

## How True Optimism Is Won

# Chicago and the Spark of Moral Courage

by Anastasia Battle

Feb. 17—During the days of the Civil Rights Movement, young people would often drop their books, grab a change of clothes and sneak out of their homes when an opportunity to demonstrate arose, evidencing the kind of electric spark which had been ignited across the country. Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, people who had become accustomed to oppression and hardship, found the courage to become moral giants—an inspiration which did not come from a selfish desire to improve one's personal condition, but rather from a selfless determination that all people deserve to be seen as human.

This tradition, which still rings strongly in the minds of Americans, was ignited in Chicago during the December-January struggle for a Gaza ceasefire resolution. A moral impulse was deployed, activating many layers of the community, and eventually achieving a victory in the City Council. The only way to describe the tension and drive of the people of Chicago over these weeks is to describe it as the true determination that all people deserve to be seen as human. We are witnessing the kernel of a civil rights movement unfolding now.

The period of October-November 2023 became a dark time in American politics. The veil of “democratic values” came down and many people's true colors came out for all to see. After the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, followed by what can only be described as inhuman acts of genocide against the people of Gaza, apparently as tribute to the altar of Hitler, the world was forced to respond. Fights have ensued across the world, from street corners to Parliaments, and even in the United Nations. The world has seen some of the largest demonstrations in history, with numbers likely reaching

into the tens of millions in just a few months.

In Chicago, Alderperson Rossana Rodriguez-Sanchez was moved to respond to the continuing atrocities, and introduced a resolution in support of a ceasefire which called on the United States to unconditionally call for an end to the bloodshed. Unfortunately this resolution, introduced in November, never made it past Alderperson Debra Silverstein, the strongest opponent of a ceasefire resolution in Chicago, and was



X/@BlockClubCHI

*Chicago Public Schools students rally at City Hall in solidarity with the Palestinians and to support passage of the Ceasefire Resolution by the City Council. Jan. 31, 2024.*

shot down quickly. Around this same time, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) called Alderperson Sanchez anti-Semitic, taking advantage of her use of the phrase “from the River to the Sea,” a sentiment that Alderperson Silverstein echoed.

Chicago's leadership was not one to take it sitting down, however. Silverstein had already introduced her own resolution on Oct. 13 regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict, which was in full support of Israel's actions. The resolution repeated the narrative that Israel

has the “right to defend itself,” and only expressed sorrow for the Israeli lives taken by Hamas on Oct. 7. The obviously one-sided language in the resolution in the face of a growing genocide taking place in Gaza caused a brawl to break out, with other Alders insisting that the resolution be altered to say the “deepest sorrow for all innocent civilians” and to remove reference to “Israel’s right to defend itself.” Clearly frustrated at the opposition, Silverstein stated:

Israel has fewer citizens than the state of Illinois. Can you imagine the heartbreak and pain that thousands of casualties would cause in our state? In Israel, Oct. 7 will always be remembered as 9/11.

One can only ask, does Alderperson Silverstein see the people of Gaza only as 3/5ths human?

Just a few weeks later, the world shifted. Following a UN Security Council vote where the United States cast the sole veto against a ceasefire in Gaza, the UN General Assembly convened an emergency session and passed its own ceasefire resolution by a tremendous margin—153 to 10, with 23 abstentions. The world’s community of nations had spoken, and overwhelmingly demanded peace. While the General Assembly’s resolution was non-binding, its effects shook the world.

The very next day, Alderperson Rossana Rodriguez-Sanchez, in collaboration with Alderperson Daniel La Spata, introduced a new ceasefire resolution into the Chicago City Council in support of the UN vote. They titled it “Uniting for Peace,” named after the one in the UN.

Further evincing that the Chicago Alders saw their actions as on the world stage, they began their [resolution](#) with a quote from Chapter 1 of the UN Charter, which states that it is the intention of the UN “to maintain the international Peace and Security,” and “to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights ... and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace.” After referencing this, the resolution simply asserts:



Chicago City Council

*Alder Debra Silverstein, the most adamant opponent of a ceasefire resolution.*

BE IT RESOLVED, that we, the members of the Chicago City Council, support the United Nations implementation of Resolution 377, known as “Uniting for Peace,” which called an emergency session of the General Assembly which voted in favor of “immediate humanitarian ceasefire” in Gaza and

BE IT RESOLVED, that we, the Chicago City Council, do hereby call upon President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. and the United States Congress to call for and facilitate a lasting Peace in Gaza starting with a permanent ceasefire to end the ongoing violence and to promptly send and facilitate the entry of humanitarian assistance including medicine, food, and water, into the impacted region....



