

Maritime Union of Australia taking no action to oppose Gaza genocide

Oscar Grenfell
6 November 2023

A meeting at the Sydney headquarters of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) on Friday evening further exposed the role of Australia's trade union leaderships in blocking any industrial action by workers to stop Israel's genocide in Gaza.

MUA officials postured as opponents of the Zionist regime's onslaught. However they reacted with intense hostility to a simple question from a Socialist Equality Party leader, asking whether the union would take any concrete action against the unfolding mass murder.

It is now more than four weeks since Israel began its mass bombardment of the Gaza Strip. Tens or even hundreds of thousands of Australian workers and young people have participated in the largest anti-war demonstrations since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, as part of a powerful global movement. Last weekend marked the fourth round of mass demonstrations, while many other actions have been held, including vigils organised by rank-and-file hospital workers.

Under conditions of this mass opposition, the unions have organised literally nothing. They have held no protests or rallies, much less called strikes or other industrial action against the worst war crimes of this century. Indeed, for the first week of the bombardment, the unions maintained an almost complete silence. Several, including the Australian Council of Trade Unions, later issued the most tepid and mealy-mouthed statements. The major health unions have not even condemned Israel's repeated bombings of Gaza hospitals.

The complicity of the unions in the Israeli war reflects their close alignment with the Labor government, which is full-throated in its support of the Zionist onslaught. More generally, it underscores the fact that the union bureaucracy functions as an arm of the state, with its upper middle-class executives supportive of imperialist military operations in the Middle East and internationally.

The transparent line-up of the union leaderships behind the Australian government, and Israel, is undoubtedly producing substantial discontent, anger and many questions among workers.

It was under those conditions that the Friday evening meeting took place. It was held under the auspices of Unionists for Palestine. The group was established with the backing of leaders of the Sydney Palestine Action Group, which has organised the important weekly mass protests in Sydney.

The Solidarity group, however, is also centrally involved in Unionists for Palestine. While occasionally describing itself as socialist, Solidarity is a fake-left organisation. Its primary activity

is to defend the trade union bureaucracy, and to curry the closest of relations with it. Solidarity's publication hails virtually every union-enforced sell-out agreement, including those that slash wages and conditions, as a "victory."

The meeting was chaired by Solidarity member Paddy Gibson. He did not reveal his political affiliation, instead describing himself as a rank-and-file member of the National Tertiary Education Union. The meeting as a whole was dominated by Solidarity, along with other pseudo-left groups and layers around the union officialdom.

Two members of the Palestine Action Group spoke, outlining Israel's horrific crimes and condemning the Labor government's active support for them.

Gibson then warmly introduced Paul Keating, the secretary of the MUA's Sydney branch. Keating's remarks were followed by those of Joe Deakin, who was introduced as an "MUA veteran," but worked for many years in the union's bureaucracy, including as its Sydney assistant branch secretary as recently as 2017.

Keating and Deakin's remarks were an exercise in demagoguery. Keating proclaimed that the MUA's official policy was "solidarity with our Palestinian comrades and their struggle." He denounced the Labor government's support for the genocide, declaring that Labor was a "party of capital." The MUA, by contrast, stood against "all imperialist war."

Deakin declared that the MUA was "steeped in the struggle" against war. He gave a potted history of the waterfront unions, going back 90 years, presenting it as one of militant industrial action against war. Much of this was politically false or grossly inaccurate, as the WSWs has previously reviewed.

It bears no relationship to the role or record of the union over the past thirty years or more, during which time the MUA has done nothing to oppose the eruption of militarism. Instead, the union has collaborated closely with the major shipping companies and governments to eliminate thousands of jobs, reducing the port workforce to a tiny fraction of what it once was.

While continuing this corporatist program, the MUA leadership in Sydney deploys pseudo-radical rhetoric, in keeping with its control by the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia. The CPA upholds all the crimes of Stalinism, including its mass murder of socialists in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and its betrayal of countless revolutions. It is a virulently nationalist organisation, which promotes Labor and is integrated into the corporatist union bureaucracy.

