

Barcelona port workers refuse to ship arms to Israel

Alejandro Lopez
7 November 2023

On Monday, 1,200 dockworkers of the Organization of Port Workers of Barcelona (Organización de Estibadores Portuarios de Barcelona - OEPB) announced they would refuse to service any ships carrying war material to Israel and any other country to protect human rights.

The initiative taken by the Barcelona dockworkers is part of an international movement of protests against the Israeli war on Gaza. It shows the potential for the working class to mount its own, politically-independent intervention into the crisis to stop the war and the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza.

Workers' anger is erupting across Europe. In Belgium, airport ground crew unions called on their members to stop handling weapons shipments to Israel. In Greece, workers protested in Athens International Airport, while protesters in Denmark blocked all entrances to the Søborg plant of the Danish arms company, Terma, to protest its sale of weapons and equipment for F-16 and F-35 fighter jets to the Israeli Defense Forces. In the UK, protestors blockaded the road to the headquarters of Elbit Systems in Bristol, which manufactures parts for Israeli drones.

In the United States, where 300,000 protested in the streets of the capital, Washington DC, residents of Tacoma prevented the *MV Cape Orlando* from taking on military equipment ultimately bound for Israel. In California, protestors stalled the *Cape Orlando*, a military supply ship bound for Israel, for several hours at the Port of Oakland.

Will Lehman, rank-and-file socialist candidate for president of the United Auto Workers (UAW) has issued a statement demanding the UAW cease production of equipment or munitions used by the Israeli military.

All these powerful protests and initiatives have

rapidly spread quickly on social media, garnering worldwide support among workers and youth.

In the statement posted by the OEPB, Barcelona dockworkers said that it is their duty to adhere to and defend the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Magna Carta, as the signatory countries have forgotten them, and these fundamental rights are systematically being violated in Palestine.

The statement continues: “We decided within the association not to allow ships containing war materials to operate in our port, for the sole purpose of protecting any civilian population, regardless of their location, as there is no justification for sacrificing civilians.”

The statement called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, searching for peaceful solutions to conflicts, and for the UN “to stop its complicit and negligent behavior” to maintain international peace and security and defend international law.

Workers told the online port news portal *El Mercantil* that the decision came from the dockers. They also stressed that they wanted their initiative to expand, telling *El Mercantil*, “we will transfer the proposal to other ports so that they can assess whether they want to join the initiative or not.”

OEPB spokesperson Sebastián Huguet told *El País* yesterday that the initiative arose after seeing the massacre of Palestinians in Gaza. Thousands of Israeli soldiers backed by tanks, artillery, warplanes and warships surrounded Gaza City, the most densely populated portion of the Gaza Strip, threatening mass killing on an even greater scale than has already taken place. The death toll has now surpassed 10,000 in Gaza and 150 in the West Bank. “We thought that the tension was going to go down, and it has been the other way around,” Huguet said.

Huguet added that the workers did not want be “co-

responsible” for civilian deaths. Between 2020 and 2022, Israel imported €140 million in weaponry from Spain under the Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government, while Madrid spent hundreds of millions buying weapons with the “combat-tested” mark from Israel. This means that their use against the Palestinians makes them seen as more valuable and more reliable for armies like that of Spain.

“We do not have any evidence that the port of Barcelona is used for weapons but, if that were the case, we will not let anyone work with the ships. We will not stop the war, but if we can encourage other ports to join, we would welcome it,” said the spokesperson.

Monday’s initiative is not the first time Barcelona dockworkers wielded their industrial strength against military-police violence. In 2017, the right-wing Popular Party (PP) government, backed by the PSOE, used three large tourist cruise ships to house more than 4,000 police to crush the Catalan independence referendum.

Dockworkers in Barcelona and Tarragona responded by refusing to supply services to vessels carrying riot police and the paramilitary Civil Guard. OEPB workers unanimously agreed on this action “in defence of civil rights”, and against what they called “repression ships.”

The dockworkers’ courageous and principled stand against the Israeli-led genocide, which is backed by all the NATO imperialist powers, reveals the growing radicalisation of the working class. A political confrontation has emerged between the European and international working class, on the one hand, and the Zionist regime in Israel and its imperialist backers, on the other.

Broader support must be mobilized among workers internationally, to defend workers who take up the call to refuse to handle weapons shipments to Israel. They will inevitably face retaliation from employers and also from the acting Socialist-Podemos government, which has not extended its full support to the Israeli regime. This is also bound up with the financial interests of Madrid, the seventh largest arms exporter worldwide, which generates €3.6 billion annually from arms sales.

Workers, however, cannot wait for the union bureaucracies to organize industrial action against the war. The main national confederations in the US, UK,

Germany, France, and Spain have organised no action whatsoever against the genocide. It is only in Belgium and Barcelona that certain union locals in a strategically located industries have proposed a concrete form of action.

Ultimately, a broader movement of the international working class capable of halting the war on Gaza can only be built in a rebellion of the rank-and-file against the national union bureaucracies. This emerges particularly clearly in Spain, where the head of Spain’s social-democratic General Union of Workers (UGT), Pepe Alvarez, joined a rally in front of the Israeli embassy called by pro-Zionist groups and backed by neo-fascist party VOX. The UGT leader then met with the Israeli ambassador in Madrid.

Critical initiatives such as those of Barcelona and Belgium workers and protests in US ports, can only develop into a broader, international movement halting the war if rank-and-file workers build their own organizations and take control of their struggles out of the hands of figures like Alvarez. This alone can allow the working class to bring fully to bear its industrial power against the Gaza war and genocide. This requires waging a political struggle against NATO governments, including the PSOE-Podemos government in Spain which supports the Israeli war effort.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact