

Where does the power to end genocide come from?

Arc Up Anarchist Communists

25/07/2024

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The modern Palestinian Resistance movement is the perfect demonstration of the chasm between the will of social movements and their power. Despite huge mobilisations and actions taken by people in solidarity around the world since October 2023, the genocide continues to be carried out with active support from major world powers.

It's crucially important that we understand where the power to win our demands lies in waiting, and where we are grasping at straws. The Left can't afford to be reaching for power and coming up short. To demonstrate this, we can look at strategies employed in our context in the 70s, that contributed to ending South African Apartheid¹, and compare them with the strategies employed in our context against Palestinian genocide.

THE PARALLELS

By the 70s, the New Left was in full swing. It was watching the decline of the Soviet Union and was moving away from big communist organisations and toward smaller collectives, spontaneous actions, political stunts, occupations and sit-ins. Social issues of race, gender and sexuality came to the fore and many communist organisations saw them as bourgeois distractions from class issues. Some would say that the New Left experiment broadly continues to this day.

That means the Anti-Apartheid movement in the 70's looked in many ways similar to the Palestinian movement today. Palestinian 'Boycott, Divest and Sanction' campaigns common today were directly inspired by the Anti-Apartheid movement.

There were big protest marches against apartheid. Direct action was common, such as disruptions to sporting events with all-white South African players. Student activists were heavily involved in the Anti-Apartheid movement.

Protestors today have been gathering in consistent and sustained protests for Palestinian liberation in major cities. Groups of activists even disrupted a popular horse racing event and several businesses with ties to Israel. University students occupied their campus lawns and buildings, demanding the university management cut ties with Israel weapons manufacturers.

There are marked similarities between the broad approaches to fighting South African apartheid and Palestinian genocide respectively, so how was it that the Left dealt blows against the apartheid regime in South Africa, while we struggle today to generate power to change Australia's ties to Israel? The glaring difference between the two movements is the strength, capability and involvement of the workers movement in the fight.

THE WORKER'S MOVEMENT AGAINST PALESTINIAN GENOCIDE

Today, unionists trying to raise support for Palestine are met with resistance from their Labor-affiliated unions. The Labor Party has endorsed the Israeli genocide and actioned that support by pushing out Senator Fatima Payman based on her support for Palestine. Of course, the Labor Party looked different in the 70's compared to now. Between 1983 and 1991 a series of agreements between the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the Labor Party bound unions to processes

¹ Despite the end of apartheid laws 30 years ago, we hold no illusions that the oppression of Black poor and working class people ended with it.

of state arbitration, and fines that criminalised unprotected strike action. This is a slippery bit of class warfare that flushed the last shred of the party's working-class credibility down the toilet.

Small groups of rank-and-file unionists are doing what they can, but the opportunity to leverage substantive class power in solidarity with Palestine doesn't seem to be feasible anywhere within the Labor-affiliated nor the broader union movement today. A small group of non-union activists even took to protesting outside of Trades Hall, calling on unions to call workers off the job in support of Palestine.

The Maritime Union of Australia backed a picket in Melbourne in January 2024, giving its workers a paid day off to delay an Israeli-owned ship from leaving the docks. The union support seemed not to come from substantive organising by the rank-and-file, as many workers found out they had a paid day off from broader community picketers blocking the gates into the docks. Very few stayed at the picket, which remained dominated by community activists and non-MUA unionists.

The MUA leadership called for an end to the agreed one day picket, but many community activists argued against unionists to continue the picket through the night. Other community pickets and actions in front of the same docks occurred without the backing of the MUA or other unions, and ended up being dispersed by police.

THE WORKERS MOVEMENT AGAINST SOUTH AFRICAN APARTHEID

In 1971, the arrival of the Springboks, an all-white rugby team from apartheid South Africa, resulted in a union movement-wide black ban on their sporting events. This meant no workers were to lift a finger for the team. The ban was enforced by pilot, liquor and hotel workers unions. Gumbaynggirr activist and Black Power member, Gary Foley recounts that the team "couldn't get anyone to fly them anywhere, or serve them anything or rely on anywhere to stay."

Bob Pringle, then president of the Builders' Labourers Federation, walked into the sports ground where the Springboks were set to play intending to saw the goal post in half. During the country's construction boom, unionised builders' labourers quite literally built our cities, but when injustice was afoot or scab workers continued construction during a strike, they were known to *unbuild* parts of it as well.

In 1976, the massacre of Black African students in Soweto led to the UN calling an embargo on all oil shipped to apartheid South Africa, which their military relied on to function. Big oil companies naturally chose profit and ignored the toothless embargo, so a number of international maritime unions, including the Waterside Workers Union and Seaman's Union of Australia, united to form 'Maritime Unions Against Apartheid'. They announced their refusal to deliver both oil and weapons to South Africa, and so the combined force of these powerful unions at strategic docks around the globe became the muscle capable of enforcing a hard embargo on South Africa. The reigning Liberal government at the time was happy to back white power in South Africa as at home, and attempted to punish the involved trade unions. In the end, the unions stood strong, and the bans were enforced to the letter.

On the continent, the height of student rebellion saw barricades erected in universities and government buildings smashed, but the illegal workers strikes of Black South African and allied workers was crucial to forcing negotiations that ended apartheid. Nevertheless, the international

solidarity their movement received from unionists on our shores was important to the struggle and an example of the power of workers to change history. Although Nelson Mandela was a moderate that utilised the threat of worker uprisings to negotiate for a Black elite to share in the continued exploitation of the Black working class, he came to Australia after his release from prison in the 90's to thank the unionists for their part in ending apartheid in South Africa.

THE TASK AHEAD

In the face of genocide, many on the Left feel *doing something* is crucial. And it is. Unionists in the 70's were part of the huge protest marches that swept the continent, but the kind of power that can deal blows to genocidal regimes from halfway across the world is built in the workplace. Many feel that the union movement today doesn't show up for their struggles, and they're right. But even the black ban on the Springboks wouldn't have happened without a push from below from principled workers and unionists. Our unions are a reflection of the love or neglect we show them, a reflection of our level of organisation and our political will. Individual unions will improve or be replaced, but only if we build the appetite of workers in our industries to want a fighting workers movement capable of tackling all injustices—not just those that happen at work.

There are clear and important lessons to learn, in this era of grasping for the power to end atrocities and coming up empty-handed. We simply cannot neglect the workers movement for other forms of activism and then wonder why union officials aren't mobilising workers to end genocide for us. We have to re-build that power and capacity ourselves, from below, as workers. For Anarchist Communists today, there is no task more pressing. This is how we build power strong enough to end genocide and all injustice for good.

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