During the meeting, an appeal by Palestinian trade unions for industrial action by unions around the world, to block supplies to the Israeli war machine was repeatedly referenced. Keating and Deakin vaguely gestured their support for it.

The issue is very concrete on the ports, with a Zim ship arriving in Sydney this weekend. Zim, an Israeli shipping line, has a protracted record of supplying the military, and declared last month that it was willing to dedicate its entire fleet to the Zionist onslaught against Gaza. The Palestine Action Group, together with Unions for Palestine, have called a protest against the ship this Saturday. That is an important action, pointing to the need for a turn to the working class.

The ports, however, are covered by the MUA. Neither Keating nor Deakin indicated that the union would call for any industrial action against the docking of the ship, or any others supplying Israel's war machine. A Solidarity member, who works with the MUA, declared in the discussion time that port workers could potentially attend the Saturday protest with union flags before or after their shifts, clearly signalling that no action would be taken.

The issue came to a head when Socialist Equality Party assistant national-secretary Max Boddy spoke during the question period. Addressing Keating and Deakin, Boddy asked: "Has your union leadership committed to carrying out action, called for by the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, including strikes to block all military supplies to Israel?"

Boddy noted the complete inaction of the unions over the first four weeks of the bombardment. "Will you resolve to call for a series of political strikes across the country in opposition to the genocide and the Labor government's full-throated support of it?" Boddy pointed out that while they had denounced Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his government, the MUA remained affiliated to the Labor Party. Would they end their affiliation and all support for Labor over the genocide, he asked?

Throughout Boddy's remarks, which were roughly a minute long, members of Solidarity heckled and sought to silence him. They denounced as "sectarian" Boddy's straightforward question to the MUA leadership. One sought to interrupt, saying that action could only come from "the rank-and-file."

That exposes the complete fraud of Solidarity's involvement in Unionists for Palestine. During industrial disputes, when the SEP has called on workers to form their own rank-and-file committees to prevent the imposition of sell-out deals and to fight for their independent interests, Solidarity and the pseudo-left have vehemently objected, insisting on the unchallengeable authority of the official union leaderships.

But, amid a genocide and the increasingly open support for it by the union bureaucracy, Solidarity asserts that it is up to the rank-and-file alone to obstruct the Israeli war machine. This is simply a cover for the union bureaucracy and its complicity in the mass murder.

Keating and Deakin indicated that they would respond to Boddy. But in their concluding remarks, they did not, instead repeating abstract calls for "solidarity" that committed the union to nothing.

In their earlier speeches, Keating and Deakin had already indicated that the union was not planning any action. Keating had referenced ongoing attempts "to try and criminalise our trade

union activity."

Deakin had been more explicit. He referred to laws, which can be used to impose massive fines for unauthorised industrial action. Deakin said, "You cannot do it alone. And if you try to, you'll become ineffective because they'll just deregister" the union. He said this showed it was necessary for attendees to "go home and tell your neighbour, tell your family member" about the assault on Gaza.

Keating and Deakin left out a lot. The Fair Work Act industrial laws that ban most strike action were drawn up by the trade unions and the last Labor government. They are continually invoked by all the unions, including the MUA, to suppress any action by workers and to force through sell-out agreements. The vast majority of the unions, including the MUA, remain affiliated to the Labor Party, whose explicit policy is the maintenance of the whole Fair Work framework.

The MUA, moreover, is not a small union that would have to "do it alone." Its branches cover all of Australia's major ports. In 2018, the MUA merged with the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining Energy Union, which has over 100,000 members across some of the most significant industries in the country.

While Deakin and Keating were unable to answer Boddy during the meeting, they accosted him and other SEP campaigners at its conclusion. As the SEP members were already walking out of the building, a furious Keating approached the SEP members, angrily denouncing them with profanities. The atmosphere was an extremely aggressive one.

The meeting, and the reaction of the MUA officials, again demonstrated that the mobilisation of the working class against the Gaza genocide requires a political struggle against the union bureaucracy. Tied to the Labor government and the corporations, they function as an industrial and political police force on this crucial question, as on every other.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact