

Pro-Palestine ship blockade is the latest chapter in the Port of Oakland's activist history

With the support of unionized longshore workers, Bay Area activists prevented an Israeli-operated cargo ship from unloading.



by **Zack Haber**

June 8, 2021, 3:53 p.m.



Pro-Palestinian activists picketed entrances to the Port of Oakland on Friday, June 4. Credit: Amir Aziz

Last Friday evening, a young Palestinian boy wearing a keffiyeh, a traditional Arabic scarf, ran into the arms of Willis, longshore worker and president of ILWU Local 10, and the two embraced on the road near an entrance to the Port of Oakland.

The boy was among the hundreds of protesters who rallied outside the port earlier that day, set up picket lines, and urged port workers not to unload cargo from the Volans, a ship owned by Zim Integrated Shipping Services Ltd., the oldest and largest Israeli-owned cargo shipping company. The ILWU Local 10 workers didn't unload the ship, and late Friday evening the Volans sailed away from the port and out of San Francisco Bay.

Last Friday's protest marked the seventh year in a row that Israeli-owned ships haven't transferred cargo at the Port of Oakland, according to protesters. The ship blockades have been part of the international Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement waged by Palestinians and their supporters to pressure Israel to end its military occupation of Gaza and the West Bank and grant Palestinians equal rights, including the right to return to Palestine.

The Arab Resource and Organizing Center, or AROC, organized the protest and members of at least 25 local organizations, including Critical Resistance, Queers Undermining Israeli Terror, and Jewish Voice for Peace Bay Area, showed up in support. Truck drivers honked in approval as protesters waved Palestine flags and held signs criticizing the Israeli government.

"This is such a powerful showing of solidarity," said Mohamed Shehk, an organizer with AROC, on Friday morning. "It's really inspiring to see the commitment, support, and resistance of the Bay Area in support of the Palestinian people."

Willis, who has been a longshoreman for over 25 years, expressed sympathy with both Palestinians and the protesters.

"Even if we wanted to, we can't control this," he said about the picket line early on Friday afternoon. "We don't fight protesters. That's not what we do."

Part of the reason the ILWU, which represents longshore workers along the entire U.S. West Coast, didn't cross the picket line last week is because the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, a labor coalition in the Palestinian territories, called on unions worldwide to act in solidarity with them.

"Workers' struggle is worldwide," Willis said. "Worker power, and economic power, is real power. It's more powerful than those bombs Israel is dropping."

The Congress of South African Trade Unions, a labor federation representing hundreds of thousands of South African workers and their unions, signed on to support the protest at the port. The endorsement was particularly important to the protest organizers, as the Palestinian BDS movement directed at Israel has largely been modeled after the international anti-apartheid movement that transformed South Africa over two decades ago.

Friday's protest drew a diverse range of Bay Area residents. Elderly people using canes walked alongside a small child being pulled in a red Radio Flyer wagon. As a man stood reading a Quran, a woman held a sign that read, "Another Jew against Israeli genocide." Members of [Jeumsae](#), a collective of Bay Area-based Korean drummers,

played at a picket. At one point, a protester stood next to them and rapped the chorus of DMX’s “Ruff Ryders’ Anthem,” as they drummed along with his cadence, smiling.



Demonstrators arrive in the afternoon at the Port of Oakland to try to prevent an Israeli ship from transferring cargo. Credit: Amir Aziz

Friday’s action was the culmination of a weeks-long virtual standoff between protesters and ZIM. The Volans was originally scheduled to dock in Oakland on May 18, but it lingered off the California coast for 17 days while protesters tracked its movements on the internet and prepared to descend on the port at a moment’s notice. AROC spread the word at a [May 15 pro-Palestinian protest](#) in San Francisco about its plans to blockade the ship, and activists set up a text message alert system that over 5,000 people eventually signed up for. The group speculated that the Volan’s delay in docking was a result of their plans.

The Oaklandside attempted to contact ZIM through their website and by phone, but they did not respond to our requests for an interview or answer questions about the protest. A few [reports](#) in maritime trade publications indicated a general backup of ships waiting to unload at the Port of Oakland, and [some reports](#) state ZIM representatives blamed their ship’s delay on this problem. ZIM told the [Middle East Eye](#) that it would be “calling on other US West Coast Ports” because of “operational constraints and long delays in the Port of Oakland.”

For a while, it appeared that the fear of a picket would be enough to cause ZIM to decide to turn away from Oakland and not even attempt to unload cargo. “Every day the ship sits out there in the ocean, they’re burning fuel and wasting money and logistical resources,” Wassim Hage, an organizer with AROC, said about his group’s strategy earlier last week.



Activists marched along Middle Harbor Road outside the Port of Oakland.

But after the long delay, the Volans docked on the afternoon of Thursday, June 3. AROC sent a text alert around 5:30 asking supporters to show up at 6 a.m. the next day to “hold the picket and send a clear message that Israeli apartheid is not welcome.”

Friday’s ship blockade was an eye-catching show of strength by pro-Palestinian demonstrators. But it wasn’t the first time protesters at Oakland’s port have attempted to bring international trade to a halt. Seven years ago, another ZIM-operated ship was [prevented from unloading in Oakland](#). And the current blockade and the 2014 action are just two chapters in a long history of pickets, protests, and strikes on Oakland’s waterfront.

