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International workers build 'people's embargo' against Israeli genocide

written by Lallan Schoenstein
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From the docks of Oakland to the ports of Morocco, from Italian logistics hubs to South African coal mines, an international movement is taking shape to do what governments have refused: Cut off the flow of weapons and fuel sustaining Israel's assault on Gaza.

On Nov. 22, labor organizers, Palestinian activists, and anti-war campaigners from six countries gathered online to launch the People's Embargo for Palestine — a coordinated effort to leverage workers' power at critical chokepoints in the global military supply chain. The webinar brought together a veteran of the anti-apartheid

struggle with a new generation of organizers who have notched concrete victories over the past year.

“Anything that comes off of a ship is handled by longshore workers, some of the most critical workers of the global economy,” said Clarence Thomas, a retired member of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 10 and veteran of the 1980s campaign against South African apartheid. “The commerce of the world is handled through dock worker power.”

That power is now being mobilized for Palestine. And it’s working.

Maersk retreats, Zim expelled

Members of The Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM) reported that their research unit has been tracking military cargo shipments to Israel, publishing detailed reports on shipping routes, weapons components, and fuel supplies. According to Kaleem Hawa, speaking for PYM, their “Mask Off Maersk” campaign has successfully forced the Danish shipping giant to reroute vessels away from Spanish and French ports, where workers have refused to load Israel-bound cargo.

“Maersk has become afraid to bring arms through these ports, and they have rerouted to avoid targeting,” Hawa reported. The campaign also claims a breakthrough: Maersk announced this past summer it would cease carrying imports or exports from Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank — “marking the first time an international shipping company has enacted a de facto sanction of Israel,” according to PYM.

In Oakland, the Israeli shipping line Zim has been entirely expelled from the Bay Area since 2014, when the Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC) organized a “Block the Boat” action. ILWU Local 10 members refused to cross community picket lines for four days, and the Zim line never returned. In the case of the ILWU

Local 10 members, it has meant a loss of wages, because longshore workers make their money unloading and loading ships.

“There has not been any complaints from any longshoremen that I know about missing money from the Zim line vessels that no longer come into the port,” Thomas said, addressing the reality that solidarity comes at a cost. He said: “Many years ago trade union activist Baldemar Velasquez said, ‘Solidarity is not an empty slogan.’ It means that you give something up.”

Learning from the anti-apartheid movement

The parallels to the 1980s campaign against South African apartheid are deliberate. The same ILWU locals that refused to handle South African cargo then are organizing against Israeli shipments now. The same combination of labor action, divestment, and sanctions is being deployed.

Thomas recalled that in 1988, the ILWU International Convention officially condemned Israel’s treatment of Palestinians, calling it “state-sponsored terrorism” and quoting Israeli journalist Amos Elon’s description of Gaza as “the Soweto of the state of Israel.”

But he was candid about setbacks. In 2024, a resolution written by ILWU Local 10 calling for the entire union to refuse military cargo to Israel “was voted down resoundingly,” Thomas acknowledged. “It was a very discouraging moment.” The union’s membership, he noted, has changed significantly over the decades.

“Each generation has to fight its own battles,” he said. “I’m almost 80 years old, and I’m not giving up.”

From South Africa, Noxolo Bhengu of COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) brought a message of solidarity rooted in her country’s history. “During apartheid, it was workers in the ports of Oakland, in Liverpool, in Australia, in the

Nordic countries — workers just like you who refused to handle South African goods,” she said. “From Cape Town to Cairo, their courage saved lives, and their actions built pressure when governments were too timid.”

COSATU, which represents government workers, teachers, nurses, mine workers, and transport workers, is now pushing to end South African coal exports to Israel. South Africa supplies the majority of Israel’s thermal coal, according to organizers, making this campaign potentially one of “the most substantial blows against the genocide to date,” as Hawa put it.

Italy: Millions strike against complicity

In Italy, the logistics union S.I. COBAS has led strikes and blockades targeting companies involved in the military supply chain. Alessandro Zedra, the Milan coordinator, described their approach: “For S.I. COBAS, embargo work is not only about policy proposals but about building real power from below.”

The actions face “heavy repression — investigation, trials, and police violence,” Zedra said, but they prove “that workers can play a direct role in disrupting the machinery of war.”

On Oct. 3, Italy saw what organizers describe as a historic convergence: Grassroots unions coordinated with CGIL, the country’s largest union federation, to call a general strike. According to Mariam of Giovani Palestinesi Italia (GPI), millions of workers across the country walked out against the Italian government’s complicity in the Gaza genocide.

“These dates are especially important because they were not only demonstrations but also strikes,” Mariam said. The actions included blockades at ports and airports between Sept. 22 and Oct. 3. Another round of national strikes and mobilizations was scheduled for Nov. 28-29.

The Italian movement is also contesting a new financial bill that would massively increase military spending as Italy participates in what organizers call “the plan for rearmament of Europe.”

Tracking the supply chain: From Poland to Oakland

The People’s Embargo relies on detailed research to identify vulnerable points in the weapons supply chain. PYM’s methodology involves tracking shipments before they’re loaded, mapping manufacturing sites, and understanding specific routes.

Recent reports have exposed surprising nodes in the network. According to PYM, 90% of TNT imported by the United States — where domestic production has ceased — comes from Poland. “This TNT is used in the bombs that are dropped on Gaza,” Hawa said.

In Canada, the government claims it suspended some weapons export licenses to Israel. But a PYM report released the week of the webinar documented how Canadian manufacturers exploit a loophole, shipping components to the United States which then forwards them to Israel.

Shatha M., speaking for Arms Embargo Now Canada, described how the report “triggered a national crisis” with senators referencing it in Parliament and a bill now proposed to close the loophole. When PYM exposed a shipment of antennas used in Elbit drones, the suppliers suspended future shipments to Elbit “within days,” she reported.

“What started as a scattered demand is now the shared political baseline across the country because the movement made it so,” Shatha said.

Perhaps most surprising was Oakland’s role. Despite the city’s progressive reputation and history of solidarity with Palestine, PYM research revealed that Oakland’s civilian airport has been one of the most frequent departure points for

F-35 components destined for Israel.

“These shipments have flown through the Oakland airport multiple times per week, almost every single week this year,” said Voulette, a PYM organizer coordinating the Oakland People’s Arms Embargo campaign. According to the research, 96% of the cargo went directly to Nevatim Air Base, where Israel’s entire F-35 fleet is stationed.

The shipments included bomb release units for 2,000-pound bunker-busters, guidance systems, and targeting components — all transported through civilian infrastructure. The revelation was particularly shocking because Oakland passed one of the first ceasefire resolutions in November 2023, and ILWU Local 10 has long refused to handle Israeli military cargo at the maritime port.

“FedEx, Lockheed Martin, and these genocide profiteers have been exploiting our city and our public infrastructure to facilitate a genocide that we never consented to,” Voulette said. The campaign has built a coalition of over 30 organizations and won endorsement from the Alameda Labor Council, representing 135,000 workers and 135 unions.

Morocco: Organizing under repression

In Morocco, the campaign against weapons shipments operates under difficult conditions. Ismail Lghazaoui of BDS Morocco was imprisoned for his role in organizing protests against ships carrying military cargo.

“It was the first protest on-site back in Nov. 13 to 16, and we were only five people,” Lghazaoui said. “I was imprisoned but released two months later, and suddenly we have more mobilizing.”

The movement has since identified at least 25 ships carrying military goods — from F-35 parts to maintenance components — through Moroccan ports. Dock workers in Tangier and Casablanca have contributed by halting boats or refusing to work them.

Morocco's complicity is particularly painful, Lghazaoui noted, because the country has historical and cultural ties to Palestine and signed onto international resolutions condemning the genocide. The Moroccan government came under pressure after ships denied docking in Spain were rerouted to Moroccan ports instead.

"UN rapporteur Francesca Albanese [has said] that Morocco is complicit in genocide by allowing or harboring ships that make deliveries to the Zionist regime," Lghazaoui reported. The campaign is now pursuing legal complaints and coordinating with movements across the Mediterranean to halt ships wherever they appear.

The movement also honors Sion Assidoun, a founder of BDS Morocco, who led early campaigns against the Zim shipping line, which led the Zim campaign back in 2010 or 2011. It helped identify how complicit the Zim company is and helped Tunisia to actually remove Zim completely from its itinerary. Assidoun recently passed away. "We will take the torch and continue forward," Lghazaoui said.

A strategy for the long haul

The People's Embargo represents a shift in strategy for the Palestine solidarity movement. Rather than focusing solely on mass demonstrations or lobbying governments, organizers are targeting the material infrastructure of genocide — the ships, ports, airports, and factories that keep weapons flowing.

"This has been a logistics genocide, full spectrum and integrated, the result of a networked world of war profiteers and resource extraction working together against oppressed peoples globally," Hawa argued in opening the webinar. "Close study of supply chains can teach us as people's movements what the ruling classes have not yet admitted, or hope never to admit."

The approach requires detailed research, international coordination, and the

willingness of workers to take action at personal sacrifice. It faces government repression in multiple countries. And it operates in the context of a ceasefire agreement that organizers view as fundamentally unjust — what Hawa described as “the theft and primitive accumulation of almost half of Gaza, with the rest left to siege and concentration camp conditions.”

But the victories, while modest in scale, demonstrate what’s possible when workers exercise power at chokepoints in the global economy. Zim was expelled from Oakland. Maersk rerouting from European ports. Canadian suppliers are suspending shipments after exposure. Italian workers are shutting down logistics for days.

“The military-industrial complex operates across borders,” said S.I. COBAS organizer Zedra. “Therefore, our resistance must also be transnational.”

As Voulette put it in closing the Oakland section of the webinar: “History is not just something that is done to us. It is something that we can shape through our actions.”

How to support the campaigns

Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM)

Website: <https://www.palestinianyouthmovement.com>

Arms Embargo Now (Canada)

Website: <https://armsembargonow.ca>

BDS Morocco Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions Movement

Website: <https://www.bdsmovement.net>

Statement honoring Sion Assidoun:
<https://www.bdsmovement.net/Rest-In-Power-Sion>

Congress of South African Trade Unions

Website: <https://mediadon.co.za>

Oakland People's Arms Embargo

Website: <https://armsembargonow.com>

Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC)

Website: <https://www.araborganizing.org>

S.I. Cobas Sindacato Intercategoriale Lavoratori Organizzati

Website: <https://sicobas.org>

Giovani Palestinesi Italia (GPI)

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/giovanipalestinesi.it/?hl=en>

Italian General Confederation of Labour

Website: <https://www.cgil.it>

Million Worker March Movement, Mobilizing in Our Own

Website: <https://millionworkermarch.com>

Editor's Note: This article is based on a Nov. 22 webinar launching the People's Embargo for Palestine. Organizations provided the URLs listed above; readers should verify current campaign information directly with these groups.

