

Palestine Popular Conference meets in Chicago

By Bill Cecil

Chicago

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Under the slogan “Reclaiming Our Voice, Reasserting Our Narrative,” hundreds of Palestinians living in the U.S. gathered in Chicago Aug. 8-10 for the first Palestine Popular Conference. It was the fruit of two years’ work in cities across the country. Nearly 800 people attended the conference cultural night on Aug. 9 and more than 500 took part in conference work.

The Palestine Popular Conference is part of a global effort to give voice to nearly 6 million Palestinian exiles not represented by the Palestinian Authority. Another 5 million Palestinians live under direct Israeli terror in the West Bank, Gaza and inside the Israeli apartheid state.



This year marks the 60th anniversary of Al Nakba (The Catastrophe), when the majority of Palestinians were forced into exile and the U.S.-funded settler state of Israel was erected on the ruins of their homes.

Flag-raising ceremony at the conference cultural night.

Photo: Raja Abdulhaq/Awda NY

A pall was cast over the gathering by the death of Palestine’s great national poet, Mahmoud Darwish. A special session of the conference was held in his honor and the conference was given his name.

The conference heard live greetings from Palestine from leaders Fadwa Barghouti, Abla Saadat and Oum Hisham, whose husbands are in Zionist prisons, as well as Sheikh Raid Salah and Orthodox bishop Atallah Hanna. They urged the conference participants to work for a Palestinian united front and to fight for the freedom of political prisoners.

Speakers included Dr. Ghada Talhami, Dr. Naseer Aruri, Dr. Rabab Abdelhadi, Laila Al-Arian and former ambassador Clovis Maksoud. The event was enriched by the poetry of Tamim Barghouti and traditional music, spoken word and dancing. The dance troupes Firqat Al Awda from New York and Hurriyah from Washington performed the debka. Kali Akuno of the Malcolm X Grassroots

Movement presented a solidarity message from the International League of People's Struggle.

The conference was structured to ensure maximum participation. Many youth attended and women played a leading role. Participants ran and developed 24 workshops on such topics as women and self-determination, culture of resistance, hip-hop and spoken word, experiences of Arab youth in the U.S., defending civil rights, recording Palestinian oral history and the right of Palestinians to return to their homeland. Children had a live feed interchange with children in Balata refugee camp in the West Bank. There was also a panel on the one-state solution: the Palestine solution for the conflict.

The main events of the conference were two town hall meetings that allowed broad participation and set goals for future work. These included defense of civil rights and support work for political prisoners, working to build a representative body for Palestinians in the U.S., and developing networks of women, students and youth. It was voted to reconvene the conference on a regular basis and the conference network was renamed the Palestine Community Network.

Said California labor activist Monadel Herzallah, who chaired the conference preparatory committee: "We are building on the example of the popular institutions created in Palestine during the First Intifada; they were genuine popular organs. And the conference has succeeded in bringing together people from all spectrums of our community—women, men, the young, the older, workers, students, professionals, small business owners, those born in the homeland and those born here. We have not had this type of grassroots institutions since the Oslo Accords.

"We are saying that Palestinians living in the U.S. are an integral part of the Palestinian people and that nothing can be done in our name without our having a say."

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Workers World, 55 W. 17 St., NY, NY 10011

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