

Logistical Syndicalism

Dock Workers' Strikes in Solidarity with Palestinian Struggle

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A foundational position of green syndicalism is that workers pose the most potent force both for ending ecologically and socially harmful activities and for safely dealing with the transition to new forms of sustenance (knowing how to deal with toxic materials, decommissioning industrial sites, etc.). Particularly through strike action, work refusals and collective sabotage, workers can directly stop practices that are destructive of nature and social well-being, rather than making appeals to governing authorities, whether they be in the workplace or in governments. This is a collective power that can immediately end capitalist production and circulation and because of this it poses the greatest threat to capital and states.

Recently anti-capitalist organizing has given sharpened focus and attention to logistical chains and the nodes of distribution and ways in which capitalist circulation are particularly vulnerable, especially in contexts of just-in-time production and exchange. Targeting logistics points has proven an effective tactic in recent struggles ranging from pipeline developments in settler colonial Canada to solidarity pickets during labor disputes and strikes.

In 2021 several dock workers' actions have been organized in response to calls from Palestinian workers for solidarity as the Israeli state launched new offenses against Palestine. Attention tuned to the aggressions with mass evictions in the Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan neighborhoods of Jerusalem, the storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque, stepped-up statist violence in the West Bank and the areas taken from Palestine in 1948, and the bombardment of Gaza. At the time of the dockers' strikes, Israeli air strikes had killed more than 230 Palestinians, including more than 70 children and 40 women, in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The dock actions focused on ships of Zim Lines, Israel's largest and oldest cargo shipping company

Notably these strikes and work refusals were rank-and-file initiated and led. They represented forms of wildcat strikes, unsanctioned and occurring outside (and against) the bounds of collective agreements. They were solidarity strikes based not on the immediate or contractual interests of the striking workers but on broader interests of class solidarity and commitment to workers facing extremes of oppression elsewhere.

#BlockTheBoat in Oakland and Beyond

In a mass show of community and workplace solidarity, thousands of people blockaded the Port of Oakland, California, to stop the Israeli ZIM-operated Volans cargo ship from unloading its cargo. Following weeks of organizing under the banner of "Block the Boat," the action culminated June 4, when more than 1,000 people turned back the ZIM-owned cargo ship. This was the second ship to be turned away by blockaders, following a successful port blockade on June 2. Block the Boat initiatives were initiated by the Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC).

Crucial to the blockades were the actions of dock workers in International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 10, who honored six simultaneous community pickets held during the morning and evening shifts. The dock workers did not cross the picket lines and did not work the ship. This left no option for the ship but to leave port.

Jimmy Salamy, a Palestinian rank-and-file worker with ILWU Local 10, spoke of the significance of the broad working class solidarity expressed in the actions, and of the rank-and-file impetus behind the dock workers' participation:

An injury to one is an injury to all. Just as ILWU Local 10 workers refused to unload cargo from apartheid South Africa in the 1980s, we honored community pickets asking us not to unload

cargo from Israeli ZIM vessels. Rank-and-file members of ILWU Local 10 stand against Israeli apartheid and with our brothers and sisters in Palestine.

During the blockade, ILWU Local 10 President Trent Willis said: Workers' struggle is world-wide... [W]hen the workers of the world figure that out, and realize that we have to band together to make change, then it'll be a better world, including for the Palestinian people. Worker power, economic power, is real power—it's more powerful than those bombs Israel is dropping.

The Block the Boat blockades come directly in response to calls from Palestinian trade unions in Gaza who have requested that workers globally refuse to handle Israeli goods, deal with Israeli businesses, or handle Israeli cargo. Elias Al-Jelda, of the Executive Committee of the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions in Gaza, stated:

It warms our hearts in the besieged occupied Gaza Strip and the rest of occupied Palestine that our comrades led by AROC, and with the solidarity of our fellow workers in ILWU Local 10, achieved this great #BlockTheBoat victory against ZIM in Oakland. We call upon all dock workers worldwide to intensify the boycott campaign against ZIM ships and all business profiting from apartheid Israel, in solidarity with our people's struggle for freedom and justice in Palestine.

The Oakland blockades were part of a call for a June 2-9 International Week of Action to stop ships operated by Israeli cargo companies from docking. The campaign has focused especially on incoming ships operated by the Israel-based Zim Integrated Shipping Services Ltd or ZIM, which is one of the world's largest shipping companies, and the largest in Israel. It has been a main transport for military weaponry and equipment for the state of Israel—both to and from Israel.

The June 2021 efforts mark the first time that ZIM has tried to use Oakland port since 2014, when a series of successful pro-Palestinian actions blocked ships from docking for months. The 2021 blockades mean that Israel's largest shipping company has now been prevented from loading or unloading in the Bay Area for more than seven years.

solidarity actions have since been organized at the ports of Los Angeles, Seattle and Tacoma, Houston, New York City and Detroit. In some places, connections between dock workers and other workers and community need to be built or strengthened. There is no question about the significance of workers striking or refusing work over and above solidarity protests.

