Pseudo-left “day of action” covers for Australian unions’ complicity in Gaza genocide

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A “national day of union action for Palestine” last Wednesday was a complete farce. It served only to highlight the hostility of the union bureaucracy to any mobilisation against the genocide in Gaza and the Australian Labor government’s complicity in it.

The event was not national, there was no action and the unions were largely absent. Instead, the pseudo-left held two small rallies, one organised by Solidarity in Sydney and the other by Socialist Alternative in Melbourne. The aim was to cover the refusal of the unions to take any action against the genocide in Gaza for the past two years.

The Sydney protest was held outside the Department of Defence offices at 5:30pm. The location underscored the central political thrust of the gathering, to again issue plaintive appeals to the Australian state to end its support for Israel. And the timing of the rally, outside of the working day, demonstrated its token character and the fact that it was not connected to any industrial action.

At a gathering of around 100 people, in a city of almost 6 million, there were flags of several unions, including the National Tertiary Education Union, the New South Wales Nurses and Midwives Association and the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA). This was presented by the Solidarity organisers as proof of growing union involvement in the campaign against the genocide.

The keynote speaker was Paul Keating, the Sydney branch secretary of the MUA.

In a table-thumping speech, Keating demanded that the Labor government impose sanctions on Israel. He pointed to several small but notable instances of dockworkers overseas refusing to handle military exports to Israel. Keating exaggerated the scale of these actions, which number only a handful globally over the course of a genocide that has spanned two years.

But that aside, Keating declared that “When it comes our turn, these boxes, if they’re coming through here to Sydney, Sydney wharfies, in fact wharfies across the country, will not load those boxes.” Scarcely before the rally was over, Solidarity members took to social media to declare that Keating had committed to industrial action to halt military supplies to Israel.

There was a catch, however, which they did not mention, and a fairly major one. Keating was only referencing “arms that are destined for Israel.” Despite the false declarations of the Albanese government, Australia does export military components to the Zionist regime, underscoring the active involvement of Labor in the war crimes, but such exports appear to be very small in volume.

And the bigger catch was that Keating claimed not to know of any such weapons exports passing through Sydney ports!

Later in the rally, Keating’s disclaimer was amplified by Solidarity leader Paddy Gibson. “If they can find out what those boxes are they will stop the box,” Gibson declared. “They don’t know what’s in those boxes, that’s the sad truth.” He called for attendees to “go out into the working class” to gather “intelligence” as to where these boxes containing military components were.

The whole thing had an absurd character. If anyone were in a position to find out what was being transported through Australian ports, it would surely be the MUA bureaucracy.

But, even accepting at face value the professions of Keating and his colleagues not to have any idea of what passes through the ports they effectively manage, there was a glaring contradiction that underscored the cynicism of the charade.

During his speech, Keating had proclaimed his union’s commitment to boycotts, sanctions and divestment from Israel. Such a commitment, were it a reality, would mean refusing to handle not only direct arms exports, but all goods and trade associated with Israel.

When the genocide began, in October 2023, Solidarity publicised the visits to Australian ports of vessels from the Israeli-owned Zim shipping line. Zim is closely associated with the Israeli regime and made a public commitment that its entire fleet would aid the Israeli war effort, if required.

At the time, Solidarity made the correct point that Zim vessels coming and going from Australian ports were a significant component of Australia’s complicity in the genocide.

At a November 2023 meeting at the MUA’s Sydney

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headquarters, a member of the Socialist Equality Party asked Keating if the MUA would act on an urgent call by the Palestinian trade unions for industrial action to paralyse the imperialist-Zionist war machine.

Keating reacted with unconcealed fury. The MUA has not taken a single strike against Zim or any other cargo associated with Israel. Solidarity held a handful of protests at the ports, the last of which was over a year ago, to cover for the lack of industrial action.

At a similar "day of action" in December 2023, Nat Wasley, Gibson's partner and close political associate, sought to excuse the failure of the MUA to carry out any strikes against Zim. Wasley is an MUA health and safety officer, who collaborates with Keating.

Wasley said that as much as the MUA might want to strike against Zim, its hands were tied by Australia's draconian industrial relations laws. Wasley was silent on the fact that the MUA is affiliated to the Labor Party, which drafted those laws and is committed to maintaining them. She presented the presence of the Zim cargo as deeply upsetting to herself and other wharf workers.

Two years on, however, Wasley, Gibson and Solidarity seem to have recovered from their upset. Zim was not mentioned once at the protest. The company's publicly available schedule shows that Zim ships will dock at the Sydney port six times over the next month, seven times in Melbourne and ten in Brisbane.

The MUA and Solidarity's silence makes clear that they are committed to the orderly loading and unloading of the Zim cargo. For all Keating's bluster, they are functioning as the enforcers of Israeli shipping.

Gibson hailed the fact that the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has issued toothless motions, suggesting sanctions against Israel to the Labor government that it works with everyday. Now, Gibson said, it was up to "rank-and-file unionists" to take unspecified "action" to turn such motions into a "reality." In other words, Gibson and Solidarity accept and defend the refusal of the ACTU, the peak union body, to do anything in opposition to the genocide.

The rally was turned over to Greens Senator David Shoebridge, who repeated the call for sanctions. Prior to the May federal election, Shoebridge and his colleagues were campaigning for a coalition with the pro-genocide Labor Party. As part of that pitch, Shoebridge unveiled the Greens' first costed military program, featuring a plan for the development of Australian missiles and drones.

Gibson effusively introduced New South Wales Labor (NSW) MP Sarah Kaine and cheered throughout her remarks, which consisted of motherhood statements about the sadness of civilian deaths and the meekest suggestion that the federal Labor government might end weapons exports to Israel.

Kaine is a member of the NSW Labor government, which earlier this year passed sweeping "hate speech" legislation, which potentially outlaws strident criticism of Zionism, and anti-protest laws forbidding demonstrations anywhere in the vicinity of "places of worship." Given the ubiquity of religious institutions, that was a transparent attempt by the frothingly pro-Israeli government, of which Kaine is a part, to ban all public protest.

Prior to being elected, Kaine was closely associated with the most openly pro-business sections of the union bureaucracy, and was an academic specialising in "management discipline." In 2020, she served as the "Director of Industrial Relations Compliance" for the state Liberal government.

The promotion of such an individual by Solidarity underscores the group's commitment to the whole framework of draconian industrial relations. That framework can be invoked to shield Solidarity's allies in the MUA bureaucracy from criticism, for their failure to take industrial action, and to prevent a movement of workers independent of and opposed to the corporatist bureaucracy.

In Melbourne, around 300 people took part. The MUA, notwithstanding Keating's bluster in Sydney, was entirely absent.

Socialist Alternative took a slightly different tack, presenting its rally as a strike by members of the Australian Services Union (ASU). That too was a fraud. The ASU leadership refused to endorse industrial action. It advised its members instead to ask their bosses if they could take time off to go to the Melbourne rally. What Socialist Alternative presented as "rank-and-file" industrial action, involving at most 100 workers, thus amounted in practice to a slightly longer lunch break.

The "day of action" again underscored the reality that whatever their occasional left-wing or "socialist" rhetoric, the pseudo-left functions as an adjunct of the union bureaucracy, with which it is increasingly integrated. The aim was not to develop union action to defend the Palestinians, but to cover over and excuse the complete absence of any such action.

The mobilisation of the working class against the genocide, including through strikes, requires a rebellion against the corporatised, pro-war union bureaucracy and the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves.

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