X/U.S. Palestinian Community Network

*Alder Rossana Rodriguez-Sanchez, who introduced the Resolution supporting a ceasefire.*

### The Mobilization Begins

By this time, nearly 20,000 Palestinians had already been killed, over 85% of the population was displaced, and there was no end to the carnage in sight. The vote in

the UN showed that a growing majority in the world rejected this horrible chain of events and was prepared to stand up to the U.S. and other supporters of Israel to demand the humanity of Palestinians be respected. The question remained: were Americans themselves prepared to stand up to their leaders in defense of humanity?



The Anti-Defamation League Midwest and Jewish United Fund issued this Joint Statement Jan. 31: “Chicago City Council Passage of Dangerous, One-Sided Ceasefire Resolution.”

*Hamas. Instead, they advocated for a one-sided resolution that divides our city, emboldens Hamas, and dangerously undermines U.S. global influence.*

*“The debate and rhetoric around this resolution has fanned the flames of antisemitism as antisemitic incidents in the city and U.S. reach unprecedented levels.*

*“Since this resolution was introduced, we have tracked an increase in antisemitic incidents across the city. Jewish-owned businesses, Jewish students, and Jewish elected officials have been harassed and targets of vandalism and hateful propaganda. Protesters have disrupted City meetings, put travelers at risk by shutting down highways, harassed the children of Holocaust survivors, and just yesterday covered City Hall in disgraceful and offensive graffiti. Protest after protest in Chicago has celebrated violence against Jews and crossed the line from legitimate*

A committed handful of organizers in Chicago decided they would take up the challenge. Within a few days after its introduction, the resolution passed through the Human Relations Committee and was scheduled for a vote in front of the entire council on January 24. What then commenced in Chicago was nothing short of a series of “political miracles,” as described by one of the organizers for the resolution. This resolution became the political battleground for the city, with the world watching.

In an interview with *EIR*, Martin Levine of Jewish Voice for Peace Chicago, a long-time peace activist since his days as a student at Columbia University, described the month leading up to the vote as follows:

It was a long effort of very skilled internal politics—a group of folks in a broad coalition and a tremendous amount of groundwork of over 165 organizations. There was no *über* organization. It was a broad swath that organically began to organize, coordinating different areas that needed a breakthrough.

The ADL went into high-gear to denounce the vote after the resolution passed through committee on Dec. 18. In a joint statement with the Jewish United Fund (JUF) released later that day, they wrote:

Today’s hearing fanned the flames of hate and anti-Semitism. Witnesses spread disinformation

and played on anti-Semitic tropes while Aldermen failed to respond and some even repeated the lie and gave anti-Semitic conspiracies oxygen.

Alderman Silverstein, not surprisingly, echoed this same sentiment. An [official statement](#) released by her office on Dec. 18 said:



*One side of a two-sided leaflet/petition issued by the Jewish Voice for Peace Chicago, urging a Yes vote on the Ceasefire Resolution.*

Comments at today’s committee meeting are nothing short of blood libel, parroting the worst accusations against Israel, while denying the Jewish nation its fundamental right to defend itself. The resolution they passed fails to demand the release of the innocent hostages kidnapped into Gaza, condemn Hamas for the bloodiest attack on Jews since the Holocaust, or acknowledge the rape and sexual violence perpetrated against civilian Israeli women.

Levine said that many people in Chicago’s Jewish community, the fourth largest Jewish community in the United States, came together to push for this resolution—organizations and individuals alike. They put aside their differences, and in some cases fundamental disagreements, in a moral outcry to stop a genocide unfolding in their name. Over 1,000 Chicago Jews signed a letter to the City Council in support of the resolution. This letter was printed and hand-delivered to the Alders. The letter (see following article) stated in part:

As members of a people that has survived genocide and mass pogroms, we stand against the war crimes, mass displacement, and dehumanization suffered by the Palestinian people....

Some of us are the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors; we firmly reject the idea that calling for peace in Palestine/Israel is anti-Semitic....

Chicagoans stand for justice: if our City Council cannot call for an end to the unjust killing of over 10,000 children, how can they claim to represent the values of their constituents? We demand that our City Council call for a ceasefire now.

By January, nearly every Alderperson who even hinted that they would vote yes to a ceasefire was being denounced as an anti-Semite. Chicago organizers reported that Alderpersons were being threatened with the pulling of funding from schools and projects if they voted yes. But the demonstrations of thousands of people in Chicago, which has the largest Palestinian population in the United States, from November through January only grew larger as time went by, as more innocent lives were taken.

On January 11, another breakthrough in the world occurred. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) heard South Africa's strong case that Israel was in fact committing genocide against the people of Gaza. With incredible precision, including the use of exhaustive public statements by Israeli officials showing explicit genocidal intent, South Africa's presentation placed on the world stage a devastating picture of Israel's actions in Gaza. In this context, an "Emergency Summit for Gaza," sponsored by a broad coalition of organizations, began the next day at the historic Rainbow PUSH headquarters in Chicago—an organization founded by civil rights leader Reverend Jesse Jackson. Leaders from all over the country came to this summit, despite a heavy snowstorm, to have a serious dialogue on how to actually achieve true peace for Gaza.

The Chicago ceasefire resolution was a major focal point at the summit, with organizers bonding over lunch, and centralizing their social media accounts. This coming together of minds for a cause which so powerfully goes to the question of human dignity, reso-



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*The occupation of the rotunda of California's State House in Sacramento by Jewish groups, one of several actions around the country demanding a ceasefire in Gaza, Jan. 3, 2024.*

nated very deeply with Chicago's rich civil rights history. Reverend Jesse Jackson, a close collaborator of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., attended personally and used his voice to motivate the attendees.

A whole panel was dedicated to the young organizers whose organizations are on the ground in Chicago. They described how, through the use of demonstrations, local media, and direct calls to their representatives, that they could pressure officials to do what was right. They collaborated with the members of the audience to link up over social media to get updates and marching orders, which was widely used for coordination.

The presence of interfaith leaders was felt dramatically, all of whom expressed their profound solidarity and love for humanity. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all stood together as part of a coalition to save not just the people of Gaza, but to bring humanity together for peace in the world as a whole. The unity and determination of the people in the room was palpable, and was solidified when "We Shall Overcome," a civil rights song of freedom, was sung by the whole auditorium as they interlocked hands.

Dwight McKee of Rainbow/PUSH, a longtime civil rights activist and a collaborator of Martin Luther King, Jr., described how this summit really moved people. He told *EIR* that people really became engaged during the summit, and "things really started to come together." Ashley Jackson, Jesse Jackson's daughter,



X/Jake Sheridan

*Alder Rossana Rodriguez-Sanchez (at podium) holds a press conference. Rev. Jesse Jackson (in wheelchair), a close collaborator of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., used his voice to motivate passage of the Ceasefire Resolution. Chicago City Hall, Jan. 31, 2024.*

played two hours of the summit proceedings over her radio show. McKee described how Jesse Jackson was especially moved by the summit, committing himself to further action for peace as a result.

The Jan. 11-12 Emergency Summit streamlined and unified the entire mobilization, playing a crucial role in the final weeks leading up to the vote. Ultimately, over 165 organizations in Chicago joined the effort, mobilizing tirelessly all the way up to the last day. Even Alderperson Sanchez was reportedly making calls to organize for the resolution. Phone numbers for the Alders were posted on social media accounts and emailed, thousands of personal emails and letters were sent to the City Council, and background material was shared widely for people to discuss and familiarize themselves with.

### **If You're Not Sure, 'Take a Walk'**

The vote was scheduled for Jan. 24. However it was postponed when a resolution introduced by Alderperson Silverstein called for the City to honor the Jan. 27 Holocaust Remembrance Day. Silverstein and a number of other Alders requested that Sanchez push back the vote on the ceasefire resolution, out of respect for the occasion. "I just feel like the timing is very bad," Silverstein told ABC. Reluctantly, the vote on the ceasefire resolution was postponed, although only for one week, as opposed to a full month as requested by its detractors.

According to a Jewish Voice for Peace organizer, this anniversary had never been acknowledged by the City before, and was clearly used in an attempt to undermine the ceasefire resolution and attack it as anti-Semitic. There were even efforts to rewrite the resolution during the intervening period "to find a version that is consistent with U.S. policy." Jewish Voice for Peace and If Not Now made a [public statement](#) denouncing the decision to move the vote, saying:

We stand against the horrific and cynical misuse of the holocaust memory by some members of the Chicago City Council to delay the upcoming vote on a #CeasefireNow resolution. The memory of the Shoah compels us to say Never Again for anyone.

At the Council's commemoration of Holocaust Memorial Day Jan. 24, Alderperson Silverstein gave an address to the Council, during which she was disrupted by protestors in City Hall. Incidentally, the disruption happened after she called for the world, "to say in one voice: Never Again! Never Again!" at which point she was drowned out and forced to stop her remarks. Following the day's events, Silverstein clipped and [posted the following](#) on social media:

"Very sad that protestors disrupted the Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration at City Council. Never Again is a statement against all forms of anti-Jewish hate. Holocaust denial and distortion are recognized forms of anti-Semitism and should never have occurred at City Hall.

One can only ask the question: what were these protestors *really* upset about?

That same day, Mayor Brandon Johnson used his political weight at exactly the right moment. In a public statement, he declared his endorsement of the ceasefire resolution, breathing life into what could have been lost momentum during the delay. The vote was rescheduled



UN/Loey Felipe

*The United Nations General Assembly adopts a resolution demanding “protection of civilians, upholding legal and humanitarian obligations, [and] an immediate humanitarian ceasefire [in Gaza].” New York City, Dec. 12, 2023.*

for Jan. 31, giving one more week to organize. It would occur just days after the ICJ ruling was to be delivered.

During these final days, Jesse Jackson sent an important [letter](#) to all the City’s Alders encouraging them to vote for the ceasefire:

There is no daylight between the multiple aims of ceasefire, release of the hostages, Israeli safety, and equality, dignity, and freedom for Palestinians. We must all be cognizant to remember that it was only during the six day truce that the release of hostages was secured. The lives of the remaining hostages hang in the balance. Each day that there isn’t a ceasefire, their chances of survival shrink and every ten minutes, a child in Gaza dies. We do not have a minute to waste. War is inherently incapable of birthing peace. Bombs and guns do not eradicate hateful violent ideology. Only love can do that. The death Israel is inflicting today, will only return tomorrow as Hamas 2.0.

It is only through nurturing of hope and coexistence that our goals can be achieved. At Rain-

bow/PUSH Coalition, we have always stood firmly against apartheid and occupation, we have always fought fervently against colonialism. The Black community understands occupation because we have been occupied. Knowing these truths and committed to honoring the sacredness of all people, it is time for Chicagoans to come together and say “ENOUGH.” Enough to war. Enough to violence. Enough to hate. The time for peace is now. Let us begin with a City Council resolution for ceasefire.

Jackson’s personal appeal carried a significant amount of weight in Chicago, a fact which ultimately played a significant role in the resolution’s passage.

January 31, the day of the vote, was a very cold Chicago day, yet the minds of many were racing in anticipation. Students from 12 Chicago high schools organized a mass walk-out. According to reports on the ground, there were already 1,000 students lined up early in the morning, hours before City Hall would even start its session. Many held posters calling for a



X/Jake Sheridan

*Thousands of Chicago Public School students gathered inside Chicago City Hall, pressing for a Yes vote on the Resolution supporting a ceasefire in Gaza, Jan. 31, 2024.*

ceasefire and an end to the genocide in Gaza, replete with prepared chants.

Dwight McKee described the day of the vote as “tumultuous and very significant.” On the day of the vote, Jesse Jackson went down to City Hall in

person and visited many of the Alders himself. He then sat alongside Alders Rodriguez-Sanchez, La Spata, Fuentes, and Sigcho-Lopez for a press conference before the proceedings began, urging the other members to support the ceasefire resolution. Jackson's presence "created such an image and an impact," McKee said, "it was very hard for some of the Alders to resist the moral pressure he was putting on them."

When the session finally started, the Council was incredibly tense. Thousands were gathered inside the City Hall, hoping and pressing for a ceasefire. The Council chamber became so full that people spilled out onto the street. After nearly three hours of debate and testimony, all attention was focused on the results of the vote. No one knew which way it would go, but everyone felt it would come down to the skin of their teeth.

One after another, the Alders cast their votes. At one point, two close collaborators of Mayor Johnson turned to him, expressing anxiety over which way they should vote. In a bold move, Johnson reportedly told them that if they're not sure which way to vote, "take a walk." They both heeded his advice and left without making any comments or statements.

All the votes were then tallied, adding up to a nail-biting 23–23 tie! As per Chicago law, this left the tie-breaking vote to Mayor Johnson, who pushed it to 24–23 in favor of the resolution.

After an incredibly dramatic and dynamic organizing process, Chicago had become the largest city thus far to pass a ceasefire resolution. The resolution was then forwarded to President Biden, Vice President Harris, and all members of the Illinois Congressional delegation.

As could be imagined, the ADL and JUF came out immediately to attack the resolution, the City Council, and the Mayor in a [public statement](#) saying:

The debate and rhetoric around this resolution fanned the flames of anti-Semitism as anti-Semitic incidents in the city and U.S. reach unprecedented levels.