After its failed attempts to dock in Oakland, the Volans took the rather extreme measure of trying to dock at Prince Rupert, s British Columbia. Prince Rupert is a far north port only a bit south of the Alaska border. This may have seemed like an obscure location where a mobilization against ZIM Lines was less likely than in larger city centers, with larger activist bases, like Oakland, Seattle or Vancouver. If so, those hopes were quickly dashed. On June 14, only hours after being notified of ZIM's intentions to dock in Prince Rupert, a community mobilization set up pickets at the entrance to the city's Fairview container terminal.

To their credit, unionized longshore workers refused to cross the community picket lines. This foiled the ZIM efforts as International Longshore Workers Union local 505 members are required to tie down and unload all ships that stop at the terminal. This is the power of worker organizing on a class basis—a strength that community protests and pickets alone do not have and which secure power only through the participation of the workers who withdraw their labor. The Prince Rupert Port Authority later confirmed that the Volans would not be unloading in Prince Rupert,

The International Dockworkers Council released a statement commending local 505: "We would like to express our solidarity with the comrades who choose not to cross the picket line to defend such a noble cause." To be sure, the power of a picket line is realized only when all workers respect it and hold to the spirit of "Nobody in and nobody out."

I participated in a relatively smaller action at the Port of Vancouver in early June. At that action, we blocked a main entry to the port for several hours. A ZIM ship stops in Vancouver roughly every month. There is also a ZIM office in downtown Vancouver. That action showed the weakness of relative isolation from dock workers themselves. While some individual dock workers participated, and some truckers showed support and turned away, there was no organized collective participation that could have shut the port down in the form of a strike.

Strikes in Italy

Longshore workers at the port of Livorno mobilized against the Israeli assault on Gaza and against weapons shipments to Israel, saying publicly that they would refuse to offload or reload a ship destined for Israel if it stopped at the port. The Livorno longshore workers made the decision after getting word that their work could be contributing to the Israeli occupation forces. The workers had been given a heads-up that some of the containers they were scheduled to load were destined for the port city of Ashdod in the Occupied Territories and contained weapons and explosives.

Dock workers, organized as part of the Union Sindicale di Base (USB, one of the rank-and-file unions in Italy), called a strike against the ZIM ship the Asiatic Island on May 15. "The port of Livorno will not be an accomplice in the massacre of the Palestinian people."

They had been informed of the ship by fellow workers in the Collettivo Autonomo Lavoratori Portuali (Autonomous Port Workers Collective) in Genoa, where there were also actions scheduled against offloading or loading the ship.

The Asiatic Island, which flies the Singapore flag, is a standard "feeder" (a small container ship) operating in the scheduled service of the Israeli state-owned shipping company. Weapon Watch reports that ZIM ships regularly load goods in the port of Genoa.

Weapon Watch, a Genoa-based organization that monitors weapons shipments through European and Mediterranean ports,

had issued a public statement regarding the ship, reporting that it was loaded with high-precision rockets. The ship began its journey

in Marseilles, France, and was bound for Genoa before proceeding to Livorno and Naples. The ship was ultimately slated to deliver its shipments to the Israeli ports of Ashdod and Haifa. Weapon Watch claimed that the loading occurred without the ship docking in the "Dangerous Goods Zone," as required by law.

USB released a statement denouncing the weapons shipping operation and demanding that the Port Authority, harbormaster and border authorities inspect the ship's cargo, along with the reported dozens of armored military vehicles that were allegedly slated to be loaded while the ship was in the harbor. Further investigation by union members found that no military materials would have been loaded onto the ship had it called at Livorno, but they still sought public clarification and confirmation from the government whether authorization for the ship's cargo had been granted. They also insisted that all military shipments to Israel be ceased.

In Naples, the final Italian port of call for the Asiatic Island, dock workers (members of the SI Cobas rank-and-file union) organized a march of thousands of people to the port. They issued a statement in solidarity with struggles against the transport of weapons. They also denounced

the complicity of virtually every political party in Italy's parliament with the Israeli state's aggressions against Palestinians.

In June, dock workers in Italy again decided to strike against a ship scheduled to dock at the Port of Ravenna, because of the likelihood that weapons would be loaded for transport to the Port of Ashdod in Israel. A statement by the workers asserted: "Workers felt moral responsibility and refused to be accomplices in this tragic conflict." The strike was effective, as the shipping firm decided to abandon the shipment.

Direct Action and Division in Durban

At the end of May over 10,000 people marched on the Durban Esplanade and the port in Durban, South Africa, in solidarity with Palestinians and against the docking of a ZIM Lines ship in the port. This followed a smaller march a few days before. In addition to members of the union federations Cosatu and the South African Federation of Trade Unions, participating groups included members of shack dwellers' movement Abahlali base Mjondolo and the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance. Marchers called on state-owned Transnet to refuse to allow Israeli cargo ships to dock in South Africa's ports.

