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ACTIVISM

'Block the Boat' hits New Jersey

"The situation in Palestine remains very urgent so we really need to build on the momentum": Activists in New York and New Jersey join the "Block the Boat" efforts.

BY [MICHAEL ARRIA](#) - JULY 30, 2021 - 25



PHOTO CREDIT: JEHAD DAWOUD

Last weekend activists held an action at a port in Elizabeth, New Jersey, attempting to block an Israeli-operated cargo ship from unloading. The Haifa-based shipping company ZIM has been targeted by the BDS movement over its connection to Israeli apartheid and last month Bay Area protestors [successfully stopped](#) ZIM from offloading in Oakland.

I spoke with Tova Fry and Suzanne Adely, who helped organize the recent action.

Tova was part of the [Arab Resource and Organizing Center](#) (AROC) organizing team for Block the Boat in Oakland in 2014 and she helped to reactivate Block The Boat NY/NJ as part of the Block The Boat International Week of Solidarity in June. She's also a member of Northern New Jersey Jewish Voice for Peace.

Suzanne is co-director at the Food Chain Workers Alliance and President-Elect at the National Lawyers Guild. She's also a member of the US Palestinian Community Network and Al-Awda New York.

You had mentioned that the first pro-Palestine action at a port there occurred last month, in solidarity with the Block the Boat action in Oakland. I wanted to start there. Can you talk about that action in June, what the scene was like, and how it went?

Tova Fry: The Port of New York and New Jersey is seven container ports. This is the first time, as far as we know, that the Palestine action has happened at the ports. So we knew we had a lot of work to do because nobody had any contacts with the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA). We had only about a week or a week and a half to organize the event.

So we were trying to make contact with the union and finally get support from the union, but also just figure out all the logistics of the action itself. And so, Suzanne and I developed a flier to hand out to the longshore people to try to help them understand what we were doing and what we were asking of them. And Suzanne and I went to the port, to the terminal where the employee entrance was a few days before the event to try to flier the workers.

There's a drive-in entry here which is not the situation in Oakland, where there's a union hiring hall where you can flier them. We were there to try to hand out fliers. We had only handed out seven fliers when we were accosted by the terminal's private security guards. They claimed that we were on private property, so we moved from the curb area we were standing on to the actual street.

We tried to flier there and they told us the whole street was private property and that the cops were on the way. They also claimed that they knew we were coming and that they had alerted Homeland Security. So we decided that rather than resist arrest, we'd go back to our cars. By the time I was pulling out, there were about ten police cars, there was the port's private security. I noticed they had blocked Suzanne from leaving so I stopped.

Suzanne Adely: At that point we were asking the police whether we were free to leave. Some of them said we had to speak to their Captain and then there were others who used that opportunity to say, "We know what you're up to. We've seen posts about what's go-

ing on and we want to let you know that we're watching what you're doing." They were even dropping references to Homeland Security and counterterrorism agents, just as a way to try and intimidate us. And then there were others that said, "We'll let you go. We just need to ask you a few more questions and we'd like to see your identification." They took down our license plate numbers and scanned our IDs.


It was a very direct and obvious attempt to stop us from reaching out to the workers and, trying to intimidate us from having any kind of action or activity at the port.

Going into that action, we knew that we had to be cautious in terms of our choices, because we had very specific goals to be able to mobilize a picket in front of the port's gates. But we also knew that there could be a high risk of repression. We always have seasoned activists with us, but we also often have community-based folks. We knew that, as Tova explained, we were dealing with private security, Port Authority police, and New Jersey police

We were also aware that there was a federal building in the vicinity, so we didn't know if there was the potential to come into direct conflict with any federal agents. So we were very cautious going in. In terms of it being the first such action in the area, I think we viewed it as highly successful. We were able to mobilize a really good amount of people to come out to a place that was very hard to reach, that was very isolated at 6:00 in the morning, and we were able to mobilize enough numbers that we quickly were able to defy police demands and march to the front of the gates blocking the entrance.

Tova: I'd just add that they tried to block us into this area that was about half a block from the actual intersection where the employees would enter. We had several hundred people turn out, but it was so hard to get to and they wouldn't allow anybody to park there at all. So people literally had to take either mass transportation or drive, but wind up somewhere remote from the port and then take a ride share or get dropped off to even be there.


Despite all that we still had a lot of people and were able to break through the police lines and were able to set up a picket line across the entire intersection, but the workers had already entered before we were able to do that. So it was a symbolic first and a very powerful show of force on our part to show that we weren't going to be deterred by these harassment tactics.




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Can you talk about the action that occurred last weekend? I know the cargo ship was ultimately able to dock, but what were your impressions of the protest and what's next in terms of organizing around this issue?

Tova: We had a little longer to plan for this one. We had a little bit longer to mobilize. We decided to do it to help keep the momentum up internationally in solidarity with Palestine and we felt that the whole “Block the Boat” initiative as a BDS campaign was such a powerful weapon in terms of really putting financial and political pressure on the state of Israel. We felt it was an important thing to do this time.

Like I said, this time we had a longer amount of time to mobilize so we really made further attempts to try to reach out to the ILA. And again, because they don’t have a hiring hall we were prevented from handing out fliers to workers that are driving in to work because of all these claims of private property. We did meet some people, a couple ILA members, just rank and file. We were able to get some fliers out, but we did for both actions try to reach out to the ILA leadership just to let them know why we’re there and what we’re doing.

We know that they technically can’t officially support, but they could have made it easier by explaining to the workers themselves what we were doing so that the workers could make a choice. We were also kind of surprised because [Dennis Daggett](#), who is the executive vice president of the ILA, he’s also the president of the International Dockworkers Council and the International Dockworkers Council. Back in May they put out this wonderful statement. I actually have it in front of me.


It says, “The IDC strongly condemns the massacre of civilians and children in Palestine, unconditional support to the Palestinian general strike.” It’s several paragraphs long and you may have seen it, but the last paragraph, it says the IDC calls on dockworkers to show solidarity. So we are really wondering and we’re curious why it is that neither Dagget or any of the other leadership responded to our request to meet with them.

So we’re curious about that. But this current action that we had this time, because of what we did last time, we think they actually allowed us to be on the street where the workers were driving in this time, but they had us barricaded so that we couldn’t actually hand out fliers to the workers. We were on the opposite side of the street from the direction they were driving in so the workers could see us with our colorful signs and banners

and they could hear our loud chanting and everything, but we weren't able to reach to them directly.


We did have a bit of a smaller crowd this time. There's various reasons for that. It rained that night and in the morning this was again another 6 am Sunday picket line. But we still felt it was very successful because of the pressure we had created last time, we felt we were actually able to have the visibility of the workers as a way to build up for future actions, hopefully, where they see who we are and what we're doing and why we're there.




Suzanne: I'd just add that the outreach to the rank and file, the union leaders representing dock workers, locals here is still very much a priority for us, even after the second action. I think as we can continue to build "Block the Boat" in our region, that kind of connection and solidarity with workers is as important as ever.

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This morning in Elizabeth NJ: Sayel Kayed of [@AMPNJ](#) speaks on why PortNYNJ workers must refuse to unload ZIM ship! [#BlockTheBoat](#) [#BDS](#) [@AROCBayArea](#) [@Ny4Palestine](#)

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Beyond labor, can you talk about the dynamic of those involved here? What's the coalition look like, what kind of engagement have you gotten from the community?

Suzanne: I would say that we're getting a very good reception. We have a coalition, the "Block the Boat" New York/New Jersey coalition that came together and is made up of several community and activist-based organizations in the New York and New Jersey area. Several of those groups come out of another coalition called New York for Palestine. For example, I have been an organizer in the Palestinian Arab community for a very, very long time. I joined Al-awda New York in 2001 during the second Intifada. That's a national group in New York. It's also a very specific chapter that has done work, particularly in the five boroughs of New York for many, many years. I'm also a member of

a network called Labor for Palestine, and we, along with other community based organizations in our Palestine Coalition, came together to support the New York/New Jersey “Block the Boat” initiative.

And that also includes the New York/New Jersey chapter of American Muslims for Palestine, who we worked very closely with. It includes Within Our Lifetime, United for Palestine. That’s based out of Brooklyn. And it also kind of includes a lot of our allies. We’ve had many friends who are part of groups like the ANSWER coalition, to local DSA chapters, to Jewish Voice for Peace, and the Green Party.