Extending a radical history of the Port of Oakland and Bay Area longshoreman protests

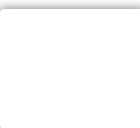
One of the first and biggest shutdowns at the Port of Oakland was on May 9, 1934, when East Bay longshoremen joined workers at every West Coast port by walking off the job. The strike, which lasted over 83 days, was in response to harsh labor conditions imposed on dockworkers by shipping companies. The companies tried to break the strike by recruiting non-union laborers to work the waterfront, and police violently attacked the striking workers. Two longshoremen in San Francisco died at the hands of police. [The 1934 West Coast Waterfront Strike](#), as it came to be known, resulted in the unionization of all West Coast ports in the United States under the auspices of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, or ILWU. Ever since, the union's members have respected many picket lines and refused to cross them, in part due to the threat of violence when the police become involved.

In 1965, allies of Central Valley farmworkers who were attempting to organize a union and win better wages picketed Howard Terminal, where a Norwegian ship was waiting to be loaded with a cargo of grapes. ILWU workers refused to load the agricultural goods in support of the Delano vineyard laborers.

After Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed in 1968, [longshore workers stopped handling cargo in Oakland and San Francisco for 24 hours](#).

In 1976, a Black longshoreman from Oakland named Leo Robinson took inspiration from [a student uprising](#) in Soweto, South Africa, and formed the Southern Africa Liberation Support Committee, which raised awareness about apartheid among West Coast dockworkers. Years later, workers organized strikes in Oakland and San Francisco against South African apartheid, refusing to handle cargo bound for that country. Perhaps the most notable was in 1984 when the committee showed [Last Grave at Dimbaza](#), a documentary about the conditions facing South Africa's Black population, during an ILWU Local 10 meeting. After seeing the film, the union members unanimously voted to refuse to unload South African cargo and staged an 11-day protest that attracted hundreds of supporters.

In 1990, shortly after being released from prison, Nelson Mandela delivered [a speech](#) at the Oakland Coliseum during a 10-day tour of the United States. He specifically thanked ILWU Local 10 for their support.



Nelson Mandela - Full Concert - 06/30/90 - Oakland Coliseum Stadium (OFFICIAL)



“We salute members of the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union Local 10 who refused to unload a South African cargo ship in 1984,” he said. “In response to this demonstration, other workers, church people, community activists, and educators gathered each day at the docks to express their solidarity with the dockworkers. They established themselves as the frontline of the anti-apartheid movement in the Bay Area.”

Since then, there have been many instances when Oakland’s port has served as a site of protest. While longshore workers haven’t necessarily led all these actions, many rank and file members have supported them.

In 2003, the activist group [Direct Action to Stop the War](#) led a picket at the port against Stevedoring Services of America and American Presidential Lines, two companies that had contracts with the U.S. military to ship supplies for the American war against Iraq. The Oakland police shot the protesters with teargas and rubber bullets and also wounded some members of the American Postal Workers Union and ILWU Local 10. Union members and activists sued OPD over the incident and forced the police department to adopt strict policies about using gas and less-lethal weapons on crowds.

Shots On The Docks: Oakland Police In 2003 Shoot ILWU Local10 Longshoremen and...



On November 2, 2011, protestors with the Occupy movement marched from Frank Ogawa Plaza to the port during a general strike, calling on all workers to stand against government and corporate malfeasance during the financial crisis of 2007-2008. The march successfully shut down the port's evening work shifts. Unions like the Oakland Education Association and ILWU Local 10 did not officially endorse the strike but **encouraged** workers to take the day off. It was likely the biggest protest ever at the port. **Police estimated the crowd at 7,000** while **participants estimated** the crowd between 20,000 and 100,000.

On May Day last year, over 300 vehicles and over 50 people on bicycles, **a large portion of whom were Oakland educators**, gathered at the port and formed a caravan to protest against ICE deportations and to advocate for workers' rights and better public school funding. Then on Juneteenth (June 19), a **massive protest** sanctioned by the ILWU shut down 28 West Coast Ports, including Oakland's, to show solidarity with Black people harmed by police violence, and to call for the prosecution of Derek Chauvin, the Minneapolis police officer who murdered George Floyd.

A sustained international campaign to put pressure on the Israeli government



Longshore workers with ILWU Local 10 declined to cross the “block the boat” picket lines to unload ZIM’s ship, the Volans.

In 2014 during the [Gaza War](#), the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions called on allies around the world to block ZIM ships from carrying out trade. At the Port of Oakland, AROC and other groups picketed a ZIM-owned cargo ship to prevent it from unloading.

This year, the ILWU Northern California District Council released [a statement](#) on May 25 in response to the [recent 11-day offensive](#) by the Israeli military, which has killed about 250 Palestinians, at least 66 of whom were children. During the same time period as the 11-day offensive, thirteen people have been killed in Israel, including two children. Some of them were struck by rockets fired by Hamas, which governs Gaza.

“The recent Israeli-state sanctioned violence follows decades of systemic discrimination and violation of human rights of all Palestinians, including militarily enforced restrictions of movement for over 4.7 million Palestinians, a brutal blockade on Gaza; confiscation of land; economic exploitation; and suspension of basic civil liberties,” the longshore workers wrote in their statement.

Nora Abedelal, a Palestinian Bay Area resident and youth coordinator with AROC, was 16 at the time of the 2014 protest at the Oakland Port, and remembers it well. She was impressed by the range of people at the protest, not just Palestinians, which included rank and file ILWU Local 10 members. Like they had so many times before, the longshore workers opted to not cross the picket line—something Abedelal and other organizers that day viewed as crucial to the 2014 action’s success.

“At the time Israel was heavily bombing Gaza,” said Abedelal. “So being there at the port and actually winning was something that was empowering for me, and it invigorated me to continue to stand against Israeli apartheid. Since then I’ve been engaging in organizing work because I was so inspired by our win in 2014.”

Hage, the AROC organizer, said this year’s blockade was another win: “I think that it showed how doable this is with labor, Palestine, and supporters working hand and hand together.”

