

Melbourne dock protests continue but Australian unions do nothing to oppose Gaza genocide

Our reporters
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Nearly 400 people attended a “Unionists for Palestine” protest outside the Patrick’s terminal at Swanson Dock in Melbourne on Tuesday evening.

The cargo ship, Zim Sparrow, operated by the Israeli Zim shipping corporation that has committed itself to supplying the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza, was earlier in the day diverted to Port Kembla but the protest went ahead anyway. Zim operates over 70 cargo ships globally.

On Thursday morning protesters in kayaks attempted to block another cargo ship, the Vela, which is currently chartered by Zim, as it arrived in Melbourne. The Vela sailed through the kayakers. Rima Ansarallah who was at the protest said, “Today we’re here to halt business for Zim, an Israeli shipping company that sends weapons and materials to kill Palestinians. Being Palestinian myself, this is something that I want to stop by any means necessary.”

The events reflect a striving by working people to take more direct actions against the genocide than the mass rallies that have occurred since the Israeli bombardment began in October.

The corporatised trade union leadership, however, is doing nothing. This is most stark on the ports, where the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) has rejected any strike action, instead enforcing industrial peace and ensuring the orderly loading of Zim cargo week in, week out.

The MUA leaders cite draconian Fair Work industrial laws as reason for their refusal to take industrial action. Those laws, however, were drawn up by previous Labor governments, with the active involvement of the unions.

The MUA and most other unions remain affiliated to Labor, whose explicit position is the maintenance of the whole Fair Work framework. The unions use the legislation, not only to block strikes defending the Palestinians, but also to prevent any struggle against the continuous cuts to jobs, wages and conditions, enforced by the bureaucracy itself.

During Tuesday’s protest, dock workers could be seen through the security fence climbing up and down the ladders to the straddle carrier crane cabins that they drive to move shipping containers. The biggest cheers from the crowd erupted when some of the crane operators sounded their horns.

Protesters took this as support for the protest.

The event underscored the cynical and duplicitous role of the “Unionist for Palestine” organisation, dominated by the fake-left Solidarity group. The organisation is billed as a “rank-and-file” initiative, but in fact its whole purpose is to cover-up and excuse the refusal of the unions to oppose the genocide.

Matt Abbott, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) president at Federation University, co-chaired the rally. He stated, “We’ve faced attacks from Liberal governments, and from Labor governments. We face some of the harshest laws against industrial action in the developed world.”

The NTEU is, again, a Labor-affiliated union and collaborates closely with the very federal Labor government that has aggressively backed the Israeli war crimes.

Kevin Bracken, former Victorian secretary of the MUA, gave a potted history of actions taken by the waterfront union decades ago, including against apartheid in South Africa.

The MUA officials have developed an entire mythology, which they trot out at every Palestinian-related event they attend. Much of the supposed record of militancy is exaggerated and distorted, with tensions between the rank-and-file and the bureaucracy always absent.

But above all, this history has nothing to do with what the MUA is today. It is a shell of a union, having presided over the gutting of jobs across the ports over the past three decades. And it is among the most corporatised, intimately collaborating with the government, the shipping companies, the port corporations and other segments of big business, such as the fossil fuel conglomerates.

To the extent that the unions took action decades ago against war and oppression, that only underscores their transformation since into adjuncts of governments and company management, now complicit in the genocide of the Palestinians.

Bracken deflected from the MUA’s failure to lead any industrial action by referring to MUA national secretary Christy Cain’s call for leadership of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), to do something. Cain, however, is on the ACTU’s executive, and so was essentially appealing to himself.

Bracken said, “Working people can’t stand by and let this happen and do nothing about it.” That remark defies parody, given the union is doing everything it can to ensure that workers are unable to take action against the genocide.

Senator Lydia Thorpe, who resigned from the Greens over their support for the Voice referendum, said, “This government, Uncle Albo, is complicit in genocide in Palestine and in this country. To even allow a company on our land that is aiding and abetting genocide is a criminal act in itself.” But despite calling the prime minister a criminal, Thorpe concluded that people should pressure the government “to do the right thing.”

Greens senator Janet Rice said the government had “blood on its hands” and was complicit in Israeli war crimes, exporting weapons to Israel and supplying intelligence via Pine Gap for the targeting of Palestinians. She said she receives an email every minute of every day opposing the genocide but concluded by saying, “What I would like is everyone here to contact all the other Labor MPs and the Liberal MPs and the National MPs and ask them to sign on to it [a petition] as well because this is a just cause.”

This is an attempt to trap opposition within the dead-end framework of parliament. The Greens, for all their moral handwringing, are committed to the defence of imperialism and collaboration with the pro-genocide Labor government.

Several other speakers were from sub-groups of Unionists for Palestine, including in health and education. Summing up the tenor of the speeches as a whole, one said the protest had “disrupted” the Israeli war machine, when it had plainly not.

The rally passed a resolution that promoted the unions, rather than indicting them for their assistance to the Israeli war machine and alignment with the Labor government. It outlined no concrete actions, and no way forward.

On Thursday, Will Lehman, a US auto worker and leading figure of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), wrote: “In every factory, workers should expand the network of rank-and-file committees to break the stranglehold of the UAW [United Auto Workers] bureaucracy. The fight against layoffs, austerity and inequality must be united with the fight against war. Stopping the genocide requires strikes and boycotts of arms companies, work stoppages at the docks and airports to prevent the shipment of any items to Israel with a military use and the systematic preparation for a political general strike against the war.”

Only by forming rank-and-file committees of dock workers can the stifling stranglehold of the MUA bureaucracy be broken, and a genuine campaign begun. International co-ordination by such organisations of struggle is the only way that a global company like Zim can be blocked as part of the broader struggle to mobilise the working class against the genocide and all the governments facilitating it.

Gill, a nurse who attended the protest, told the WSWs, “I’m just an ordinary person like the people in Gaza. As a human being I feel that I need to stand with Palestinians... Someone’s

got to take action, someone’s got to show the public that what they’re seeing on the mainstream media is all propaganda, it’s all rubbish. It’s not about race, it’s not about religion, it’s just about being a human.

“I feel very strongly, very emotional about it. I’ve got to just be there, supporting the Palestinians. That’s all I can do as an ordinary person. I’m not rich, I’m not a politician, all I can do as a human being is just walk and support them. I used to be a mental health nurse, so I’ve worked with mums and babies, women and children very closely. Just to see the effect on some of the children in the videos from Gaza, you can see that they’re just shellshocked, traumatised.”

Asked about the role of the Labor government, Gill said, “It’s just disgusting. They’ve sold their souls to the Israeli government. Sadly, once you’re in power you can have your head turned by money and I think that’s what has happened to them. They’re an American vassal state as I call them, or the US lackeys.”

In discussing the failure of the unions to take any industrial action Gill noted, “There’s been support for Ukraine, but there’s been no support for the Palestinians. Yes, and they’re using the Ukrainians as the cannon fodder.”

Amy also attended the protest: “For me it’s about humanity and treating each other with respect and treating everyone as human. And the people in Palestine are not being treated as human, so that’s the biggest thing for me. I go to the Melbourne rally every Sunday and I have been to a few things in Geelong with the Free Palestine Geelong group as well. I work in an office with maybe 1,500 people, and nobody is talking about it... people are scared to speak out, there’s so much propaganda.”



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