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Dock workers: Block military cargo to Israel

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Against the genocidal war on Palestinians in Gaza!



Photograph: Nathaniel St. Clair/CounterPunch

The massacre of Palestinians in Gaza is escalating as the misnamed Israel Defense Forces (IDF) continue their carnage, flattening whole neighborhoods and committing mass murder of civilians. Yemen and Southern Lebanon have now been drawn into the war. More than 35,000 Palestinians, mostly children and women, have been killed and 67,000 seriously injured, according to the Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor (4 February).^[1] The United States is co-responsible for this genocide underway, as *all* the heavy (500-2,000-lb.) bombs causing the mass slaughter and *all* the warplanes from which they are dropped are *made in the U.S.A.* Without U.S. weaponry, the Zionist militarists would be stymied. “Genocide Joe” Biden’s pretense

of concern about civilian casualties is nothing but cynical crocodile tears. *This is a U.S./Israel war.*

Hospitals, universities, and residential buildings are being deliberately targeted. Ambulances have been destroyed, and medical workers killed, recently including those seeking to rescue a 6-year-old girl trapped in a car where her parents were killed by Israeli fire. Israel has cut off food, water, medical supplies, electricity, and fuel, allowing only a trickle of humanitarian aid to enter. United Nations authorities report that 90% of Gaza's 2.2 million people have been driven from their homes, and nine out of ten have less than one meal a day. Now, based on an Israeli claim, the U.S., along with Australia, Britain, Canada, France, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Switzerland, have stopped funding the U.N. Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), making them complicit in the Zionist campaign to obliterate the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip.

How can this monstrous slaughter be stopped? In December, the South African government brought charges of genocide against Israel before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), a toothless body that in a January 24 ruling called for Israel to change its war policy to protect civilians. This predictably had zero effect. In the U.S., the Center for Constitutional Rights and Defense for Children International - Palestine brought a case last November against war criminals Biden, U.S. Secretary of State Blinken, and Pentagon Chief Austin, calling to enjoin the defendants from "providing, facilitating or coordinating military assistance or financing to Israel." (One of the Palestinian American plaintiffs, Monadel Herzallah, will be speaking at a labor forum against the genocidal war on Gaza at ILWU Local 10 on February 24.) On January 31, a federal judge in Oakland ruled that he didn't have jurisdiction but echoed the ICJ ruling that "it is plausible that Israel's conduct amounts to genocide." So much for the courts.

Now, Israeli forces are poised to escalate the slaughter by attacking Rafah, where

over a million Gazans are concentrated. On the Israeli-occupied West Bank, from October 7 to date, at least 390 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli soldiers and fascistic settlers, and thousands arrested. Backing the Israelis up, there are some 50,000 U.S. troops in the region and 19 warships in the eastern Mediterranean and Red Sea, from which U.S. warplanes and missiles are bombing targets in Yemen, Syria and Iraq and threatening Iran. Working people the world over should be demanding that Israel get out of Gaza and the West Bank entirely and that the U.S. and its allies get the hell out of the Middle East. As a first step, unions should use their muscle to stop all Western arms shipments to Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and anywhere else in the region.

Labor on Gaza: Paper resolutions but not a lot of action

Last October 18, the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) issued an urgent appeal notably “calling on trade unions in relevant industries: 1) To refuse to build weapons destined for Israel. 2) To refuse to transport weapons to Israel. 3) To pass motions in their trade union to this effect,” as well as to take action against companies complicit with the Israeli siege, to pressure governments to stop military trade with Israel “and, in the case of the U.S., stop funding it.” In response, on October 30, five Belgian transport unions issued a joint statement saying they were refusing to load or unload arms shipments heading to the war zone. And on November 6, the Barcelona dock workers’ union announced it would “not permit activity in our port of ships containing war materiel,” while calling for a ceasefire in Gaza.

In Britain, Canada, and elsewhere, unions have passed motions, and there have been protests outside Israeli companies, notably the “defense” contractor Elbit. In Italy, rank-and-file dock unions in Genoa and other ports actually stopped operations with Israeli ships and held a national one-day strike against the war on Gaza on November 17 that shut down hundreds of warehouses in logistics hubs. In Sydney,

the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) joined protests against Israeli ZIM Lines ships and has called for an immediate ceasefire. In January, the 20-million-member International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) issued a statement, "Global Unions Call for Unified Action Following IJC Ruling on Gaza Genocide Case." Sounds good, but there is no call for labor action, just an appeal to the U.N. and "world leaders."

