The Boat That Wasn't Blocked: 'Australian' edition

Anonymous

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There is a genocide in Palestine. We need to block the boats – to stop and disrupt Zim ships, as a means to attack and undermine the Israeli killing machine. Right now, our efforts are being misdirected – by organisations who adopt the rhetoric of direct action, smear it over events which are not that, and undermine movements which truly have the will to act against Zionism.

Two recently announced rallies, both titled 'Block the Boat', have been organised in a way which does not reflect *any* intention of actually blocking boats, but instead actively frustrates attempts to do so. At time of writing, the first rally (in Melbourne) had already occurred. Some disruption of a road took place *in spite of* the organisers, through attendees defying and ignoring their instructions. The second rally, in Sydney, has been planned for a time and place where no ZIM ship will be present, and organisers have misled attendees about the ZIM line's scheduling and movements.

Despite working to inhibit both the road blockade and direct action in general, organisers have basked in credit on social media for the action that happened in Melbourne, also significantly exaggerating its size and impact.

People have a courage and capacity to act which overflows the bounds of A-B marches – symbolic demonstrations outside the empty halls of power. The purpose of this piece is to undo the misdirection so we can get on with disrupting the flow of weapons, goods and commerce to Israel, in solidarity with the Palestinian people.

A plan that didn't make sense

There were signs from the start something was not right about these rallies. The words 'Block the Boat' implied, well, blocking boats, and that was how many people interpreted it. Yet less prominent lettering on promotional materials indicated that the purpose was actually to *say* 'Block the Boats', and to 'call for' a boycott – a message addressed to ZIM and Albanese. It wasn't clear why we had to go to the port to do this. Albanese isn't on the dock.

STOP GENOCIDE IN GAZA NOW!
PROTEST ZIM SHIPPING LINE
5.30PM, Wednesday 8.11, 78 Webb Dock Drive.

PROTEST TO SAY:

BLOCK THE BOAT

NO ISRAELI SHIPS IN PORT MELBOURNE

Hosted by Trade Unionists for Palestine

Unionists For Palestine

The timing of the rallies also seemed suspiciously rigid, and convenient. If the goal was to intercept a Zim ship as it arrived in port, it seemed strange this could be scheduled several days in advance for the Melbourne event and a week for Sydney. That's not how the sea works. It also seemed odd that the mighty ocean would conspire via time and tide to bring a boat to port at ideal rally hours, 12pm on a Saturday and 5:30pm on a working day respectively.

The locations weren't conducive to disruption. The Sydney rally was planned for a recreational boat ramp some distance away from any container ship or cargo. The Melbourne event took place at a point which is 7-8km away from where Zim ships are typically scheduled to dock (East Swanson dock, Patrick terminal). It's possible that, as per claims that have been circulating, docking points can be changed without updating the online information. I don't have the knowledge of ports to evaluate this.

It was hard to verify claims made by organisers that we were there to meet a ZIM ship, because no-one specified which ship we were supposed to be meeting. This would have been understandable if we were conducting a clandestine action relying on the element of surprise, but we were not – the time and place were splashed all over social media and flyers.

Apparently, the lack of information was because we were relying on inside tips from contacts in the MUA (Maritime Union Australia). But shipping schedules and positions are publicly available – both from Zim and on independent sources such as Marine Traffic or Vessel Finder. For the Melbourne event, I couldn't find any Zim ship that was meant to be in the port at the same time as we were. I don't see how Zim or anyone else can change, hide or falsify this – it is a ship weighing thousands of tonnes, tracked via GPS.

The boat that wasn't

Here I'll give an account of the Melbourne rally, with the caveat I arrived shortly after midnight, then stayed until the event ended around 4:30 am. Details from before then have been sourced from footage and accounts on social media (I've also cross checked with comrades who came earlier.) I'd initially planned to show up at 5:30 pm, but was too depressed by the state of it all.

My sense of malaise was not assisted by footage and commentary I saw on Twitter – organisers making claims that were frankly unbelievable. Two speakers said the Zim boat had been delayed or had bypassed Melbourne port entirely to avoid the rally, a claim that has since made its way around the world. But as stated above, this didn't match the scheduling and when I went on Marine Traffic to check live positions, I couldn't find any vessel that seemed to line up. In any case, delays and congestion at ports happen fairly often, and it would take some pretty strong evidence to attribute this to a rally.

Were we supposed to believe a massive container ship, carrying millions of dollars' worth of cargo, had skipped a port due to an inland speakout several kilometres away from where it was supposed to dock? To misquote Amilcar Cabral: 'Tell lots of lies, claim the most implausible victories'.

Life finds a way

Then something happened. A few trucks came through bearing Zim-branded containers, evoking what a comrade who was present describes as 'jeers from the crowd and the collective middle finger'. At some point, these jeers escalated into action and people blocked the road to stop one such truck from coming through. Some lay down in front of it, others sat down. Eventually the truck was redirected to another entrance, facilitated by a police escort. People still wouldn't leave and within hours there was a whole line of trucks backed up. Estimates I've heard range from 50–60 to 'hundreds'.

It was not the organisers (Trade Unionists for Palestine, with a speaker from APAN) who made this happen. People on Twitter posted in real time to say they 'tried to get us to leave' and 'the crowd are having none of it'. One comrade who was present describes organisers yelling at people to move, actually attempting to grab one or two people, and being 'quite physically intimidating' – though by their account, it was more words and shouting than physical force.

Observing this in fragments from home, my feelings were quite mixed. It seemed really cool that people were acting with will and courage and autonomously, creating logistical disruption and exercising real economic power. That said, I was concerned people might believe they had much more proximity to Zim than they actually did. It seemed one plausible outcome was that people would throw down – perhaps leading to arrests and etcetera – in the correct belief that economic disruption is powerful and necessary. But also thinking they were stopping a Zim ship from being loaded, which was not the case.

(I've since heard that this fear was unfounded, and that there was a realistic sense of what was going on. There may have been variation between Activists™, who tended to be plugged into a ridiculous, proliferating series of Signal chats, and people who just genuinely took the statement they were there to 'block' things literally.)

Either way, a blockade is a blockade and interrupts the flow of logistics/ goods/ profit, which is cool in my opinion. It seemed like people were going to stay the night and potentially longer, so I grabbed some blankets and made my way in.

Some beautiful moments of solidarity undermined by Activists™

When I got there the vibe was nice and chill. There were a few cops but they were mostly just hanging round in the middle distance. I met a couple of comrades, ate corn chips. The terminal wasn't blocked, per se – there is more than one entrance – but the road had been diverted, the trucks which had been backing up were now being forced to take an alternative route. This is real disruption and costs $$, it enacts a cost on the 'Australian' colony and economic system. As a Palestinian participant put it, 'If Gaza doesn't eat, no-one eats.'

While there wasn't much traffic at midnight, there was a pretty comfortable impromptu camp set up – LOTS of food and about 70 people from a mix of demographics. Some were Activists™ – these were mostly, but not entirely, white. I don't have a precise definition except that there was a lingo and a claim made (explicitly or implicitly) to possession of expertise/knowledge compared to the more 'vulnerable' in the gathering.

Also people, mostly Arab and/ or Muslim, who seemed very ready to throw down and who didn't speak or present with that lingo or move according to those norms. I had the impression that they were the ones who had initiated and driven the impromptu action in the first place.

Every half hour there was a call by the Activists™ for another discussion, a 'general assembly'. It was annoying and, in my opinion, kind of paralytic. The process wasn't really distinguishable from people just repeatedly initiating votes and discussions until they got their way. The one thing that hadn't been consented to was use of the general assembly model. The terms of the interaction under which 'consensus' was gathered, had to conform to the social and cultural norms of the people ostensibly seeking to find out what the group wanted.

There was some disagreement about what the blockade was actually for – was it to send a symbolic message to someone (who?), and get attention in the media? Or to extract an economic cost?

There was a pattern of projecting vulnerability onto other people, without substantiation. The claim was made that other people present didn't know what it means to be arrested, had no ability to manage their own risks, and that the group as a whole had to make decisions on their behalf. I can't recall anyone saying that they, personally, felt vulnerable. I myself had no desire

to be arrested and good reasons for avoiding such, but felt perfectly capable of stepping away at a point where such escalation might occur.

