MUA keeps Australian dockworkers out of international anti-war strikes

Martin Scott
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Dockworkers across Europe and internationally took part in coordinated strikes and protests against war and militarisation on Friday, October 30. But the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) made sure Australian wharfies were not involved in the international stoppages.

The day of action involved strikes, stoppages and demonstrations at 113 ports in 22 countries and regions. Around 14,000 workers struck at 24 French ports, approximately 3,000 dockworkers and seafarers walked out at Piraeus in Greece, and action was also held at ports in Italy, Spain and elsewhere.

In Australia, dockworkers were kept on the job, as they have been throughout Israel's genocide of the Palestinians. To cover over their complicity, the MUA leadership engaged in pseudo-militant posturing on social media and at token protest rallies held well away from the ports.

The contrast could not have been more stark—while tens of thousands of dockers shut down ports across Europe, workers at Port Botany were allowed to do nothing more than serve as background players in a 30-second video of MUA Sydney Branch secretary Paul Keating ranting and raving about "solidarity."

Ahead of the global strike, the MUA National Council announced it had passed a resolution, endorsing "that Branches take measures to support these actions." Besides advancing the blustering slogan, "No war cargo through our ports. No support for genocide," the resolution committed the union to nothing. If any "measures" were taken, they did not involve the mobilisation of a single worker, or the blocking of a single shipping container.

In its social media videos, the union advanced another slogan: "Demand the manifest." The bureaucracy did not specify who should make the demand or, indeed, to whom it should be addressed.

It is the continuation of the MUA leadership's fraudulent line, put forward for more than a year to excuse their refusal to take action against the genocide, that they *would* halt the transport of weapons to Israel, if only they knew which shipping containers held them.

If the MUA leadership is truly unsure what is in the containers they are ensuring maritime workers load and unload every day, then why not shut down the ports completely until that information is provided?

The fraudulent character of these excuses is exposed by the fact that the MUA bureaucracy has for three years actively prevented any action against ZIM, an Israeli shipping line that has pledged all its resources in support of the genocide, and which regularly visits Australian ports.

The international actions with which the MUA falsely proclaimed its solidarity were not boycotts against individual items of cargo, but general strikes demonstrating the power of the working class to shut down key sections of industry. They expressed the strong and growing current of opposition to genocide and war among workers around the world, including in Australia.

For three years, mass demonstrations have taken place across the country, including the August 2025 march across the Sydney Harbour Bridge, involving as many as 300,000 people. In stark contrast, not a single anti-war strike has been organised by the MUA leadership. Along with the rest of the union apparatus, it has worked to prevent this mass opposition from developing into an industrial and political struggle against the war.

In October 2023, Palestinian trade unions issued an urgent appeal to workers internationally to halt weapons shipments and other supplies to Israel. When Socialist Equality Party members asked MUA officials at a Sydney meeting of the "Trade Unionists for Palestine" in November 2023 if they would call strikes in response to this appeal, they were met with hostility and threats from the union leadership.

The bureaucrats claim such action is impossible, due to Australia's draconian anti-strike laws. The reality is that the unions have worked together with successive Labor governments to draft and strengthen the legislation, and serve as its chief enforcers. The MUA is invoking the laws to prevent a struggle between the working class and the Albanese Labor government, to which the MUA is politically tied, and which fully supports the Israeli

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onslaught on Gaza and the criminal US-led war against Iran.

The following year, the MUA welcomed Prime Minister Anthony Albanese to its national conference. Albanese was there to promote the Maritime Strategic Fleet, an MUA-designed mechanism for dragooning civilian seafarers into military conflict.

In July this year, the union again demonstrated its loyalty to Labor. At the party's national conference, Sydney MUA official Paul Garrett withdrew at the eleventh hour as seconder of a limited pro-Palestine motion proposed by MP Ed Husic. Garrett and the MUA thus played the decisive role in sabotaging even this token challenge to the government's complicity in the genocide and ensuring that the subject was not discussed at the conference.

The MUA has also openly backed the US-led war drive against Russia. In March 2022, the MUA attacked the Liberal-National federal government from the right, demanding the imposition of sweeping sanctions on Russian shipping, including a ban on Russian-owned vessels and those carrying predominantly Russian cargo. The supposedly militant, "left-wing" union was thus acting as the advocate of the CIA and NATO.

This underscores that the MUA bureaucracy's refusal to take action on Gaza is just one component of its total alignment with the interests of Australian imperialism.

The pseudo-left have played a critical role in covering for the MUA leadership and the rest of the union apparatus. October 30 was no exception, with these organisations promoting protest stunts as a substitute for industrial action on the ports.

In Sydney, a protest was held on October 31 outside the offices of arms manufacturer Thales, whose Australian operations have reportedly exported explosives to a US military supplier. Organised by Solidarity, this was not an appeal to factory workers to down tools, nor to logistics workers to stop the transport of military materiel. It was a flag-waving exercise outside an office that was closed for the weekend, 20 kilometres away from the docks.

In Melbourne, Free Palestine Coalition Naarm hailed the MUA's endorsement of the international action as a "significant achievement," proclaiming "Tools down for Palestine!" But it too organised a diversion—a rally on Friday evening outside the State Library, while operations continued at the docks without interruption.

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. Their aim on October 30, and throughout the past three years, has not been to develop industrial action against war and genocide, but to cover over and excuse the complete absence of any such action.

The MUA-engineered absence of Australian dockworkers from the international strikes was conspicuous. But it does not mean that the union bureaucracies in Europe and elsewhere play a fundamentally different role from the MUA.

The international dockworkers strikes demonstrated the immense strength of the working class and that there is a mass sentiment for such action among workers. But it also revealed the limitations of what is possible within the existing leadership of the working class. A single-day strike cannot prevent the descent into a third world war!

To the extent that the union bureaucracies called strikes on October 30, they did so in an attempt to contain the anger and determination of workers and prevent the working class from truly exercising that immense strength.

Workers entering into struggle against war, job cuts and falling living standards internationally confront this common obstacle. The answer is not to pressure the existing union leaderships into adopting more militant slogans, but to build new organisations through which workers can take control of their own struggles.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of independent rank-and-file committees in ports and workplaces, democratically controlled by workers themselves, and linked internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

These committees must unite dockworkers with seafarers, railway workers, truck drivers, workers in military production and more broadly, turning the sentiment of opposition to war into a sustained international industrial and political struggle.

The fight against imperialist war cannot be separated from the fight against the capitalist system that produces it. This requires a socialist movement of the international working class, independent of the union bureaucracies and all capitalist political parties, directed against war, austerity and the governments responsible for them.

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