The “Block the Boat” actions have been a really good mix of Arab-Palestinian youth and more veteran labor-focused activists around NYC. We’ve seen those kinds of combinations. Speaking from the community perspective, we spent a lot of time educating about why this action is important. It’s been a very busy time for Palestine activism and we’ve had town halls in places like Brooklyn to where we took advantage of those spaces coming together. We talked to people about “Block the Boat”, what happened in 2014, what’s the significance of shipping and logistics, what’s the history of ZIM and how it’s connected to BDS.

So we put a lot of thought into how to build community support through education. I think it’s all just as important as the all the outreach we are trying to do with workers from the ILA that we mentioned.

Tova: It did feel like we had very broad support and participation from a number of groups. As to your question, as far as what’s next or what’s the outlook, we really haven’t had a chance to discuss that yet. I think there’s a feeling that we want to continue to do actions at the port but, what’s the timing and what’s the strategy? That remains to be discussed but we definitely want to continue to try to reach out to the ILA and labor in general because this really is a labor-oriented action.

We’ve been covering the Ben & Jerry’s story a lot recently and the other day an activist who has worked on the Vermont campaign from the beginning told me that he’s [never seen sup-](#)

[port among the public like what he's seeing now](#). He said that Israel's most recent attack on Gaza really pushed the campaign over the edge in some ways and brought increased attention to it. As two people who have been working on these issues for years, do you have similar feelings? Do you feel like your work is reaching a larger audience now? Has this movement passed a threshold?

Tova: I think so. I happen to be Jewish so one of the first things I did when I moved here, even before this action came up was I got in touch with a local Jewish Voice for Peace chapter in my area in northern New Jersey. I really felt because of the powerful struggle going on in Palestine that this was a moment that we could use to bring a lot more Jewish people in the U.S around in support of Palestine and against Zionism in general. I really feel like that's bearing out.

So I definitely see it in terms of the openings to be able to talk about anti-Zionism and even the words "apartheid" and "settler-colonialism" are words that are being used by mainstream media now and that's something you never saw before. So yeah, I definitely think it's a moment and that's one of the reasons we pushed for "Block the Boat" because we wanted to build on that momentum.

Suzanne: I think this has definitely been a period of increased support for Palestine. Have we passed a threshold? I think yes, I mean, it has felt that there has been a strengthening of support coming from organized labor. The amount of resolutions that have been passing in union locals from different sectors has been a welcomed surprise.

Not all those resolutions have passed, but there have been unions that previously, in our experience would actively try to keep anybody from talking about Palestine within their ranks and in their meetings. Now we see them passing statements and resolutions that are not just calling for human rights and justice, but actually have very good analysis around what's happening and there's been some strong calls to support Palestinian struggle and liberation.

I would say though that there have been different periods of time where we have seen an uptick or an increase in support. In 2014, Labor for Palestine had issued a statement while Gaza was being bombed and we saw an increase in, let's say, rank and file support for such statements. But now there's more statements actually coming directly from from locals, which means there's less opposition or there are less attempts at silencing discussions around Palestine within organized labor, which is terrific.

Then we talk about the community-based perspective, we're also definitely seeing a new generation and an increase in membership in our member-based organizations. We're seeing an increase in participation, not just from youth but also from families in actions and meetings.

Speaking as someone who has been doing this for a long time, I can remember years ago when we would literally be asked to leave antiwar meetings because we would talk about Palestine or were specifically left out of particular labor events in solidarity with other workers, in solidarity with South Africa, because they didn't want us to bring up Palestine. Or we were told that, if we were going to have any meeting to talk about our work, that we weren't allowed to talk about Palestinian refugees or to talk about anything beyond just the two-state solution and so on.

This was all coming from very left spaces. So it's really changed a lot for the better and I think that social media has a lot to do with. I think also people are very inspired by the united resistance they see coming from Palestine and I also think many community-based Palestinian groups in the United States have had a big hand in pushing the Palestinian perspective for decades. We are seeing those results now.

At the same time there's still a lot that has to be done. We're seeing an increase of support among organized labor, but the biggest gatekeepers in labor are still collaborating with Israel and invested in apartheid. So despite sympathy for Palestinians increasing, we still see a comfort level with a Democratic administration that's going to continue the same kind of foreign policy toward Palestine that we saw under Trump.

The situation in Palestine remains very urgent so we really need to build on the momentum from the increased solidarity we see and move it toward action that is really going to have an impact on the occupation, on apartheid. Things like the ZIM actions, like labor divesting from Israeli society. We need to be consistent in saying Palestinians have the right to defend themselves from this ongoing genocide from the Israeli state.

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