There was a general inflation of threat levels. The claim was made that cops would indiscriminately arrest everyone in the gathering and that this had happened at another, recent event for Palestine (it hadn't). It was also stated that any port worker who refused to load a ship bound for Israel would be fined $500,000 (the maximum fine for a wildcat strike is $13,320.)

There also seemed to be a talismanic clutching of symbols of officialdom and safety. A lot was made of the fact the legal observers had to go at some point – not by people who admitted feeling vulnerable themselves, but by people who claimed others in the gathering were vulnerable (who?). It felt like there was a paradoxical over and underestimation of risk – that cops were going to brutalise us en masse with no ability to leave, but also, a couple of people in pink vests were substantive enough that their presence or absence could be a deciding factor in our safety.

While there was a range of views, the people most keen on staying – and potentially escalating the action, for instance by moving to a more disruptive intersection – were not Activists™, and most were not white.

In the end we all slunk off home at the silliest possible hour, 4:30 am, just before more trucks would be coming and we might begin to have a heightened economic impact. I fell into bed around 5 am, filled with the frustrations of the evening, a sense of chances not taken and corn chips.

Miseducation intensifies

In the days which followed, there was a huge inflation of what had just happened on social media, and then actual media. To be clear, **we did not block the port**. We blocked *one road* leading to the port, causing diversion of traffic. That is not nothing, but it is very different from blocking the boats.

This did not stop the same organisations that had tried to prevent the blockade from happening, and failed to support it when it did, from accepting the exaggerated credit. While some information can be found to clarify, none of this has come from the organisers themselves (Trade Unionists for Palestine). Judging by the online presence of affiliated individuals, you would think this group and its orbiters had always applauded direct action in general, the Melbourne action in particular, and even that they were the progenitors of the blockade they tried to shut down.

The really weird stuff, though, happened around the planned Sydney rally. Organisers (Trade Unionists for Palestine and Palestine Justice Movement Sydney) released a statement that claimed the following:

- That the ship people were 'blocking' in Melbourne and Sydney was the Contship Dax

- That the protests in Melbourne and Sydney had been timed to coincide with its arrival

- That shipping schedules had been changed so that ZIM ships would not arrive at the same time as protests

- That they applauded the direct action which had happened in Melbourne and wanted similar to occur in Sydney

- That they wanted to get everyone's details for fast mobilisation against ZIM ships, so we would be ready when they docked.

Schedule on ZIM ships at Port Botany has changed - Saturday November 11 action to proceed

For more than a week, the Palestine Justice Movement Sydney and Trade Unionists for Palestine have been building towards a major rally in Port Botany to protest against Israel's slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza.

This action was endorsed by a public meeting of more than 200 rank and file trade unionists.

We are calling for a boycott of ZIM, a major Israeli shipping line that is actively collaborating with the genocide. We can not allow business as usual for this company and support disruption of the ships they contract and the cargo they are transporting to send a clear message they are not welcome in our ports.

Our protest was called to coincide with the arrival in port of the Contship Dax, a vessel contracted by ZIM. Trade Unionists for Palestine in Melbourne also held an action yesterday evening at the time when the Dax was scheduled to be in Port Melbourne.

Since the actions were called, shipping schedules have been changed to avoid ZIM contracted vessels being in port near our protests. We see this as a solid initial achievement for our campaign.

However, this also means it is almost certain there will not be any ZIM ship in Sydney on Saturday at the Hutchison Ports terminal near our protest as initially planned.

In Melbourne, activists took direct action at the port despite no ship being in, stopping trucks carrying ZIM cargo boxes. We applaud this action and seek to build similar power in Sydney.

On Friday, similar action is planned at the port of Genoa in Italy, as the campaign against ZIM spreads across the world.

At Port Botany on Saturday, however, we do not anticipate that any trucks carrying cargo for ZIM will be entering or exiting Hutchison Ports.

Organisers have decided to proceed with a public demonstration on Saturday at Port Botany regardless. We are planning for a static rally at the public boat ramp, a location that has been negotiated with police.

We want to show our strength - show the government, ZIM and port authorities we will fight their complicity with Israel's war machine. We expect another ZIM contracted ship to arrive this week. We need everyone linked in so we can mobilise again at short notice to demonstrate that ZIM are not welcome in Port Botany.