In the United States, beginning in October the United Electrical Workers (UE) circulated a petition to other unions with demands for a ceasefire and restoration of food, fuel, water and electricity to Gaza, demands that were taken up by the United Auto Workers (UAW), American Postal Workers Union (APWU), National Nurses Union (NNU), Service Employees (SEIU), Painters (IUPAT), Flight Attendants (AFA) and even the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA). But these appeals were *not* opposed to Israel's war on Gaza as such, and in the case of the UAW specifically were rendered moot by its endorsement of warmonger Democrat Biden, who has emphatically backed and enabled the Israeli slaughter, for president. The rest of the liberal union leaders will certainly follow suit.

As for the national AFL-CIO, after first quashing a ceasefire call by a local labor council in Washington State last October, on February 8, it issued a statement that begins by "condemn[ing] the attacks by Hamas," does not oppose the Israeli assault on Gaza, and calls for the release of Israeli hostages held in Gaza but not for freeing the more than 8,000 Palestinians held hostage in Israeli prisons. In short, *this is a pro-war statement* - but what else can you expect from the outfit whose international "labor" operations in conjunction with U.S. intelligence agencies earned it the nickname "AFL-CIA" in much of the world?

What about the ILWU?

While hundreds of Palestinian civilians are wantonly slaughtered by the mass-

murdering IDF occupation forces every day, while the specter and reality of this genocidal war horrifies millions around the world, what has come from the titled officers of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) has been a thundering silence. This is no accident. It goes hand-in-hand with the action (and inaction) on union matters by the ILWU International leadership under Bob McEllrath (2006 to 2016) and, currently, Willie Adams. The common denominator is *class collaboration*. Where McEllrath focused on cooperation with the shippers' Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), Adams has set his sights higher, seeking a seat at the White House table, literally, and dock jobs threatened by automation or Palestinians facing genocide be damned.

At the beginning of November, as outrage was building over the Israeli forces' massive slaughter in Gaza, several ILWU locals were working on resolutions of solidarity with the besieged Palestinians. On November 3, a ship of the U.S. Military Sealift Command, the Cape Orlando, rumored to be headed to Israel, docked in Oakland, where it was met by hundreds of protesters responding to a call from the Arab Resource and Organizing Committee (AROC). I and others headed to the docks to express solidarity with the protest, which lasted for 12 hours before police forced demonstrators away from the bollards so the crew could let the lines go. As the ship arrived in Tacoma the next day, 1,000 pro-Palestinian demonstrators blocked the dock. Longshore workers did not cross their picket line. Soldiers were brought in to work the ship.

Then, on November 6, the ILWU International Executive Board (IEB) met in San Francisco, chaired by President Adams. ILWU Local 5 in Portland put forward a resolution citing ILWU's proud history of convention resolutions and longshore actions protesting Israeli attacks on Palestinians. It called for a ceasefire and "upholding and amplifying our Union's long history of solidarity with the people of Palestine." But some Locals objected and a motion was introduced to table the resolution, which was accepted by the chair and passed. Even so, on November 18,

Local 10 in the Bay Area unanimously passed a resolution recalling the local's repeated refusal - in 2010, 2014, and 2021 - to work Israeli Zim Line ships when there were protests in defense of Palestinians and expressing "our determination to take action in their defense."

It is also reported that ILWU Locals 6 (Bay Area warehouse) and 8 (Portland longshore), as well as the San Francisco and Southern California regions of the Inland Boatman's Union in the Marine Division of the ILWU, have bucked the IEB's kibosh and called for a ceasefire in Gaza.

The shameful blocking of a resolution calling for an end to the slaughter in Gaza was a 180° turn from the ILWU's history of solidarity. Ever since the militant 1934 West Coast waterfront and San Francisco general strike, the ILWU's founding president, Harry Bridges, was hounded by the government, which tried to deport him four times, especially during the "Red Scare" at the height of the anti-Soviet Cold War. In 1949, an ILWU strike shut down Hawaiian ports for six months. In 1953, the union undertook a general strike that paralyzed the islands to protest the conviction of regional director Jack Hall and six others as Communists under the Smith Act on charges (later overturned) of conspiracy to overthrow the territorial government.

Every ILWU president since Bridges has confronted either the bosses' courts, the cops, or the feds. But government hostility didn't stop union members from opposing and undertaking militant action against U.S.-backed oppressor regimes. In 1984, Local 10 undertook a historic boycott of the *Nedlloyd Kimberley*, a ship from apartheid South Africa, after the Local leadership bowed before a court injunction was taken up by community protesters who continued to block the ship for several more days, an action that was hailed by South African anti-apartheid fighters in South Africa.

