

ACTU statement calls for end to military trade with Israel, but Australian unions are taking no action

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The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) released a statement Monday, pointing to the critical role of Australian companies in the global weapons business and calling on the federal Labor government to “take immediate steps to secure peace,” including by seeking a permanent ceasefire in Gaza.

The statement condemns “the deaths of over 34,000 civilians” and “the use of starvation as a weapon of war.” United Nations and other experts have condemned Israel’s deliberate policy of starvation, which exposes the genocidal character of its onslaught, aimed at ethnically cleansing Gaza of Palestinians.

Referring to “evidence that Australia[n] companies supply parts used as part of global supply chains, including to F-35 fighter jets” that have played a central role in Israel’s bombardment, the ACTU calls on the Labor government to “take active steps to ensure it is not contributing to breaches of international law.” The peak union body says that this should include “Ending all military trade with Israel.”

It is the first time the ACTU has issued such a call during the six months of Israel’s onslaught. Its previous two statements on the events in Gaza were of a tepid and duplicitous character, bemoaning the mass deaths but outlining no industrial action whatsoever to impede the government’s funding or supply of goods to Israel.

In the 200 days since October 7, the ACTU and all the unions have refused to call a single strike to halt the production or transportation of military equipment or other supplies vital to Israel’s ethnic-cleansing operation. Indeed, the union bureaucracies have ensured that workers have remained on the job, financially conscripted to serve as cogs in the Zionist war machine.

The ACTU has not issued this statement because it has suddenly changed its attitude to the war in Gaza or the murderous role of the Labor government.

It is clearly under pressure from workers to take action, possibly including those producing the munitions parts and those dragged into shipping them and other supplies to Israel. The refusal of the Australian unions to take any industrial action against the genocide, despite a desperate call in October from Palestinian unions for their international counterparts to do so, has become more and more conspicuous and has increasingly been condemned by Palestinian activists and others.

This is part of broader hostility to the genocide in the working

class, which has been reflected in ongoing weekly mass protests, including some attended by significant layers of working people.

There have been a number of exposures pointing to Australia’s key role in the global weapons supply chain that is facilitating the slaughter. That includes information proving that decisive components of the F-35 aircraft used to reduce Gaza to an uninhabitable rubble are produced solely in Australia, including parts without which bombs could not be dropped.

The ACTU statement proclaims “deep concern” over the weapons trade. The only shipments it references however, are the F-35 components, which have been known about throughout the genocide and which the ACTU has never mentioned before.

The union officialdom, with its deep ties to the Labor government and coverage across key industries, undoubtedly knows better than the public the extent of Australia’s shipments to Israel. The ACTU statement may be motivated by fears that more will come out about the scale of those exports.

The statement is a cynical and transparent exercise in cover-up and damage control for the criminal role of the ACTU and the Albanese Labor government it serves. Both are complicit in aiding and abetting the genocidal slaughter being carried out against the Palestinian people in Gaza.

As a key ally of the US, which is funding and overseeing the genocide, Labor has been unwavering in its support for Israel, aggressively defending the Zionist regime’s supposed “right to defend itself,” while bombs rain down on women and children.

Labor has responded with aggression to any suggestions that weapons exports to Israel be ended. Even though official figures show a sharp increase in government defence export permits to Israel since Labor came to office in 2022, government officials have outright lied, claiming that no weapons shipments have been made. This is a cynical deception, based on the false premise that only fully assembled weapons count, when even the Defence Department’s own munitions list includes crucial components and parts.

Centrally, the ACTU statement does not outline any action to achieve an end to the military exports. Nor does it threaten to end its alliance with the Labor government and withdraw support if the shipments continue. Instead, one is left with feckless appeals to the very government that is complicit in the genocide.

The decisive issue—the urgent need for concrete action by

workers—is entirely absent. The ACTU could stop all shipments to Israel in a heartbeat. But the last thing the union apparatus wants is the mobilisation of the strength of the working class to halt the production and transport of military goods and components to Israel.

