get bell peppers from Israel that are grown in illegal settlements on stolen Palestinian land, and we have to sell these bell peppers all winter, and they're intermixed with bell peppers from Mexico, and it's really hard to even parse them apart from one another with the stickers. Anyway, it's really frustrating to have to sell something that comes from so far away at such a terrible cost.

Iris: Especially at a local grocer.

Fritz: At a local grocery, right. That's the background of our campaign. I don't know if you want to add anything to that.

Iris: I could speak about the exact process that we're taking under. Within the co-op bylaws, there is a section about the referendum process. So this all started out as, at least for our effort it seems, was Fritz forming the UE for Palestine Caucus convention, a couple of UE conventions ago.

Fritz: Well, I didn't form that. I was part of the group that formed it, but there were other locals who really took the charge on that.

Iris: Coming back to the local and bringing that to a monthly membership meeting, the BDS vote, and from there, it grew to a community outreach campaign where we had talked to all co-op shoppers, just anyone who would be willing to sign on to our online petition that we had.

Fritz: Yeah, we had an online petition to make the co-op an apartheid free zone, which got a lot of crazy reactions from a lot of different people, but that was our initial start to it.

Iris: Yeah, and then from there, it grew into deciding to use this bylaw process, this referendum idea, for talking to members, seeing if they would be interested in supporting our referendum campaign and signing on to our petition. And once we reach 500 signatures, we can present those to the board and ask them to have a, well, less "ask" but more "tell" them...

Fritz: Compel them to have a special meeting where we have a vote where member-owners could vote and decide together whether or not we want to boycott Israeli products at the store. But Iris and I have been collecting signatures for a little under a year, and it feels like a long time, because we have to do it off the clock. We have to do it outside the premises of the store. And so it's further from the entrance. And so we were out in all types of weather, trying to get signatures, and we're still trying to get signatures. We plan on submitting all the signatures later this fall. That's good.

TFSR: Can you talk in maybe a little bit more detail, or however much detail you're comfortable with, about how the campaign has been received by management and membership, maybe from the individual conversations you had all the way up to the member board?

Fritz: Member-owner population. Yeah, every member is an owner of the co-op. We could talk about that. So at a boots-on-the-ground level, we get a lot of people who are very happy that we're doing this project, and they offer a lot of gratitude and help. Our Pittsburgh Palestine Coalition has been vital in planning as well as the implementation of different events that we have and getting everybody together to collect signatures and so forth. But we also have been targets of the Zionist community. The Jewish Chronicle put out multiple articles about our campaign. We've received death threats. We've received threats of all sorts. Some people have just flat-out called us "terrorists" at the table. It's been a pretty volatile experience so far. But it's also really hopeful, because as the genocide has become more publicly accepted, Amnesty International, Bernie Sanders, all sorts of safe liberal talking point people or institutions are coming out and saying that this is an actual genocide. More and more people are signing the petition. More and more people are thanking us and spreading the word about our petition. So we're hopefully going to be successful and people are going to find their humanity again.

TFSR: **These conversations have gotten easier as the genocide has gone on.**

Iris: Yeah. We've had a lot fewer people take a "I don't know, it seems really complicated" stance lately. It's good to not have to deal with that conversation anymore. But at the same time, it's frustrating that it has taken up to this point for the animosity to die down a little bit. But in speaking about the management reception, the board is remaining neutral on the petition. They're not gonna comment one way or another. Anytime someone asks them about it in the board meetings, we have monthly co-op board meetings that all co-op members are welcome to attend. They haven't publicly spoken out about it; however, one hurdle that we do face is that the East End Co-op has never participated in a boycott before. And this was part of our manager's statement to the Jewish Chronicle that he gave.

Fritz: Our manager wanted to make it clear that the co-op is not political, which, to me, goes against the end statement of an ethical food infrastructure. How can you separate ethics from politics in a way? Them being neutral, or them saying that they're neutral, is just a form of complicity. They're not blocking us but they're also not helping us, if that makes sense.

TFSR: **Can you talk about how your efforts dovetail with the larger efforts within the region? Where does your work fit into the larger Palestinian Coalition organizing?**

Iris: One of the folks in the Pittsburgh Palestine Coalition that we keep in close contact with is always organized in a protest, I swear, she is so busy. But she's always reaching out to us, as the local saying goes, "Hey, do you want to speak? Do you want to come out and plug your petition?" I've spoken at a couple, which also involved, I think, PSL, that was putting together some of those protests.

Fritz: PSL has been amazing this whole time.

Iris: And then also the support that we get from our union rep, as the UE for Palestine Caucus, is cool. I just came back from the UE Convention in Chicago; it was a couple of weeks ago. I came back from it, and I went and hung out with the UE for Palestine people, and that was so nice. But also, at one point, I felt I was in a discussion panel, because I was the only one there who was doing an active boycott campaign. They were like, "How do you do it? What was it like? What's it like now?" It's a lot of difficult conversations with a lot of different people.

TFSR: **That's interesting. Do you think that the starting point of organizing a boycott campaign, you guys are doing it, but that whole process would be very opaque to people who are not used to being in organizing spaces, and what do you tell those folks, and what do you recommend as a starting point?**

Iris: In the same way that a union starts out, it starts out very grassroots. You get a couple of people who care very deeply and then talk with more people to try to get them to also care very deeply. And that's the idea of our Palestine Solidarity Committee and having a UE for Palestine Caucus. And so you have this group of people, you get together, and you assess the options that you have. We did that process through trial and error with the apartheid free zone and the just vote for the BDS initiative. And then we finally settled on this bylaw process that seems the most actionable of all of them. It starts with just people caring enough to do something about it.

Fritz: And it involves a lot of creative thinking, a lot of detective work, because you're looking at how my workplace is complicit in genocide? How is it involved? And once you start to pay attention to how it's involved, you can find ways in which you can fix it or tweak it so it's not as involved. And that's what we're doing. On paper, our co-op is not funding genocide, but we do have a handful of products that come from Israel. So what we can do is try to get rid of them in any way we can. But it depends on one's workplace. But as we're finding out in 2025, every single

workplace in America is involved in some way, shape, or form, and it's up to us, the workers, to try to figure out how we're involved and what we can do about it.

TFSR: Do you think that having products and services so interlaced in the social fabric is how the people who are perpetrating this stuff keep people cowed by it? If that makes sense. Maybe that's a cynical question.

Iris: In a way, it made me think about this. So we, as workers, want to represent workers. It makes me think about the workers, the people who have a job, who work at Combined Systems Incorporated. I don't know if you've ever heard of Combined Systems.

Fritz: Kafkaesque.

TFSR: Okay.

Iris: Combined Systems is a company that's not too far from Pittsburgh that makes crowd control munitions. And there was a piece that I read that linked these munitions to the IDF, to crowd control efforts in Gaza. And later in that piece, it also connects those same munitions to being used on George Floyd protesters in 2020. These systems are interlaced in a way that puts us in really strange positions, where it almost feels like we have to, not put our values aside, but- I don't know what I'm trying to say here.

Fritz: We have to make compromises every day.

Iris: Yeah, being a food co-op, being a grocery store, it feels so strange to be saying like "Stop selling this food." That's maybe one of the ways that our managers are looking at it is like "We're a grocery store, why can't we sell food?" But it's so frustrating to be a witness to.

Fritz: And that's the fantasy that we hope to make a reality someday, of making the co-op into an apartheid free zone, being able to go to a place where you believe and know that everything is as ethical as it can be in this late-stage capitalist world that we live in. Just having that confidence in a community space that's also a grocery store. That's what would be so wonderful to have in this world, but it's hard to think about, or it's hard to actually apply it. But I also want to mention the Pittsburgh Palestine Coalition has been doing a great job with calling out products from Trader Joe's that are from Israel and also picketing in front of Trader Joe's every Saturday for the last probably four or five weeks now, which is great. It's an-

other way in which food systems and the grocery industry contribute and can help stop being complicit in the genocide. The Pittsburgh Palestine Coalition has been calling out the products from Trader Joe's that are from Israel, and they are asking management to remove those products from the store in East Liberty. I doubt that they're going to do that, but it's a cool venture.