In 2002, in the build-up to the Iraq war, President George Bush II threatened to send troops to occupy West Coast ports if the ILWU walked out during contract

bargaining. Democratic senator Diane Feinstein called on Bush to invoke the Taft-Hartley Act, which he did. In April 2003, ILWU longshore workers respected the lines of anti-Iraq war protesters in the Port of Oakland, who were viciously attacked by the police using concussion grenades, rubber bullets, wooden dowels, and tear gas. A number of protesters were hospitalized, and scores arrested, including myself as the Local 10 business agent on the scene. Then, on May Day 2008, acting on a Local 10 resolution, the ILWU shut down every port on the Pacific Coast, demanding an end to the U.S. war on Afghanistan and Iraq – the first strike by U.S. workers against a U.S. war since 1919.

ILWU tops swing hard to starboard on Israel-Palestine

But today, it's different. ILWU president Willie Adams clearly disagrees with the union's longstanding defense of Palestinian rights. This is not new. In 2006, when he was secretary-treasurer of the ILWU International, Adams traveled to Israel on a trip sponsored by an evangelical Christian pro-Zionist group. He wrote an article for the ILWU newspaper, *The Dispatcher*, fulsomely praising Israel with no mention of the oppression of Palestinians in the giant open-air prison that is the Gaza Strip or of the attacks by fascistic Zionist settlers against the Palestinian people in the West Bank. When Adams asked *Dispatcher* editor Steve Stallone for his opinion of his article. Stallone told him: "It's problematic. It conflicts with the ILWU's official position established by its highest decision-making body, the convention."

Stallone showed Adams union resolutions of the 1988 and 1991 ILWU conventions defending Palestinian rights and criticizing Israeli attacks. Shortly after, Stallone was fired, in good part for his critique of Adams' pro-Zionist article, which was challenged in the *Dispatcher* by a letter to the editor from 38 angry members in Canada and the U.S. The firing, engineered by newly elected International president Bob McEllrath and Adams, both from the conservative leaderships of the Pacific Northwest locals of the ILWU, was an early marker of the union's rightward

trajectory. It revealed a top-down bureaucratic tendency to undo democratically decided political positions. This was reflected in deepening capitulation to the shipping bosses “at home,” as successive longshore contracts failed to defend longshore and clerks’ jobs from the threat of automation.

Another stark example was McEllrath’s sabotage of the struggle in 2012 to unionize a scab export grain terminal (EGT) being constructed in Longview, Washington. He ordered Local 21 to drop plans to occupy the site and then saddled it with a contract, leaving the control tower fully in the hands of management. Meanwhile, the union accepted a \$20 million dollar fine over its job actions in the Port of Portland, Oregon, stemming from an ill-advised dispute with the IBEW over a couple of reefer jobs. It even went into bankruptcy proceedings rather than shutting down the coast in response to this attack. But more on that later.

The ILWU’s sharp right turn was reflected in the bargaining over the 2022 Pacific Coast Longshore Contract Document (PCLCD), especially over relations with the federal government. Adams sat in a photo op for President Biden on the deck of the USS *Iowa* in June 2022 before the expiration of the previous contract. He dutifully vowed not to strike, abandoning the ILWU’s historic program of “no contract, no work” and surrendering labor’s leverage in the bargaining. Then, in an unprecedented move, he invited U.S. acting secretary of labor Julie Su into the contract negotiations with the employers’ PMA. Adams kept members working without a contract for a year when the ILWU was not facing a no-strike clause and could have walked out at any time. Instead, the union leadership kept the “wheels of commerce rolling.”

Adams brags that he’s the first ILWU president to meet at the White House with a U.S. president. After the *six-year* 2022-28 PCLCD was finally ratified last August, Adams was rewarded with a visit to Washington to be photographed with Biden, in which the Democratic president praised the contract as “a good deal for the United

States of America.” Adams was back at the White House for another photo op in November, when he applauded Biden’s “Global Labor Directive,” which the ILWU president said will “reverse decades of labor-hostile trade deals” like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). What a fraud! Biden voted for NAFTA and helped Democratic president Bill Clinton fast-track that job-killing deal through Congress in 1993.

ILWU on the ILA warpath

For decades, the West Coast ILWU traded on its reputation as the “progressive” U.S. dock workers union. The ILWU courageously opposed the Korean War at its height and refused to send arms to the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile in 1978 and to the military junta in El Salvador in 1980. At the same time, the union leadership was careful not to cross vital “red lines” of the imperialist rulers. Thus, the ILWU marched in demonstrations against the Vietnam War, but even as it struck against the PMA in 1971, it continued to move war cargo. And as Jimmy Carter’s anti-Soviet war drive went into high gear in 1980-81, social-democratic ILWU president Jimmy Herman denounced the Soviet Union over the CIA-funded, Polish nationalist Solidarność, Ronald Reagan’s favorite “union.”

