

Italian dockworkers block Saudi ship carrying weapons for Israel

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On August 7, dockworkers in Genoa mounted a determined blockade against the transit of the Saudi ship *Bahri Yanbu*, in a direct challenge to Italy's role in arming Israel and its imperialist allies.

The ship, arriving from Baltimore, Maryland in the United States, was scheduled to load military equipment produced by the Italian arms conglomerate Leonardo, including an Oto Melara cannon bound for Abu Dhabi and possibly tanks or other heavy weapons already staged in the terminal yard.

Refusing to become accomplices in the Gaza genocide, the workers blocked the loading of the cannon and exposed the ship's cargo—already filled with weapons, ammunition, explosives, armored vehicles and tanks—through on-site inspections at dawn.

Despite attempts to obstruct their access, around 40 dockworkers boarded to document the shipment. Their defiance forced the Port Authority into damage-control mode, offering vague promises to discuss in September the creation of a "permanent observatory on arms trafficking."

The dockworkers made their position clear: "We don't work for war." In 2019, workers blocked a similar shipment for the same Saudi company, after discovering the declared civilian cargo was in fact weaponry. That mobilization extracted a pledge to stop loading such cargo, but no ban on transit was ever implemented, allowing the weapons flow to continue.

This week's action immediately drew the intervention of the major union federations—CGIL, CISL and UIL—alongside base unions USB (Unione Sindacale di Base) and CALP (Collettivo Autonomo Lavoratori Portuali). They were joined by pacifist groups and the Genoese Church, whose involvement since 2021 has enjoyed the explicit support of Pope Francis.

The confederated unions announced a ban on loading arms for war zones "by any means," but their real role was to corral the protest inside the narrow confines of legality, invoking Italy's Law 185/90, which supposedly prohibits arms exports to countries engaged in conflict.

USB, for its part, filed a formal complaint earlier and invoked the constitution's repudiation of war in its "Labor Rejects War" manifesto. CALP leader José Nivoi stated plainly that handling such cargo would make workers complicit in war crimes and the genocide in Gaza.

On August 8, CALP and USB staged another protest at Ponte Etiopia, disrupting traffic across the port area. The unions announced that mobilizations will continue, culminating in September with an international dockworkers' assembly to coordinate opposition to turning Genoa into a logistics hub for war.

The present blockade follows a significant episode in late July, when Genoa dockworkers blocked the unloading of military cargo bound for Israel after receiving intelligence from Greek unions PAME and ENEDEP.

That shipment—military-grade steel—had already been intercepted in Piraeus by Greek port workers, then re-routed to Genoa aboard the Chinese vessel *COSCO Shipping Pisces*. USB responded with an immediate refusal to handle the cargo and a threat to strike, ultimately forcing the operators to return the containers to the Far East.

These actions connect directly to earlier episodes of international solidarity. On October 20, 2024 dockworkers in Piraeus halted the loading of 21 tonnes of ammunition destined for Israel after Palestinian trade unions issued an urgent appeal for workers worldwide to refuse all roles in Israel's arms supply chain. Similar refusals have occurred in Barcelona, Belgian transport hubs and the French port of Marseille, where CGT dockers blocked arms shipments in June. Such interventions demonstrate the enormous potential of targeted, sector-wide labor action.

The Mediterranean coordination between PAME, ENEDEP, USB and French dockers proves that workers possess the means to strike directly at the logistical arteries of imperialist war. However, these actions remain under the stifling grip of the union bureaucracies.

While PAME declared that workers "will not become accomplices" to Israel and its allies, their perspective—like that of USB and Si Cobas—remains trapped within the nationalist and legal framework of the capitalist state. They seek to "politicize the strike" while preserving their role as defenders of the system, rather than mobilizing the working class as an independent revolutionary force.

The intervention of the confederated unions, the church and various legal authorities in Genoa is aimed at preempting a broader struggle and keeping rank-and-file militancy within

safe boundaries. By presenting the blockade as a question of legal compliance—whether with Law 185/90 or constitutional clauses—they channel workers’ anger into appeals to the very capitalist state that organizes and profits from the arms trade.

Leonardo, Italy’s largest weapons manufacturer, continues to export to regimes across the globe with the approval of governments of every political stripe. Meloni’s far-right coalition, like its predecessors, has no intention of halting the lucrative arms trade to Israel, Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. Claims by Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani that all arms shipments to Israel have ceased are lies, exposed by the recent events.

Rome’s real policy is one of accelerating militarization and suppressing opposition. Last September, parliament passed the so-called “anti-Gandhi” law, criminalizing road and rail blockades with prison sentences of up to two years. This followed a June security decree that extended police powers, lengthened prison terms and targeted protest tactics. These measures are aimed squarely at the working class, to ensure that anti-war mobilizations like the Genoa blockade can be crushed under the guise of public order.

Italy’s place in the global war drive is central. As a NATO member and EU stalwart, it has committed to Washington’s confrontations with Russia and China, while maintaining close ties with Israel and Gulf monarchies.

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni presents herself as a champion of “national interest” and “pro-Western” nationalism, aligning with Trump’s demand for higher European military spending. Under the EU SAFE plan, her government is drawing €14 billion in low-cost loans to modernize Italy’s armed forces, a windfall for defense industry giants like Leonardo and Fincantieri.

This militarization is integrated into civilian life through the “dual-use” doctrine, which designates infrastructure like Genoa’s port as both civilian and military. This blurring of lines forces dockworkers into the position of handling war cargo as part of their normal duties, under conditions of stagnant wages, worsening safety and the ever-present risk of retaliation for resistance. The Genoa blockade is therefore not just an act of solidarity with Gaza but a direct rejection of the militarized transformation of the Italian economy.

Yet the greatest danger facing workers is the role of the union bureaucracy itself. Time and again, workers have demonstrated their willingness to act—blocking ships, refusing to load weapons, coordinating across borders.

But under the leadership of CGIL, CISL, UIL, USB, Si Cobas and similar bodies, this resistance is subordinated to appeals to the capitalist state and its laws. The unions’ strategy is to contain militancy, to prevent independent rank-and-file organization and to keep actions episodic rather than as part of a revolutionary strategy.

The international communications that enabled the July victory against the *COSCO Shipping Pisces* show what is

possible when workers act in concert across national borders. But for this potential to be realized, workers must free themselves from the grip of bureaucracies that ultimately defend the existing order.

Genuine rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves, must be formed in every port, warehouse and transport hub. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is fighting to link up these struggles internationally, not only to share information but to prepare coordinated action aimed at stopping the imperialist war machine at its source.

The Genoa dockers’ stand resonates far beyond Italy’s borders. It shows that the working class, the producer of all wealth and strategically placed in the logistics chains of global capitalism, holds immense power to disrupt the plans of the ruling class. But power unused—or used only within the limits set by the state and its loyal union apparatus—will be dissipated.

The choice before workers is stark: continue to rely on organizations committed to defending capitalism, or build an independent movement aimed at ending both the wars abroad and the social assault at home.

The working class possesses the strength to halt the arms convoys, empty the warships and dismantle the production lines of death. The path forward requires organization, clarity and above all a conscious political break with all factions of the capitalist class, whether openly reactionary like Meloni or dressed in the pseudo-left rhetoric of the trade union officials.

It requires a turn to the international working class, uniting the struggles of dockers in Genoa, Piraeus, Marseille and beyond with those of transport, manufacturing and service workers across Europe, the Middle East and the world. Such a movement, which the IWA-RFC is building, must be connected to the fight for socialism, the only program capable of ending the system that breeds war, exploitation and repression.



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