TF SR: Beyond the financial losses to the economy that result from divestment, why do you think divestment is an effective tool in the efforts to combat the genocide in Gaza?

Iris: Well, especially for us wanting to undertake this campaign, we're hoping to be a spark for other co-ops within our region, within the East Coast, within the country. Because Fritz and I recently went to a screening of the encampments documentary. And one of the things that was most impactful from watching that was seeing how that first solidarity encampment at Columbia sparked an entire nationwide movement, university movement. So again, it was a group of folks at a grassroots level trying to affect change and if we can show that there is a way to do this, and that not only is there a way to do this, there's a way to successfully do it, then it can turn into an entire movement.

Fritz: Yeah, and also, divestment is an effective tool because Palestinians are asking us to do it. They're part of BDS, and it's an ask straight from the people who are being affected the most. So we need to honor their wishes. But also, divestment is just one tool and we need a diversity of tactics in order to really help stop the genocide. The latest general strike in Italy was really inspiring to me, and the labor movement in America needs to take note of that. We need to take note of that and try to see what we could take from that and use for ourselves and for Pittsburgh or the East Coast, or the whole country. What would a general strike look like, and how would that work on a larger scale? But that entails all of labor to come together and prioritize, which is something that is difficult to do.

Iris: And I think of us as uniquely in a position to speak out, especially given the withholding of aid that has gone on for so long, the famine conditions now in Gaza. As a grocery store, we have to take a stand and uphold the end statement that we have. Creating an ethical and resilient food infrastructure. Trying to do that and selling peppers from settlements on stolen land is just so very antithetical to everything that we're trying to do.

TF SR: Is there anything we didn't cover? Anything you want to speak to, as far as what's next for the union? What's next for this particular campaign?

Iris: For the union and union activities, it's a continued and escalating pressure campaign on our management for our working conditions, for the justice for our wrongfully terminated co-workers, many grievance fights, and we're working on laying the groundwork for our next contract fight and being ready for if we have to take further measures to stand up and assert our rights as a collective bargaining unit. And for the petition, we're still collecting signatures. We're hoping to be a couple of months out from presenting this. From there, the board will hopefully accept it without issue, and if not, then the pressure campaign is on.

Fritz: Yes, the Union never sleeps, as our comrade Megan Moffitt would say.

TF SR: **Where can people find you if they need to reach out to you, either online or in person?**

Fritz: I would say to follow us on Instagram @UElocal667, and you could also come to the East End Food Co-op and talk to me up front or ask for Iris in the back.

TF SR: **Thank you both for taking the time to talk to me. I really appreciate it.**

Fritz: Yeah, of course.

Iris: Thank you so much.

Fritz: And solidarity.

TF SR: **Thanks. You too. Off topic, do you all still make the lemon pepper tofu sandwiches?**

Iris: Oh, we sure do, every single day of our lives.

TF SR: **Do these come out immediately?**

Iris: Yeah, that's one of the real big sellers. There's the mushroom barley, which is the big soup, and then the lemon pepper tofu is the big sandwich. And we bash them out real big every day. Try to make 40 sandwiches a day.

TF SR: **When do you put them out?**

Iris: They go out at varying times of the day. That's mostly the supervisor's work, making the sandwiches.

Fritz: It shouldn't be the supervisor's work. That's bargaining you need.

Iris: Hey, if you want to set some aside, I'm back there. I got you.

TFSR: I might be in touch about that. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me.

Fritz: Thank you, Ian.

TFSR: You all take care. Okay? Bye-bye.

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