

Dockworkers and Labor Activists Can Block the Transport of Arms to Israel

AN INTERVIEW WITH

RAFEEF ZIADAH / KATY FOX-HODESS

Pro-Palestine “Block the Boat” actions, where dockworkers block the transport of arms to Israel, have proliferated in recent years. Recalling actions against apartheid South Africa, they’re an effective way for labor to oppose Israel’s war on Gaza.

INTERVIEW BY

PETER COLE

As a humanitarian disaster ravages Gaza, activists around the world have taken a wide range of actions aimed at pressuring Israel, from mass marches and “die-ins” to blockades and sit-ins. Unions have also ramped up solidarity actions in a range of sectors. While the scale of these actions is unprecedented, they follow on the heels of years of organizing and education campaigns by rank-and-file labor activists.

Among the most celebrated labor actions have been those launched by dockworkers in a number of countries — including the United States, Australia, Canada, Sweden, Italy, South Africa, Belgium, and Tunisia — who have refused to load Israeli ships and cargo and transport arms to Israel. In the United States, major actions took place in 2014 and 2021 under the banner of “Block the Boat,” organized by the San Francisco-based Arab Resource and Organizing Center.

Katy Fox-Hodess and Rafeef Ziadah have been researching port-based pro-Palestine actions since 2019. In this interview, conducted by labor historian Peter Cole, they discuss the key lessons for pro-Palestine organizers seeking to work alongside and within the trade union movement (you can find information on both [here](#) and [here](#)). Understanding these lessons is particularly important given the severity of the crisis in Gaza and Palestinian trade unions' recent call to workers around the world to prevent the manufacture and transportation of arms to Israel.

PETER COLE Why did you decide to study the “Block the Boat” (BTB) protests? Why were they significant, and what were you interested in understanding?

RAFEEF ZIADAH For some time, Palestinian organizers focused on pushing international trade union solidarity with Palestine from symbolic gestures and motions to actions that are both strategic and impactful. In this sense, the Block the Boat campaign was transformative.

The “official” initiation of the Block the Boat campaign dates to 2014 in the Port of Oakland, drawing inspiration from earlier similar actions in South Africa and Sweden. During Israel’s military assault on Gaza in 2008–09, the [Boycott Divestment Sanctions, or BDS] movement urged dockworkers to abstain from handling Israeli cargo and ships. In response, the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) in Durban became the first in the world to refuse unloading an Israeli ship. This act carried significant symbolic weight, reminiscent of actions taken by trade unionists against the South African apartheid regime from the 1950s through the 1980s.

The Block the Boat initiative, spearheaded by the San Francisco–based Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC) in 2014, went beyond symbolic protest and aimed to inflict tangible economic losses on Israel. Focusing on garnering support from unionized dockworkers in the United States, the targeted effort aimed to prevent Zim Integrated Shipping Services (ZIM), an Israeli shipping company, from docking at ports. In 2014, BTB actions caused various delays to ZIM vessels and led to it discontinuing its West Coast service for several years. However, in 2021, ZIM resumed operations on the US West Coast by initiating a new express liner from China.

BTB was from the beginning pivotal in reimagining the potential for rank-and-file organizing within dockworker unions and worker-to-worker solidarity. It was very important to record this experience in detail, to understand and learn from the successes but also pitfalls to avoid.

PETER COLE Can you talk through what Block the Boat looked like in practice? How did the blockades actually work?

KATY FOX-HODESS Solidarity actions at ports have looked different in different countries, and that largely reflects differences in labor law. In Sweden, for example, unlike in the United States, political strikes are lawful, so back in 2010, the national leadership of the independent Swedish Dockworkers Union simply made a decision not to handle Israeli cargo in response to an attack on Gaza. This earlier action was one of the inspirations for the Block the Boat movement in the United States.

Because of the far more restrictive laws on industrial action in the United States, however, community-based activists have played a much bigger role in the US blockades. Community activists make these actions much more powerful – but handling the relationship with the union effectively is critical for success. The stronger the relationships built with the union, and the more effective education and outreach done with union members are, the greater the likelihood of success. Conversely, actions where activists were unable to build meaningful relationships with the union were far less effective at disrupting Israeli ships or building long-term momentum.