The International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) on the East and Gulf Coasts, on the other hand, has backed every U.S. imperialist war. Yet in 2022, the ILWU joined the ILA in support of the U.S./NATO-provoked imperialist war in Ukraine, refusing to work Russian ships. And now both unions are mum about the genocidal war by Israel and the U.S. against the Palestinians in Gaza. They are not alone. The International Dockworkers Council (IDC), which in 2014 and 2021 issued sharp denunciations of Israeli massacres in Gaza, has said nothing about the genocide currently underway. The only recent “action” by the IDC, now headed by Dennis Daggett (son of ILA president Harold Daggett), was a statement in November against “any kind of war or confrontation” that didn’t even mention Gaza and a January visit to Pope Francis in

the Vatican, where likewise no mention of Gaza was reported.

In contrast to the complicit silence of the ILA and ILWU leaders in the U.S., the Canadian section of the ILWU on December 20 issued a brief statement calling for a ceasefire in Gaza and expressing “solidarity with the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions.” It did not, however, call for any specific action, such as boycotting war materiel. Not coincidentally, the week before, the Canadian government voted for a ceasefire resolution in the United Nations. In January, Canadian ILA Locals 273 (St. John, New Brunswick) and 1953 (St. John’s, Newfoundland) took a stand for a ceasefire in Gaza. The reality is that almost all trade union leaderships are part of a privileged *labor bureaucracy* that is ultimately beholden to the capitalist-imperialist rulers. Occasionally, some may break ranks, particularly when they, as well as the workers’ organizations they lead, are under attack. But mostly that will reflect divisions in the ruling class, as with “antiwar” Democrats over Vietnam.

Many liberals are calling for a ceasefire in a desperate effort to put an end to the horrifying slaughter of the people of Gaza, even though they don’t oppose the U.S./Israeli war as such. But precisely because of the latter, they are condemned to impotence in the face of the kill-crazed Zionist warmongers who will not stop, nor will Biden stop them. Plus, any “negotiated ceasefire” would leave the Israeli occupiers in place, which is intolerable to the people of Gaza. And the besieged Palestinians have a right to defend themselves against the murderous Israeli onslaught. Rather than seeking in vain to pressure Biden and the Democrats in Congress, what’s needed is to use labor’s power to *block* the imperialist war machine. Dock workers are at the choke point for transporting military cargo. We can stop it. The bureaucrats will say that violates the contract. But ILWU Local 10 has done it before, and it can do so today against the genocide in Gaza.

What’s needed is a leadership that is prepared to wage sharp class struggle against the bosses on the docks and beyond. With that, we can impose workers’ control over

automation, help win organizing drives for Amazon workers, fight racist police repression, and strike a powerful blow against imperialist and Zionist wars. In this global economy, port workers hold an awesome power if they are organized and armed with a program and leaders willing and able to use it. The supply chain problems during and after the pandemic made the importance of the ports clear to the imperialist rulers, which is one big reason why ILWU leaders are suddenly getting invites to the White House to chitchat in front of the cameras. Class-conscious union leaders would say instead: government hands off! To unchain workers' power, we need to break with the Democrats and all capitalist politicians and build a workers' party on a class-struggle program.

Genuine solidarity with the besieged and massacred Palestinian people must demand, as did motions last December by Painters Local 10 and Ironworkers Local 29 in Portland, Oregon, "the immediate end to Israel's bombing of Gaza; for Israel to vacate Gaza and the West Bank, and to end all arming and funding for it now." In Oakland on January 13, AROC called for a "Port Shutdown for Palestine," to "Stop Military Aid to Israel!" and for "Ceasefire Now!" A couple thousand protesters were mustered, starting at 5 a.m. and going till 4 p.m. The PMA evidently realized that if they ordered up longshore workers while all the terminal gates were picketed, the workers would not cross. So employers didn't even order longshore workers from the union hiring hall. *The next time, it should be the ILWU itself that initiates the action, as it did in the apartheid ship boycott in 1984.*

The Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions has called on transportation unions to refuse to touch arms to Israel. We must honor their request now! **War cargo to Israel - too hot to handle! Defend the Palestinians, defeat the war on Gaza!**

Notes.

[1] While Gaza Health authorities report 27,700 killed at this time (February 10), the

figures cited above include those who have been reported missing for 14 days, mostly buried under the rubble.

Jack Heyman is a retired Oakland ILWU longshoreman who was an organizer in San Francisco of the historic 1984 union boycott action of a ship from apartheid South Africa, the 2008 May Day anti-war protest shutting down all West Coast ports against the U.S. imperialist war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the militant 1997 Bay Area solidarity port actions for the Liverpool dockers and numerous anti-Zionist port protests from 2002-2021. He published the class struggle Maritime Worker Monitor with the late Portland longshoreman Jack Mulcahy who died last year in a mountain-climbing accident on North Sister peak in Oregon.

Source: [CounterPunch](#)