You can join the rapid response contact list by adding your details at this link: https://tinyurl.com/33vsdump

FREE PALESTINE!

Every one of these points is incredibly implausible, misleading or false.

- The Contship Dax was not scheduled to travel from Melbourne to Sydney, but in the opposite direction.

- It was not scheduled to be in those respective ports on the date of those rallies.

- Trade Unionists in Palestine and other organisers had not initiated or applauded the direct action in Melbourne, they tried to stop it.

- For the claim the ship's movements had been changed to avoid the rallies to be true, the Contship Dax would need to have reversed its planned origin and destination. This would mean changing its position by hundreds of miles, and its schedule by a week or more – all in response to a planned speakout on land, several kilometres away from where it was supposed to dock.

Vessel Code *

Contship Dax (UOT)

(•) Vessel Departure   ( ) Vessel Arrival

CONTSHIP DAX Voyage No150

Vessel Code	Lloyd's No.	Country	Built In	Call Sign	Line Code
UOT	9675822	Singapore	2015	SBCC6	New Zealand to Australia Service (N2A)

	Port	Arrival	Departure	VGM	Last Gate In	Doc Cut Off	
>	Sydney (NS)	07-Nov-2023 15:00	10-Nov-2023 12:00	06-Nov-2023 15:00	06-Nov-2023 15:00	06-Nov-2023 15:00	⋮
>	Port Kembla	10-Nov-2023 14:00	15-Nov-2023 2:00	N/A	N/A	N/A	⋮
>	Melbourne (VI)	17-Nov-2023 2:00	17-Nov-2023 16:00	16-Nov-2023 2:00	16-Nov-2023 2:00	16-Nov-2023 2:00	⋮
>	Auckland	22-Nov-2023 6:00	23-Nov-2023 4:00	21-Nov-2023 18:00	21-Nov-2023 6:00	21-Nov-2023 18:00	⋮
>	Tauranga	23-Nov-2023 16:00	24-Nov-2023 20:00	23-Nov-2023 4:00	22-Nov-2023 16:00	23-Nov-2023 4:00	⋮
>	Lyttelton	26-Nov-2023 14:00	27-Nov-2023 4:00	26-Nov-2023 2:00	25-Nov-2023 14:00	26-Nov-2023 2:00	⋮

Then, Sydney organisers started signing people up for urgent alerts, promising to text them for rapid mobilisation when a Zim ship was due to arrive – when *at that very moment*, the Contship Dax was sitting right there in the dock. This was confirmed by several people using four different sources (Zim schedules, Port Botany website, Vessel Finder, Marine Traffic) – including sources that locate ships using GPS positioning, and are not owned by ZIM.

Palestine Justice Movement Sydney @PalestineRising · Nov 9
IMPORTANT UPDATE ON SATURDAY

ZIM has changed its schedule and their boat may not be in port on
Saturday. Nevertheless, our protest against ZIM at 12pm is still ON.

We'll also come back whenever we know a ZIM boat is there. We won't
have much notice, so register for updates!

CONTSHIP DAX
Container Ship IMO 9675822

ADD NOTES | ADD TO FLEET | CREATE NOTIFICATIONS

Shipment tracking ✕

✓ Carrier independent predictive ETA
✓ Full transportation plan
✓ Delayed shipment notifications
✓ All data in one single platform

Try it yourself:

[Enter Container Number]

TRACK YOUR SHIPMENT

Voyage Information ⌃

⚠ UNLOCK VOYAGE INFORMATION

AU BTB
BOTANY

AU MEL
MELBOURNE

ATA: 2023-11-08 10:32 LT (UTC +13)   ETA: 2023-11-17 12:00 LT (UTC +11)

Latest Position ⌃

Position Received: **2023-11-09 11:59 LT (UTC +11)**
5 minutes ago
Vessel's Local Time:
2023-11-09 11:59 LT (UTC +11)
Area: **EAUS - East Australia**
Current Port: **BOTANY**
Navigational Status: **Moored**
Speed/Course: **0 kn / 39 °**
AIS Source: **Sydney**

SHOW ON LIVE MAP

Nearby Vessels

Weather

Wind: **11 knots**
Wind direction: **NE (42°)**
Air Temperature: **20°C**

Some people have said or implied that organisers are relying on secret information from MUA insiders, showing that ZIM has changed schedules in response to the planned protest. Again, the nature of supposedly secret information is that it's impossible to scrutinise. But there's a reason why the shipping news is public – container ships are big. You can *see* them. It would seem wildly dangerous to falsify their position, and I can't imagine how technically this might be done.

