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Palestine solidarity

Support grows for BDS among grassroots of US Labor movement

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We, representatives of Palestinian civil society, call upon international civil society organizations and people of conscience all over the world to impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel.” This call for solidarity was issued in July 2005 by hundreds of Palestinian organizations, including all major trade unions. Systematic land confiscation, mass incarceration, house demolition, and routine attacks that leave hundreds of civilians dead have become part and parcel of daily life in Israel-occupied Palestine. The US-sponsored “peace talks” merely readjusted Israel’s occupation strategy: instead of deploying its army inside Palestinian cities and towns, Israel now surrounds them with checkpoints and walls; hinders Palestinians’ ability to work, study, and travel; and ensures that Palestine remains economically dependent on Israel. Recognizing that Israel has used negotiations to normalize and sustain the occupation, Palestinian civil society adopted the non-violent strategy of Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS) against its oppressor.

Compared to its international counterparts, the U.S. labor movement has been slow to embrace BDS. Michael Letwin, co-founder of the solidarity group Labor for Palestine, suggests this is the product of the American labor movement’s historical and continuing institutional support for Israel. The major US trade unions, Letwin says, have hundreds of millions of dollars in pension funds that are invested in Israel. Senior union leaders, in fear of alienating the Democratic Party and other political allies, frequently denounce BDS and criticize their counterparts around the world who support it.

On the grassroots level, however, things look different. This summer, hundreds of US labor leaders and organizers signed on to Labor for Palestine’s BDS statement. To add to these inspiring developments, on December 4th, UAW 2865, a union that represents 13,000 student workers across nine University of California campuses, will become the first U.S. union to hold a membership vote on joining the BDS movement. Similarly encouraging are recent solidarity actions in the San Francisco Bay Area, which show that, despite the ambivalence among some union leadership, rank-and-filers do not hesitate to stand in solidarity with the oppressed.

This August, during five days and four nights of demonstrations at the Port of Oakland, a diverse group of pro-Palestine and social justice activists under the banner of the Block the Boat coalition picketed several berths where the Israeli cargo ship Zim Piraeus attempted to dock. Activists returned to the port whenever workers were dispatched to unload it—in some cases in the middle of the night. Their numbers, which fluctuated between dozens and thousands, were not always sufficient to physically block all entrances to the vessel. Yet the action succeeded due to the support of Oakland’s longshoremen, members of the International Longshore Workers Union (ILWU) Local 10, who refused to cross the community picket lines. Even when police surrounded and split protestors on multiple occasions, workers refused to proceed and unload the ship. The ship eventually left port, unable to unload most of its cargo.

Israel’s massacre of more than 2,000 Palestinians this summer enraged Samantha Levens, an ILWU marine division rank-and-file member. Upon hearing that community members were organizing to block the Israeli liner, she prepared information fliers and distributed them to the longshoremen. “We weren’t saying “don’t handle the cargo,”” Levens says. “We were just giving information about the issue: what happened during the South African apartheid, the history of ILWU honoring community picket lines, and the position of international unions on the situation in Gaza.” The longshoremen’s reaction was positive. Even on the third and fourth days of picketing, she says, when members were eager to go back to work, “I mostly saw people becoming more supportive.”

Lifelong longshoreman, ILWU member, and activist Clarence Thomas explains: “I can’t be silent on these issues. I’m

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sure that there are longshoremen in Gaza who haven't been doing work in decades. Isn't it ironic that ships can go as they please into ports in Israel, but can't come into Gaza?" Solidarity, Thomas says, is a key value in labor activism: "Politics is one thing, but the aspiration and the communality of the working class is something else," he says, citing numerous solidarity actions ILWU has taken since the 1930s against oppressive regimes throughout the world. "As an African American man, I don't have any difficulty relating to the plight of the Palestinian people," he says. "I know what it means to be racially profiled and to be targeted by a militarized police. I've been pulled over many times. I had police guns pointed at me. I understand this phenomenon."

