

# How American Dockworkers Fought Apartheid in South Africa

BY

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Forty years ago today, San Francisco dockworkers struck a blow against apartheid by refusing to unload cargo from South Africa. That kind of international worker solidarity is badly needed today to end Israeli genocide and apartheid.

It's just a few weeks after the most conservative Republican president in a generation convincingly won a second term, causing many to despair. Across the ocean from the United States, a country engaged in apartheid was condemned by most of the world's peoples and nations, but the pariah nation remained loudly unrepentant and possessed a powerful ally in the White House. Meanwhile, an impressive, increasingly large global movement of people stood in solidarity with those who had suffered generations of violence, injustice, and settler colonialism.

While this might read like today's news, the above describes 1984.

At that moment, a small and powerful yet weakened left-wing union with a history of fighting racism, fascism, and authoritarianism refused to unload cargo from apartheid South Africa. Union workers downed their tools in solidarity with black workers leading the resistance inside their country.

On November 24, 1984, the Dutch cargo ship *Nedlloyd Kimberley* docked at San Francisco's Pier 80 loaded with goods from South Africa and other countries. Rather than do their job, the dockworkers —

proud members of Local 10 of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) — refused to touch the South African auto parts, steel, and wine after they unloaded the rest of the ship’s cargo. For the next ten days, the union dispatched members to this pier who continued refusing to unload the South African products, essentially striking against apartheid. Each day, hundreds of other workers and community members provided support for these workers.

The longshoremen timed their action quite well, just two weeks after the landslide reelection of President Ronald Reagan. Reagan had proven himself to be fiercely anti-union, notoriously firing the entire country’s unionized air-traffic-control workforce when it struck in 1981. Along with British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, Reagan defended apartheid South Africa; both archconservative governments considered Nelson Mandela of the African National Congress (ANC) a terrorist. Hence the action of these union radicals gave notice that workers, when organized in unions and willing to engage in collective work stoppages, still had tremendous power and popular support. These dockworkers combined internationalist, antiauthoritarian ideals with power on the job to advocate for social movements abroad.



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In 1962, ILWU Local 10 members refused to cross a community picket organized by Mary Louise Hooper (center, second from front) of the American Committee on Africa and with support from San Francisco’s CORE and NAACP chapters. (Courtesy of ILWU Archives)

## An Anti-Apartheid Legacy

For decades prior to its 1984 action, the ILWU supported independence movements across Africa. In 1962, scores of longshoremen in Local 10, which still represents San Francisco Bay Area dockworkers, refused to unload a ship carrying South African cargo. This boycott was planned by William Chester, the ILWU's highest elected black official, and Mary-Louise Hooper, a white American expelled from South Africa a few years prior for boldly supporting the ANC. After returning home, she helped lead the American Committee on Africa (ACOA). To justify this work stoppage, ACOA cited ANC president Albert Luthuli, Hooper's friend and the 1962 Nobel Peace Prize winner: "Economic boycott is one way in which the world at large can bring home to the South African authorities that they must either mend their ways or suffer for them."

In 1976, rank-and-file activists in Local 10 formed the Southern Africa Liberation Support Committee (SALSC), with the support of their fellow workers. The SALSC was led by a cadre of black and white radicals including Leo Robinson, Dave Stewart, Larry Wright, and Billy Proctor, all of whom were committed anti-racists and anti-capitalists. They were inspired by black students in Soweto, the largest township outside Johannesburg, who rose up in 1976 to protest being forced to take classes in Afrikaans, the language of their oppressors.

In 1977, the SALSC led the campaign to donate tons of clothes, food, medicine, and other supplies to freedom fighters in southern Africa. These containers were shipped to Dar es Salaam on the Indian Ocean coast of Africa; in that era, Tanzania's president, Julius Nyerere, was a leading proponent of Pan-Africanism, so he provided safe haven to thousands of South African exiles working to build the struggle against apartheid. Nyerere and the SALSC also supported freedom fighters from what then was apartheid Rhodesia (soon Zimbabwe) and for the newly freed people of Mozambique engaged in a proxy war supported by apartheid South Africa and the United States.

The SALSC organized many events to educate their fellow dockworkers and other people about how South Africa's black working class and their communities suffered under slave-like conditions. They also helped push their union to divest its pension plan and joined others in pushing for divestment locally, succeeding in Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco in the late 1970s and early '80s. In so doing, they built solidarity and provided meaningful support for the global anti-apartheid struggle.



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On November 24, 1984, and for the next ten days, ILWU Local 10 members refused to unload cargo from South Africa, receiving support from their community. (Courtesy of Larry and Candice Wright, former members of the Liberation Support Movement)

## The Largest Workplace Action Against Apartheid

In an unprecedented move, in October 1984 Local 10 officers allowed the SALSC to show a powerful anti-apartheid film, *Last Grave at Dimbaza*, during a union meeting attended by 150 to 200 longshore workers. Afterward, Howard Keylor, a militant rank-and-filer, made a motion that Local 10 refuse to unload the next ship carrying South African cargo. Leo Robinson amended the motion so as to only boycott the apartheid cargo, which received near unanimous approval.

A few weeks later, when the *Nedlloyd Kimberley* steamed into the San Francisco Bay and docked at Pier 80, these workers were ready because they had built a movement over many years to educate themselves and others in the evils of apartheid.

Billy Proctor, whose father was a well-known warehouse union leader and local communist thinker, dramatically recounted this moment:

As luck would have it, South African cargo was not the only cargo, so we worked some breakbulk cargo from Argentina as I recall, then after about two hours, from below deck I heard our Ship's Clerk yell up to me, "that's it Proctor, nothing left down here but Razor Wire (Cortina) and Auto Glass from South Africa." I then said, and I shall never forget it, "okay fellas, come on out of the hold, I ain't hoisting one ounce of cargo from South Africa" and the movement of cargo came to a halt, we then left the ship.

Every day during the subsequent boycott, sympathetic Local 10 dispatchers assigned workers who supported the action because, in choosing to not work their assignment, they would not be paid. The economic sacrifices of these workers demand highlighting.

For the next ten days, many thousands rallied at the foot of the pier in support. Proctor recalled that a group of black women public-school teachers had previously asked Robinson, "When are you Longshoremen going to do something, and not just take resolutions to your union's convention?" They were among the many who showed up to give strength to the dockworkers and show Reagan and other apartheid defenders that they were on the wrong side of history. Among those who spoke that week were legendary activist and longtime Bay Area resident Angela Davis and Congressman Ron Dellums, who represented Oakland and Berkeley in the House of Representatives and whose father had belonged to Local 10.

The rank-and-file activists who led and participated in this action experienced incredible pressure from waterfront employers represented by the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA), which successfully filed for a federal injunction. Violating this injunction could result in fines of many thousands of dollars per day for individuals named — including Robinson and Keylor — and the union, as well as possible jail time.

Local 10's eleven-day boycott proved to be the largest workplace action in the United States against apartheid and galvanized many in the Bay Area. Just a few months later, students from nearby University of California, Berkeley, initiated massive protests, occupations, and divestment calls — eventually successfully pressuring the University of California Board of Regents to divest its multibillion-dollar endowment.

In 1990, when Nelson Mandela first visited the United States after being freed from prison after twenty-seven years, he devoted 10 percent of his speech in Oakland, before sixty thousand people, to thanking ILWU Local 10.

When the resolution to boycott South African cargo was raised at Local 10's meeting, a few members argued against it. They claimed it was illegal under their contract — as employers also argued —

because workers don't get to decide which cargo they move and which they don't. They feared a boycott could get the union in trouble and also lose money at a time when work in the port was slack. Before the *Kimberley* arrived, as SALSC activist Larry Wright recently recalled:

Two of the younger members came up to me in the union hall a few days later [after the vote]. They were angry that they would be losing money. One said, "Fuck South Africa." What they really meant was that they did not want to sacrifice pay for this action.

When the targeted ship docked there was a picket line at the terminal gate every day. Large numbers of people from the community, other unions, and organizations showed up to support our refusal to unload racist cargo. The union hall would dispatch gangs to work every shift with union members knowing they would go to the job but would not work that day. This went on for 10 days. One day the two young members who had objected to this action showed up with job slips in hand. Taking this job was voluntary since you would not be working that day. I said to them, "So you sacrificed to support this action." They said they were proud to be a part of it – they were proud of the union, and that no one was going to tell them they had to work this ship.



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Harry Bridges (front left) leading dockworkers in the San Francisco Labor Day Parade, 1939. From *The ILWU Story: Six Decades of Militant Unionism*. (Courtesy of ILWU)

## A Tradition of International Solidarity

The ILWU, especially Local 10, boasts a long tradition of international solidarity. As early as 1935, San Francisco dockers refused to load supplies aboard several ships intended for Italy to protest its invasion of Ethiopia. Similarly, on more than forty occasions in the late 1930s, ILWU longshoremen refused to load metal and other supplies to protest Japan's invasion of China. In both cases, dockers took a clear stand against fascism. As left-wing ILWU leader Harry Bridges later said, "Interfere with the foreign policy of the country? Sure as hell! That's our job, that's our privilege, that's our right, that's our duty."



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Arab American activists coordinated with ILWU Local 10 members to refuse to unload an Israeli-owned ship in Oakland in 2021. (L. Dreyer / Arab Resource & Organizing Center)

As early as its 1988 convention, the ILWU officially condemned Israel's treatment of Palestinians. Leo Robinson — Local 10's leader of ILWU anti-apartheid activism — was among the most outspoken. The convention proceedings declared Israel guilty of "state-sponsored terrorism" and described Gaza as "the Soweto of the State of Israel." In 1991, Brian McWilliams, future ILWU international president, decried Israel's "oppression of [Palestinian] workers in the occupied territories in the Gaza Strip and the violation of basic trade union rights and human rights all by the Israeli military occupation."

In the 2010s, Arab American activists in the Bay Area worked with allies in Local 10 and other branches of the ILWU to “Block the Boat,” preventing the loading and unloading of cargo of line ships owned by the Israeli shipping company Zim.

Just as with the struggle against apartheid South Africa, individuals and organizations around the world can support Palestine by isolating Israel. The working class, particularly those in unions, can and should play a role in the current struggle because workers have power. Never is that more apparent than when they stop work — be it to demand a raise or, less frequently, to stand in solidarity with oppressed peoples. Some of the most impressive examples of such solidarity are from dockworkers, who operate at a strategic choke point of the global supply chain and appreciate their leverage, despite being largely invisible to the wider public. The ILWU’s anti-apartheid activism is the sort of history that we can use now more than ever.

#### CONTRIBUTORS

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