

Protests in San Francisco and on Oakland docks against genocide in Gaza

David Brown
19 January 2024

On January 13, over 1,000 protesters blocked operations at the Port of Oakland as part of the broader day of action that saw protests of over 100,000 in Washington D.C. and half a million in London against the ongoing genocide in Gaza. The Oakland demonstrators targeted the port to oppose the shipment of military equipment to Israel. Beginning before dawn, they successfully halted both the morning and afternoon shifts.

Jimmy Salameh, a dockworker, told the Arab Resource and Organizing Center: “I’ve worked at the port for ten years, and I can say for a fact that there was no business as usual out here today. How could there be in the middle of a genocide? I couldn’t be prouder of the people who turned out today to raise their voice against the war on Gaza and to demand that this port isn’t used for military purposes.”

The next day an estimated 25,000 protesters demonstrated outside San Francisco city hall and marched down Market Street, shutting down traffic. On January 9, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors became the largest municipal body to pass a resolution demanding a ceasefire, following earlier Bay Area cities Oakland and Richmond.

The San Francisco supervisors drafted a toothless document which aims to keep mass anger against the Israeli genocide in Gaza confined in the straitjacket of the Democratic Party. The one-paragraph seven-bullet-point resolution will do nothing to stop the genocide in Gaza, but rather is aimed providing a pressure-release valve to counter the growing popular opposition to Israel’s atrocities.

The resolution calls for “a sustained cease-fire, the provision of lifesaving humanitarian aid in Gaza and the release of all hostages.” However, the board

proposes to do this through pressuring the Biden administration and Congress, under conditions where both continue to support the Israeli war on Gaza.

It condemns “anti-Semitic, anti-Palestinian, Islamophobic, xenophobic rhetoric and attacks,” lumping them all together and perpetuating the myth that there has been a fresh wave of antisemitic attacks in the US. It also “condemns Hamas’s attack on civilians that resulted in so much horror and 1,200 deaths on Oct. 7,” without pointing to the decades-long history of the oppression of the Palestinian people by the State of Israel through de facto imprisonment in the Gaza Strip, violent airstrikes and other attacks, and the cutoff of food, fuel, communications and medical care.

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors said it “believes that a just and lasting peace between the Palestinian and Israeli people requires new leadership on both sides, with a willingness and commitment to negotiate in good faith.” But despite condemnation by the UN and other international organizations over the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, the Netanyahu regime has demonstrated its unwillingness to negotiate a ceasefire and has continued to rain down destruction in the Gaza Strip.

The immediate reaction of leading Democrats like San Francisco Mayor London Breed was to denounce the resolution and any official criticism of Israel’s brutality. They are fearful not of the San Francisco board, but of the growing international outrage among workers and youth to what is transpiring in Gaza.

The protest at the Port of Oakland on Saturday called for the halt of the transfer of military equipment to Israel. The protest followed an effort last November to block the *Cape Orlando* after rank-and-file longshoremen had alerted protesters that the military supply ship was headed for Israel. Since then, the

International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which covers the Pacific ports in the US and Canada, has tried to forestall additional action with its own impotent resolution declaring solidarity with the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU), without in any way impeding the movement of weapons from West Coast docks.

The PGFTU did not put out a call for solidarity in words only, but for workers to stop producing and transporting weapons to be used in Israel's genocide. The working class is an immense social force and the only one capable of directly blocking the bipartisan support by the US government for the ethnic cleansing of Gaza. What is urgently needed is not lip-service to the Palestinians' plight, but the blocking of weapons destined for Israel by action at by workers at ports around the globe.

In opposition to this perspective, pseudo-left organizations and the trade union bureaucracies are actively seeking to stop the organization of solidarity actions by workers. Brian Becker of the ANSWER coalition and a founding member of the Party for Socialism and Liberation made the Port of Oakland protest the focus of his speech at the DC rally. He made no call for broadening the struggle against the Gaza genocide.

Protests can stop a handful of shifts at individual ports, but workers can be organized to block all military equipment to Israel. The ILWU's inaction is no accident. In 2022, when it served the Biden administration's interests in prosecuting NATO's proxy war in Ukraine against Russia, the ILWU announced that they would not handle cargo for any Russian ships. The union bureaucracy refuses to block military equipment destined for Israel because this would involve a direct fight with the Democratic Party.

Union leaders have hailed Biden as "the most pro-worker president in history," but he has directly intervened against major struggles of American workers. At the end of 2022, with the support of the Democratic Socialists of America members in Congress, the Biden administration passed legislation banning a rail strike and enforcing a contract that railroaders had already voted down.

When autoworkers went on strike last year, UAW President Shawn Fain worked closely with Biden to keep most workers on the job without a contract.

Before workers even had a chance to vote on the contract, Fain invited Biden to speak at a union "back to work rally" a month into Israel's invasion of Gaza. When a protester called for a ceasefire at the rally, union bureaucrats booed and shouted "throw her out" and "we love you, Joe."

At West Coast ports, after the expiration of their last contract in 2022, the ILWU kept its members working without a contract for nearly a year with "no-strike" pledges while they carried out backroom negotiations with the port operators and the White House. The eventual sellout agreement raised the retirement age and isolated the Canadian ILWU members who soon went on strike.

At every step of the way, the trade union leadership has worked hand in glove with the Biden administration, conspiring against their own members. In June 2022, Biden gave the keynote speech at the AFL-CIO constitutional convention, where his reelection was endorsed by the bureaucrats. As Biden's support for Israel's violence grew increasingly unpopular, the AFL-CIO fought to clamp down on grassroots opposition.

In the fight to defend the Palestinians, the Democrats, Republicans and union bureaucrats are on the opposite side of the barricades. Independent rank-and-file committees of workers should take strike action to directly halt the manufacture and transportation of military equipment to Israel and to build toward a political general strike to end US aid for Israel's genocide.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact