

NEWS | ECONOMY & LABOR

Dockworkers Push Union Resolution to Block Shipment of Israeli Military Cargo

A local International Longshore and Warehouse Union effort builds on decades of support for Palestinian liberation.

By Arvind Dilawar, TRUTHOUT

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Hundreds of demonstrators, including members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 10, gather at the Port of Oakland to demand an end to U.S. aid to Israel, on January 13, 2024, in Oakland, California.

TAYFUN COSKUN/ANADOLU VIA GETTY IMAGES

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From June 17 to 21, officers, staff and members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) will meet in Vancouver, Canada, for their biennial convention. Delegates to the convention will undoubtedly be preoccupied with the immediate business of the union, which represents workers in industries ranging from bookstores to breweries, though it's best known for unionizing dockworkers up and down the West Coast.

But amid the typical union business, convention delegates will also deliberate on a resolution submitted by Local 10, which comprises dockworkers from the San Francisco Bay Area. Drafted in response to the ongoing Israeli-perpetrated genocide — which has killed more than 35,709 Palestinians in Gaza, including more than 15,000 children, according to Al Jazeera — the resolution calls on all ILWU dockworkers to refuse to handle military cargo bound for Israel.

As surprising as this act of solidarity by dockworkers in the San Francisco Bay Area may sound, it is in fact only the latest effort in Local 10's decades-long history of supporting Palestinian liberation.

“Israel Was Treating Palestinians Like an Apartheid State”

“The ILWU has a long history of being interested in and supportive of Palestinian liberation, going back as early as the mid ‘80s,” said Peter Cole, professor of history at Western Illinois University, in an interview with *Truthout*. “And that was a direct result of the ILWU — especially its Bay Area branch, Local 10 — having a longer history of solidarity with people in South Africa fighting against apartheid.”

Cole examines the history of Local 10's opposition to apartheid in South Africa, as well as its connections to Palestinian liberation, in *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area*. Made up predominantly of Black workers and motivated by both left-wing politics in general and anti-racism in particular, Local 10 took a stand against apartheid starting in the 1960s by refusing to unload cargo from South Africa. According to Cole, Local 10 members like Leo Robinson were already declaring the demise of apartheid in South Africa by 1988 — and setting their sights on Israeli apartheid next. Since 1967, the Israeli

military has occupied internationally recognized Palestinian territory in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, where Israel has instituted an increasingly violent system of settler-colonial segregation against Palestinians.

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“Leo and others took to the ILWU convention and said, ‘In the exact same ways that apartheid in South Africa is mistreating its Black-majority workforce, so too Israel was treating Palestinians like an apartheid state,’” Cole said. “This was decades before most people were using the term ‘apartheid’ to apply to Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. But the ILWU convention goes on the record in ‘88, condemning the treatment of Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. And they reaffirm that at a subsequent convention in the 1990s.”

While Local 10 has been on record opposing Israeli apartheid since 1988, it took some time before union members started to act on that opposition. In 2010,

Local 10 once again took its cue from South Africa, where dockworkers had refused to handle cargo for the Israeli shipping firm ZIM the previous year, due to Israel's 2008-09 assault on Gaza. Answering calls to "Block the Boat" from both South African dockworkers and local community activists, Local 10 members refused to handle cargo aboard ships connected to ZIM, which has branches in practically every major port in the United States, in 2010, 2012, 2014 and 2018.

"They made a political stand as a union," said Cole, referring to Local 10. "For the exact same logic that they condemned the treatment of Black people in South Africa, they were condemning the treatment of Palestinians."

"Action Against the Israeli Government"

Since October 7, Local 10 members and community activists have picketed U.S. military ships believed to be transporting weapons to Israel as it continues its genocide in Gaza. Other ILWU locals have also opposed the genocide, such as Local 23 in Tacoma, Washington, which similarly refused to load military cargo heading for Israel, and Local 5 in Portland, Oregon, whose members have called for a ceasefire.

For Jack Heyman, a Local 10 retiree and former business agent whose family fled the Nazi annexation of Austria,

the union's opposition to the ongoing Israeli-perpetrated genocide is in line with both its condemnation of apartheid in South Africa and racial injustice in the U.S. He points out that Local 10 also organized work stoppages and other actions in 2009 against the police-perpetrated killing of Oscar Grant and again in 2020 against the police-perpetrated killing of George Floyd. Retired ILWU members like Heyman are unable to vote on union business, but they retain the right to speak on it.

“Our local is sensitive to racial issues, and I think we see the situation in Palestine very similar to the way that Black people are treated in this country or were treated in South Africa,” said Heyman. “Was it in violation of the contract?” he asked, referring to Local 10's political actions in the context of its employment contract with port management. “Sure it was. But you know what? Sometimes you gotta break the contract to change the contract, to change what's happening in the world.”

Heyman describes Local 10 as heavily invested in issues of social justice, including police accountability, racial equality and obviously workers' rights, and says the ongoing Israeli-perpetrated genocide in Gaza is foremost among such issues today. To that end, other unions have also condemned the genocide, such as the United Auto

Workers and National Education Association, both of which have called for a ceasefire.

“There’s not a stronger issue than the genocidal war conducted by the Israeli government in Gaza today,” said Heyman. “I don’t know how much more horrendous a genocidal killing can get than massacring people in hospitals, patients, all these bodies found buried underneath the rubble in the hospitals that have been blown up by the Israeli army. This is going to strike a strong response from the ILWU.”

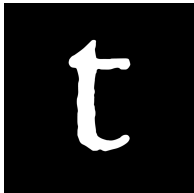
Part of that response may very well be the “Local 10 Caucus Resolution on the War in Gaza and the West Bank,” Local 10’s resolution to the upcoming ILWU convention, which Heyman drafted and the local passed unanimously in early May. Invoking contemporary calls to action, from groups such as the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions and National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa, for workers to boycott Israeli cargo, as well as Local 10’s historic opposition to Israeli apartheid in Palestine, the resolution calls for all ILWU dockworkers to “refuse to handle military cargo to Israel” and “honor picket lines protesting the war on Gaza.”

“I am sure that our union is going to make a strong stand — I’m talking in terms of action against the Israeli

government,” said Heyman. “There are a lot of good-hearted ILWU members who’ve been up against tough regimes before and aren’t afraid to speak up.”



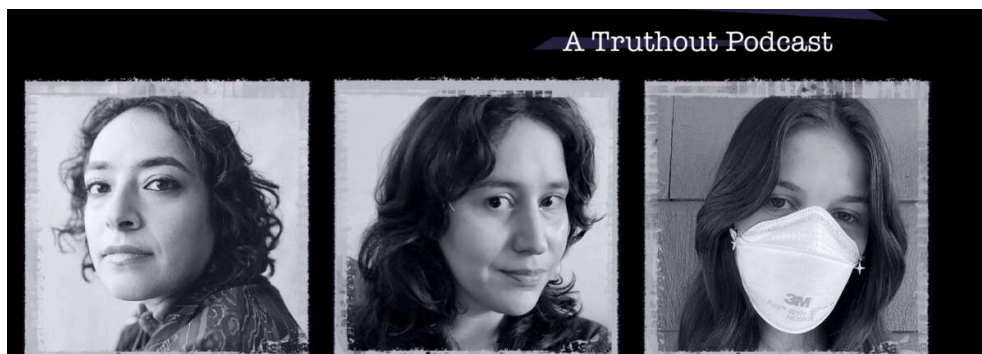
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