

“Block the Boat” actions used as cover for Australian unions’ complicity with genocide

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14 December 2023

As mass protests opposing the Netanyahu regime’s genocide in Gaza continue across Australia and around the world, workers and young people are increasingly demanding concrete action to cripple the Israeli war machine.

But the unions, lined up completely behind the pro-Zionist Labor government, continue to stand in the way of strikes. Fearful that the unions are ever more exposed, Australia’s pseudo-left is promoting “community protests” as a substitute for an organised campaign of industrial action.

On Thursday December 7, protesters used kayaks to block the passage of ships belonging to Israeli shipping line Zim and its partners through the Port of Melbourne for several hours.

This followed a protest in Fremantle, Western Australia on December 2, in which around 200 demonstrators established picket lines to coincide with morning and evening shift changes. Maritime workers refused to cross the picket, delaying a Zim ship for around 24 hours.

These actions reflect the genuine strivings of workers and young people to carry out a serious fight to starve Israel’s military of resources and end the genocide being carried out in Gaza. Zim, Israel’s largest shipping line, has functioned as an instrument of brutal Zionist oppression since the state was founded and has pledged all of its resources to the current onslaught against Palestinian civilians.

As with previous “Block the Boat” protests at ports in Sydney and Melbourne, these demonstrations have resonated with broader layers of the population, who recognise the need for more concrete action than the weekly mass rallies.

But the actions themselves, by design, amount to nothing more than stunts. They are intended by their

pseudo-left organisers to provide political cover for the class collaboration of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), which refuses to call strikes against Zim.

The reality is that without direct industrial action by maritime workers, only the most minimal disruption can be inflicted on Zim’s operations and profits by “community pickets.” But even within these parameters, the limited character of the Unionists for Palestine campaign is revealing.

Despite the clear readiness of workers and young people to take part in these actions, the overwhelming majority of Zim ships entering Australia’s ports have done so without so much as a comment from Unionists for Palestine.

A text message list established in Sydney in mid-November, billed as an “emergency response” service, has been used just three times: to organise the snap protest at Port Botany on November 21, to promote a rally outside state parliament on December 1, and to advertise an “organising” meeting in Bankstown on December 9.

Zim’s published schedules, and online GPS tracking services indicate that at least 8 ships owned by Zim or its partners have docked in Sydney in that period, including the Msc Alabama iii, which is at Port Botany at the time of this writing.

The group last night announced another “Block the Boat” action, at Melbourne’s Swanson Dock at 7:30 p.m. on December 19. The long lead time ensures that Zim has plenty of advance warning to modify its schedule to avoid the protest. According to online sources, one Zim ship is currently docked in Melbourne, while another is expected within hours.

The organisers of these demonstrations, with the closest of ties to the MUA, are well aware of the movements of Zim ships. The only rational conclusion

is that the sporadic and limited character of the protests is deliberately calculated to minimise disruption to the company and the ports.

While the MUA leadership has repeatedly declared its support for the protests, their real role behind the scenes has been to protect the interests of Zim and the whole maritime industry.

Since October 7, in defiance of the plea from Palestinian trade unions for international solidarity strikes, the MUA has not called a single industrial action against Zim. The mere act of asking whether strikes would be called to block military supplies to Israel was viewed by the union's Sydney leadership as grounds to aggressively eject Socialist Equality Party members from a public meeting at MUA headquarters.

Once the "community protests" disperse, whether voluntarily or through the violent intervention of the police, the MUA ensures it is back to business as usual, forcing its members to continue to load and unload Zim ships, which are present at Australian ports multiple times each week.

Nat Wasley, an MUA delegate closely associated with pseudo-left group Solidarity, admitted this at a recent Unionists for Palestine event: "Every shift I have worked for the last seven-and-a-half weeks, I have been confronted by containers and vessels from the Zim shipping line."

Wasley did not raise this as a criticism of the MUA leadership and its refusal to mobilise maritime workers against Israel's genocide. Instead she trotted out the standard excuse of the bureaucracy—organised political action by workers is simply not possible, due to Australia's harsh anti-strike laws.

The truth is that this draconian legislation was implemented by the union-backed Rudd-Gillard Labor government in 2009, building upon foundations laid by the Hawke and Keating administrations between 1983 and 1996, again with the full support and cooperation of the union bureaucracy.

The union apparatus consistently supports and enforces this legislation, because it provides a legal backstop for their role as an industrial police force, to protect the profit interests of big business and governments against the struggles of the working class.

Now, the MUA, in line with all of Australia's unions, is using the Fair Work Act as an excuse to support genocide.

Sharp conclusions must be drawn. Organisations that refuse to take on anti-democratic laws in the face of genocide has no claim to represent the interests of workers, in Australia or anywhere.

The "Block the Boat" actions, along with the continued mass protests around the country, demonstrate mass support among the working class for concrete action against Israel's genocide and the broader drive to war. This means taking up a political and industrial fight, not just against Zim, but against the Labor government and Australia's anti-strike and anti-protest legislation.

But such a struggle will require a rebellion against the union bureaucracy and its pseudo-left apologists, and the establishment of new organisations, rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, through which to fight.

Through these committees, workers in Australia can link up with their global counterparts, and begin to build what is necessary: a revolutionary and socialist movement of the international working class, directed against capitalism, the root cause of genocide and war.



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