Such a mobilisation would include industrial action by workers on the docks, throughout logistics and in the airports, refusing to handle all goods of potential military use to Israel. It would involve action by workers in the factories that make these components to halt their production. More generally, there must be political strikes involving the broadest layers of workers to demand an immediate halt to the genocide and Australia's complicity in it.

The ACTU has not the slightest intention of calling such action. That poses the need for a movement of the working class, independent of and opposed to the union bureaucracy. Rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers, not the union bureaucrats, must be established to plan out concrete actions against the genocide and to draw in wide sections of workers. This is the only way a genuine demand for an end to shipments to Israel will be met.

That is demonstrated by all the experiences of the past six months and more.

Most of the unions, including the ACTU and its officialdom, have scarcely even mentioned the genocide, even though it is one of the worst imperialist war crimes since World War II.

Some of the unions have issued statements denouncing the Palestinians, equating any resistance to their decades-long oppression with the crimes of the garrison-like Israeli state. ACTU leaders, such as secretary Sally McManus, along with other senior union officials, have continued to collaborate closely with the same government that has been denounced by tens of thousands of protesters as complicit in the genocide.

The role of the unions has been particularly stark on the docks. There, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), falsely presented as a progressive and even “left-wing” union, has ensured the orderly loading and unloading of cargo from the Israeli Zim shipping line, which in October dedicated its entire global fleet to aiding the onslaught against Gaza. Speaking out of both sides of their mouths, the leaders of the MUA declare support for the Palestinian struggle, but their real position was summed up in February when the union invited Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to address its national conference and gave him a rapturous applause.

This is not an aberration. It flows from the entire character of the unions as corporatised entities that collaborate on a daily basis with governments and big business. Domestically, for the past forty years this program has seen the unions enforce endless cuts to workers' jobs, wages and conditions. On foreign policy, the unions have either supported or done nothing to oppose the past thirty years of endless US-led wars, in which Australia has played a key role.

The unions are on board with the broader war drive, of which the genocide in Gaza is part. They have enthusiastically endorsed initiatives of the Labor government aimed at completing Australia's transformation into a frontline state for Washington's

plans for a catastrophic conflict with China. The ACTU has hailed moves towards the development of a war economy to that end, while the MUA has adopted, as one of its key policies, Labor's development of a strategic shipping fleet that would tie the maritime industry and its workers to provocations and military operations against Beijing.

All of this underscores the fact that workers should harbour no illusions in the ACTU resolution. The union bureaucrats are not seeking to lead a fight against the genocide, but to preempt it and subordinate it to impotent appeals to the Labor government, with which they remain allied.

Shipments to Israel must be stopped! To do so requires that such action is organised by workers themselves, independently of the union leadership, which has coordinated the suppression of any industrial opposition to the genocide. Form rank-and-file committees at the docks, in factories and throughout the working class, to prepare concrete action, including strikes, to halt the genocide! The Socialist Equality Party is committed to this struggle, and will provide workers with all political assistance possible to take forward this fight. Contact us today!

Any action by workers raises major political issues. It will come up against the Labor government, the corporations, the unions and the industrial courts, including “Fair Work” legislation which bans most industrial action. Those laws were drafted by Labor and the unions and are used by the ACTU and its affiliates to justify the suppression of any struggle.

In other words, this is a political fight, that means mobilising the immense social power of the entire working class.

Above all, what is posed is the turn to a new perspective. Capitalism, defended by the unions, is tobogganing towards disaster. The program of capitalist governments worldwide, including in Australia, is a bonanza for the billionaires, limitless funds for war and poverty for the working class, along with military policies that are leading inexorably towards a third world war.

The alternative is the fight to unite workers globally in a common struggle against the outmoded profit system. The aim must be to establish workers' governments that will end the wars and prioritise social need over private profit, as part of the development of a peaceful socialist society.



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