To repeat – at the time the Sydney organisers were telling people to sign! Your number! Here! To be ready! To urgently! Block! The boat! – **the boat was already in the port**.

[Update: the Sydney event has now passed – much like the Contship Dax, which sat in Port Botany for three days but was far away by the time the rally started. This didn't stop people from getting out on jetskis for some reason, having clips and photos taken, and allowing this once again to be broadcast round the world as a 'direct action' that had 'blocked a cargo ship'.]

The conceptually upside down and nonsensical nature of the rallies in the first place

Here's the thing: none of this ever made sense.

The call to gather at an event to 'boycott Zim' is bizarre – how can the general public boycott a company that doesn't sell final goods? The only meaningful 'boycott' in this case is not a boycott, it's a strike – the withholding of labour.

I attended a meeting for Trade Unionists for Palestine – which also featured the same guest speaker from APAN as the rally – where some people tried to call for exactly that. The cognitive dissonance was off the charts. There was much talk of wharfies refusing to load ships for South African apartheid. What a glorious past. But when people suggested that the same resistance should happen now, i.e., that workers and unions should refuse to build or transport weapons destined for Israel, organisers responded aggressively and dismissively. The conversation was derailed into discussion of a) bringing more flags to rallies, b) issuing statements and c) general BDS – things like Sodastream or McDonalds.

While BDS is good, giving up McDonalds is not the same as blocking the flow of weapons to Israel. And while statements are nice, it's not words or lack thereof which kill people, it's bombs.

In this context, the hypocrisy of the 'Block the Boat' rallies is jaw-dropping – to hold an event calling for *someone else* to boycott Zim and the Israeli arms trade, while you and your organisations are continuing to load and unload ZIM ships, to build and handle arms, and to otherwise enable the supply chain of weapons for Israel.

I suppose some of this is funny, but it's really not.

Final thoughts

I don't need to draw any conclusions about people's motivations and I won't. It may well be that organisers are attempting to play some kind of 4D chess.

What is clear is that people are telling the public stuff that isn't true, harvesting their contact details and getting them to turn out to events – on the basis that they can 'block the boats' to stop weapons from going to Israel – when these organisers are actually making sure it is impossible to block any ZIM boat at these rallies.

There are ideological differences, differences in analysis, around the value of direct action. If you don't like or believe in it, don't do it. But *get out of the way*. Stop misleading people, stop – frankly – lying. I don't know what else to call it when people appropriate direct action rhetoric, bask in the credit for actions they didn't undertake and tried to stop, and tell untruths which demobilise or even render future actions impossible.

Sometime in the night, one of the non-Activists™ at the action in Melbourne said (light paraphrase from memory): 'We are getting 100,000 people coming on the Sunday protests. If one percent, five percent of those people come to the port...' And why don't you dear Reader fill in the blanks because this is not about words, this is about the material expression of our opposition to a genocide.

That's all I have to say.

Appendix

A detailed primer on Block The Boat actions, from Workers in Palestine, can be found here.

Schedules for the arrival and departure of ZIM ships can be found here. Use the point to point function to find out which terminal they are scheduled to dock at.

The movement of ships can be tracked in real time here or here. Local port authorities will also have their own websites.

In Oakland, a method which has been used successfully is to picket the port where the ZIM ship is docked. Historically, this has relied on co-operation from port workers and their unions, who agree not to cross the picket line. We are significantly less likely to see support from unions in 'Australia'. An analogous method might be to blockade the entrances to the terminal where the ZIM ship is docked, physically preventing workers from entering, to create conditions which trigger OH/S laws enabling them to stand down without penalty.

Other strategies could involve physically inhibiting the docking, loading and unloading or departure of the ship, through actions based on land or water (as with actions by environmentalists in the past), or blocking train lines and roads supplying the ports.

Comments and critiques, especially factual corrections, are welcomed.

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