Thapelo Mohapi, the Abahlali base Mjondolo general secretary, spoke of connections between his organization's struggles and the struggle of the Palestinians. He noted that his members are often on the receiving end of brutality deployed by the Thekwini municipality during forced evictions:

We resonate with what is happening in Palestine because we are also facing persecution. We believe in international solidarity. We want to put to the end of the brutality that is happening in Palestine,...the murder that is happening...must come to an end. The blood of Palestine is our blood. Edwin Mkhize, secretary of Cosatu KwaZulu-Natal, expressed the union's desire to pressure Transnet and the South African government to stop permitting Israeli goods and ships to enter the country:

We have instructed our union members not to offload the cargo from Israel. We want to impose the same sanctions against Israel so that it will not continue with its apartheid policies against the people of Palestine. We want to force the Transnet not to allow Israel cargo vessels into our harbor. We want to tell our government not to only condemn Israeli aggressive actions against the defenseless people of Palestine. They must take action.

Another union, the Democratized Transport Logistics and Allied Workers' Union, affiliated with the South African Federation of Trade Unions, also instructed their members not to load or transport cargo from any Israeli-registered ship. The South African Transport and Allied Workers Union also took part in blocking the port entrance in what it described as actions against "Transnet-facilitated Israeli imports."

Shabir Omar, a Durban-based academic and Palestine solidarity activist who participated in the march and picket at the dock, put it in these terms:

The dock workers have taken a stand that they are not going to offload the cargo carried by an Israeli ship. We admire the courage of dockside workers, we admire their stand, we thank them because they are prepared to sacrifice so that people in other parts of the world can be freed.

Despite the actions of many workers, and some unions, there was not full support among dock unions and the ship in question was reportedly offloaded and reloaded. Anele Kiet, the

deputy general secretary of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union, expressed deep disappointment that not all unions supported the withdrawal of labor and did not support their members in refusing to offload the ship:

Our workers fulfilled our commitment to stand with the suffering people of Palestine by refusing to offload this ship. We have also committed ourselves not to touch any ship from Israel. Remember that Satawu is not the only union that organizes in the harbor, there are other unions like the Retusa [Revolutionary Transport Union of South Africa] and others, who unfortunately didn't heed our call and allowed their members to join contract workers in unloading this ship. We will engage these sister unions so that they will understand why we have taken this stance and join us in the future in refusing to service cargo ships from Israel or accept any goods from that country.

Workers in South Africa obviously have significant experiences in intense strike actions against the brutal force wielded by the state and capital. Dock workers in Durban have their own longstanding history of strikes in solidarity with working class movements globally, having organized strikes on five occasions in the space of 11 years in the fifties: 1949, 1954, 1956, 1958 and 1959. In the 1930s, dock workers refused to load meat for Ethiopia following the fascist invasion. That history continues to the present. In the words of historian David Hemson:

The popular 1973 Durban general strike was triggered by a strike by dock workers in September 1972. There were to be many others during apartheid. Even after apartheid, dock workers refused to offload cargo in solidarity with their counterparts in Australia and California, who were striking in protest of privatization.

The May actions are by no means the first against ZIM Lines in South Africa. In February 2009, SATAWU members, also in Durban, refused to offload a Zim Lines ship in protest against the 2008-2009 Israeli attack on Gaza.

South African workers obviously also recognize apartheid when they see it, and many have made connections between their own experiences and histories under apartheid and the situation of Israeli state occupation and annexation in Palestine. As Na'eem Jeenah of the BDS Coalition of South Africa puts it:

As South Africans, we know apartheid when we see it. When we look at what is happening in Palestine now, it reminds us of what happened during our apartheid past. Apartheid is an apartheid state. The reality is that anyone that talks about a two-state solution today is talking about a sovereign state of Israel and a Bantustan called the State of Palestine. There is no possibility of a viable Palestinian State. The only solution is a single democratic state that will accommodate both the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Solidarity strikes and boycotts were, of course, key elements in the international campaign against apartheid, and collective working class organizing played central parts, refusing to handle shipments to or from South Africa.

Conclusion

Strikes by dock workers and blockades of ports are significant mobilizations of class solidarity. At the same time, they can actually stop the movement of weapons to states and impede the carrying out of invasions and massacres, rather than simply making moral appeals for states to stop the aggressions that are at the heart of state operations. They can also impact the profit drive of arms

manufacturing capital and statist arms dealers, whether Israel or England, the United States or Canada.

Beyond the specific strike and blockade actions, there is the important work of working class solidarity and relationship building across national borders. These are building blocks of working class internationalism, anti-imperialism, and class-wide organizing.

The conflicted responses in Durban show the necessity of autonomous, rank-and-file organizing on an industrial (industry-wide) syndicalist basis rather than the divided and divisive approach of trade unionism, which organizes only on the limited basis of job types or specific workplaces or contracts.

Trade unions operate too on the basis of hierarchical bureaucratic models, "business unionism," in which union executives and officers focus on "collective bargaining" (often not collective in any but representational terms) with management in which the role of union apparatuses becomes management of a contract and typically involves disciplining of workers who might seek to organize outside of or beyond the contract. Trade union contracts often include prohibitions against wildcat strikes and solidarity strikes as one show of their commitment to the contract with management and their own managerial role over worker members.

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