In each of the cases we studied (at the ports of Oakland, Seattle, Long Beach, and Port Elizabeth in New Jersey), hundreds or even thousands of community activists gathered to form “community picket lines” calling on unionized dockworkers not to enter the terminals and work ZIM vessels. In one of the actions in Oakland, where community activists built the strongest relationship with the union, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) invoked the “health and safety” clause in their contract to argue that it would not be safe for their members to try to enter the workplace. An independent arbitrator was called out and ruled in the union’s favor, meaning that members received “standby pay” while remaining outside of the workplace, enabling them to respect the community picket line without losing pay. In addition, because a significant proportion of dock work (like in other industries) remains casualized, casual workers are also able to simply refuse work on any given day, providing another avenue to support community blockades.

Even in cases where contract clauses were not invoked, the West Coast actions showed that blockades can be at least somewhat effective in the short term when community members are able to mass in sufficient numbers to physically block entrances to the workplace. However, it's important to note that when this is done without support from the union, it can undermine efforts to build strong and enduring coalitions that make future action possible. For this reason, workers in Palestine urge community-based activists to take action when they have thought through and built strong relationships with the unions at the worksite. Ultimately, these actions are strongest when the workers on site refuse to handle the ships.

All in all, what the research shows is the need for creativity and flexibility to work with the opportunities and constraints of the industry at hand and the needs and capacities of the workers in that industry to develop effective blockades. Reciprocal relationships with unions, built on trust and mutual understanding, are critical. It also shows how important it is in countries like the United States that have restrictive laws on strike action for community activists to step up en masse to make these kinds of actions successful.

PETER COLE My book *Dockworker Power* examined how San Francisco Bay Area longshore workers refused to unload cargo from South Africa to protest apartheid, and that, too, was part of a global movement to isolate the white supremacist regime there. Katy, could you provide context for the Block the Boat actions in the United States and internationally?

KATY FOX-HODESS There's a very long and inspiring history of dockworkers from around the world taking solidarity actions for a wide range of anti-imperialist, anti-fascist, and other progressive political causes, going back to the nineteenth century. As you've documented in your work, though, the sustained campaign of action by dockworkers and other trade unionists against apartheid in South Africa has probably been the most significant in scale and impact. There are clear connections between South African apartheid and the situation in Palestine, and the ramping up of international trade union actions in recent years is in part a recognition of this and the need for a globally coordinated worker response.

This is particularly significant in the United States, because until very recently there has been a strong consensus in the labor movement — at least at the top — in terms of uncritical and total support for Israel. Over the past ten years or so, however, this consensus has started to break down, almost entirely as a result of grassroots initiatives by union members in solidarity with Palestinian workers, including boycott and divestment campaigns, as well as direct actions like Block the Boat. This has

really ramped up since last month to the point where, for the first time ever, we're seeing a quite mainstream national union in the United States, the American Postal Workers Union (APWU), putting out a strong statement calling for a cease-fire.

All of this is to say that, due to the rapidly changing tide of public opinion in the United States, including in the labor movement, there has never been a better time for us to work with, and within, unions to build solidarity with Palestine.

PETER COLE Can you explain what you learned about community-based organizing in your research on Block the Boat?

RAFEEF ZIADAH The Block the Boat campaign underscored several crucial lessons for organizers. Firstly, it highlighted the importance of “bridge-builders” who could connect and communicate between community groups and the trade union membership. These individuals, who had organized within their own union local and external solidarity movements for years, played a key role in facilitating collaboration, aligning goals, and navigating the practicalities of organizing a community picket at the port. The quality of organizational relationships between unions and community organizations was very important to successfully blocking the boats since, at the end of the day, successful actions relied mainly on workers refusing to cross the community picket lines.

Another key lesson was the necessity of conducting advanced research on the union, workplace, employer, and industry. In-depth knowledge in these areas proved essential for developing strategic approaches and addressing challenges. Organizers aspiring to undertake similar Block the Boat actions can refer to this valuable guide. It offers practical insights for effective engagement with trade unions.

We also found that preparation for BTB actions involves not only understanding how to track ZIM ships but also having efficient methods for mobilizing people to picket lines quickly in response to the movement of ZIM vessels, such as text-blast systems and ride shares. This also includes anticipating and preparing for police actions against the pickets. This is where the collective strength of community protesters, in extensive collaboration with labor unions, has the potential to substantially reduce or prevent police intervention, especially when leveraging contractual provisions such as health and safety clauses.

Finally, since we were looking at Block the Boat actions over an extended period, we found that organizers faced the challenge of ensuring the continuity of organizing efforts between mobilizations.

They highlighted the importance of sustaining the connections with trade unions between mobilizations, rather than only concentrating on moments of crisis. Building mutual trust and reciprocity in the relationship with unions was also emphasized. Community activists do this by “showing up” for the union when they need support — such as during strikes or when they are campaigning on local political issues.

Block the Boat actions have achieved the greatest success when community organizers focused on cultivating enduring relationships with union branches. This approach is rooted in a commitment to building long-term connections rather than simply seizing moments of crisis.

PETER COLE Can you discuss what trade union members can do inside their own unions to build support, with some examples from different sectors?

RAFEEF ZIADAH Israel’s decades-long military occupation has suffocated the Palestinian economy. As a result, many Palestinian workers have been pushed into precarious and unsafe working conditions. Unemployment and poverty levels have soared, with women, youth, and refugees most affected. Palestinian trade unions have consistently called for worker-to-worker solidarity that emphasizes their daily life and working conditions. There are numerous ways to build support within trade unions — rank-and-file activists have a significant role to play.

Actions that have the most significant impact are those that directly link an industry or specific employer to Israel’s oppression of Palestinians. For example, when dockworkers support blockades of Israeli cargo and shipping companies, that is a direct link with their workplace. Currently, dockworkers from Barcelona are refusing to handle military cargo (a long-standing policy of their comrades at the Port of Genoa in Italy) — as are transport workers in Belgium.

Actions to disrupt the manufacture and transportation of arms, similar to what Scottish workers involved in the manufacture of Hunter Hawker jets for Rolls Royce in the 1970s did during the [Pinochet] dictatorship in Chile, can be particularly effective. In 1978, dockworkers in San Francisco, members of ILWU Local 10, refused to unload US weapons aboard a ship intended for Chile; their bold action also resulted in the United States changing its policy so that it didn’t send any further weapons to Chile.

In the past month Palestinian trade unions have issued an important call for actions that disrupt the arms trade with Israel. An important tool kit, “Who Arms Israel,” provides information on how to take

such actions and on manufacturing and transport. For example, last month, four hundred trade unionists in the UK successfully blockaded a weapons manufacturing plant in Kent.

PETER COLE The three of us have conducted a lot of research on the role that workers in the maritime industry can impact global politics, which makes sense since 90 percent of all goods are moved, for at least part of their journey, by ship. However, workers in other segments of the transportation industry have tremendous potential, too. Perhaps you two could discuss examples of other industries where workers have flexed their muscles?

KATY FOX-HODESS Yes, this is a really important point to get across. Clearly the arms industry — and the international shipping industry that transports those arms — are critical targets for direct action, and Palestinian trade unions have called for solidarity actions targeting these industries in particular. But trade unionists in other industries shouldn't feel that this means they don't have an important role to play as well. As the info sheet for trade unionists on building solidarity actions in their own unions explains, the best actions are those that make a direct connection between workers in a given industry.

For example, if you're a medical worker, you could push your trade union to initiate a political campaign to open the borders of Gaza for medical personnel to enter and patients to leave. The National Writers Union has called attention both to the appalling treatment of Palestinian journalists and the need for responsible reporting on Gaza abroad. Academic and cultural workers have organized campaigns in support of the academic and cultural boycott. And trade unionists in many countries have initiated divestment campaigns when they have found that their pensions are invested in companies on the boycott list.

Even if you can't find a direct connection between your industry and the situation in Palestine, there are still many ways you can build support. You can bring a solidarity motion to a union meeting, organize fellow members to attend a protest together as a trade union bloc, or invite a local Palestine community organization to conduct an educational event with union members. Every action, no matter how small, makes a difference.

CONTRIBUTORS

Rafeef Ziadah is a human rights activist and senior lecturer in politics and public policy (emerging economies) at King's College London.

Katy Fox-Hodess is a lecturer in employment relations at the University of Sheffield.

Peter Cole is a professor of history at Western Illinois University and a research associate in the Society, Work and Development Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa. He is the author or editor of several books, most recently *Ben Fletcher: The Life & Times of a Black Wobbly*. He is the founder and codirector of the Chicago Race Riot of 1919 Commemoration Project.

FILED UNDER

Europe / Israel / Palestine / United States / South Africa

War and Imperialism / Unions

Logistics / Israeli Occupation / BDS / Gaza / Union Organizing / Solidarity