In a telling statement that likely indicates her fears more than anything else, Alderperson Silverstein said of the resolution:



chicago.gov

*Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson cast the tie-breaking vote in the City Council, making Chicago the largest city in America to pass a ceasefire resolution. Jan. 31, 2024.*

Chicago, America's third-largest city, should not vote to strip away President Biden's control over U.S. foreign policy, especially not as we are inviting him here for the Democratic National Convention.

What does the issue of taking away political power from the President have to do with opposing a genocide? Isn't it the responsibility of a free and educated people to demand accountability from their leaders? Is this an admission by Silverstein of who actually controls her?

Not surprisingly, the success in Chicago immediately came under heavy attack. The *Wall Street Journal* titled its report on the resolution: "Chicago Votes for Hamas," and the *Times of Israel* headlined their coverage: "Chicago's Mayor goes Pro-Hamas: 'Ceasefire now'." In addition, some of the same intimidation tactics which were used in attempts to sabotage the resolution are continuing against supporters of a ceasefire in Chicago. One example of this is Jesse Jackson's daughter, Ashley Jackson, who had her radio show taken off the air immediately after the resolution passed, leading McKee to state, "The cancel culture is getting worse and worse."

Despite all the pressure and threats, the moral courage of the organizers in Chicago broke through, by persistent work toward what might *seem* like an impossible task. This was accomplished by normal people making phone calls during work breaks and taking time off to attend demonstrations, and by students dropping their books and organizing. Yet these normal people had at

the same time become extraordinary when they chose to act on the conviction that humanity is worth fighting for. Optimism doesn't come from wishful thinking or a "positive mindset." It comes from a decision within yourself that you will do everything within your power to create the good that is necessary.

The meek shall indeed inherit the Earth.

## A Jewish Statement in Support of a Ceasefire Resolution

*The following letter was signed by over 1,000 Jews in Chicago, and circulated to all the City's Alders. EIR was given permission to publish its contents in full.*

We as Jewish Chicagoans raise our voices to urge the Chicago City Council to pass SR2023-0006422, a resolution introduced by Aids. Rossana Rodriguez-Sanchez and Daniel La Spata that calls for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza and the freeing of all hostages and detainees.

As members of a people that has survived genocide and mass pogroms, we stand against the war crimes, mass displacement, and dehumanization suffered by the Palestinian people. International human rights groups, UN experts, Israeli historians and politicians, prominent academics, and most importantly, the Palestinian people themselves have described Israel's actions in Gaza and the Occupied Territories over the past three months as ethnic cleansing and genocide. Even based on the numbers claimed by the Israeli government, the majority of those killed in Gaza are non-combatants, including over 10,000 children. Collective punishment of a trapped civilian population is illegal and keeps no one safe.

Some of us are the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors; we firmly reject the idea that calling for peace in Palestine/Israel is anti-Semitic.

Jewish Chicagoans, along with Jewish Americans from coast to coast, have flooded the streets on a weekly basis since October, demanding a ceasefire now because this massacre cannot be done in our name. On November 13th, over 1,000 Jews and allies from across the Midwest shut down Ogilvie Transportation Center to call for a ceasefire. Local Jewish elected officials have also taken a stand: three of the six Jewish Illinois

state legislators who represent parts of Chicago (Will Guzzardi, Kelly Cassidy, and Robert Peters) support a ceasefire.

Condemning the actions of the most right-wing government in Israel's history as it carries out ethnic cleansing does not amount to a condemnation of the Israeli people themselves. Indeed, our call for a ceasefire is also rooted in our care for Israelis, many of whom are friends and family of members of our community. Tellingly, some families of hostages are also calling for a ceasefire and for an "everyone-for-everyone" hostage-for-prisoner exchange because they understand that continued war puts the safety of them and their kidnapped relatives at risk. Additionally, the idea that this resolution does not express concern for the lives of Israelis is plainly false. The resolution specifically mentions the need for a ceasefire in order to facilitate the release of Israeli hostages, and recognizes the deaths of more than 1,200 Israelis on October 7.

With an understanding that a ceasefire is the only path forward for all people in the region, we also commend the resolution for giving special attention to the harm done to Palestinians in Israel's grossly disproportionate response to Hamas's October 7th attack. In light of the fact that the Chicago City Council already passed a resolution that condemned the October 7th attack but made no direct reference to violence against Palestinians, it is imperative that the Council acknowledge the pain and humanity of Chicago's Palestinian American community, which is the largest in the country.

Chicagoans stand for justice: if our City Council cannot call for an end to the unjust killing of over 10,000 children, how can they claim to represent the values of their constituents? We demand that our City Council call for a ceasefire now.