The strong parallels between state and racial oppression in Palestine and the US, respectively, are at the foundation of ILWU Local 10's policy of not crossing community picket lines. "We will not work under armed police escort" not with our experience with the police in this community," said Local 10 president Melvin MacKay, referring to the police's violent dispersal of anti-Iraq war pickets in 2003. "This action was always about building worker-community solidarity," assesses Reem Assil, one of the organizers of the port actions. "We hope to use it as an impetus for us to deepen work in educating workers about the issue and connecting it to their personal conditions."

Following the successful pickets in August, a second ship, the Zim Shanghai, again encountered community picket lines when it docked at the Port of Oakland on October 25. Once again, ILWU longshoremen stood down. As the first shifts to unload the Zim Shanghai were being met with pickets, all but one longshoremen refused to even take a job working the ship. The Shanghai left port without loading or unloading any cargo, thanks to the decision of ILWU rank-and-file members to once more respect a community picket line. When the Zim Beijing, a third ship scheduled to unload at the Port of Oakland, faced similar plans by the Block The Boat coalition in October, the ship diverted to avoid another humiliating defeat at the hands of a determined coalition of social justice activists and rank-and-file union members. With Block the Boat actions now spreading to other ports, it's difficult to see how Israel will weather the growing storm of BDS.

Palestine solidarity is gaining traction among academic workers too. This July, UAW Local 2865, which represents over 13,000 University of California student workers, took an important step towards joining the international BDS movement. In a public letter posted on the union's website, the UAW 2865 Joint Council (which includes 83 elected officers) declared its commitment "to support our Palestinian counterparts." The joint council pledged to bring a comprehensive BDS proposal to a general membership vote this year, a proposal that would include a call for academic boycott of institutions profiting from Israeli occupation and human rights abuses. In addition to soliciting its members' commitment to cut contact with such institutions, the union would also call on the UC system and UAW International to divest from companies complicit in the occupation.

This endorsement comes as no surprise: in the past few years, UAW 2865 has joined numerous struggles against oppression, including Occupy protests, UC student protests against fee-hikes, and last year's strike by UC custodians. Recently, it negotiated unprecedented protections for its undocumented immigrant members, queer and trans members, parents, and others.

In the midst of Israel's bombing of Gaza, the union's social justice committee carefully worded the call for BDS, outlining in detail the different dimensions of the Israeli occupation. They cited Israel's refusal to recognize Palestinian refugees' rights as indigenous people (specifically, their right to return to their land), the system of apartheid that Israel enforces in the West Bank and Gaza, and the second-class status of Israel's Palestinian citizens. The letter also mentions the connection between Israel's military industry and ethnic cleansing, the suppression of popular movements, and the oppression and criminalization of people all over the world. Concluding by quoting Desmond Tutu's "hope for a time when there are universal rights for all humans regardless of ethnicity, gender, or national, origin," the letter emphasizes that BDS does not target the Jewish people but instead targets Israel as "a colonial-apartheid state." The letter further highlights the unequivocal support BDS receives from Jewish organizations such as Jewish Voice for Peace and the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network. In fact, a few days after the letter's publication, more than forty current and former Jewish UAW 2865 members publicly endorsed this

BDS call.

The date for the general UAW 2865 membership vote has been set for December 4th. The official ballot language adopted by the Joint Council includes a single yes or no vote on whether the union should call on the US government to end military aid to Israel, and call on the University of California and UAW International to “divest...from Israeli state institutions and international companies complicit in severe and ongoing human rights violations as part of the Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people”. The ballot also includes a checkbox where members can pledge to refuse to “take part in any research, conferences, events, exchange programs, or other activities that are sponsored by Israeli universities complicit in the occupation of Palestine and the settler-colonial policies of the state of Israel”. The Joint Council also adopted several documents to educate members about the issues and explain the rationale for the vote; these include a BDS FAQ page, an academic boycott fact sheet, and a labor movement statement.

As in other social justice struggles, mobilization for BDS concerns not just Palestinian rights, but also the right of workers to act and express themselves politically. Purporting to represent UC Jewish students, several Zionist organizations have petitioned UC President Janet Napolitano, alleging that the Joint Council’s solidarity with Palestine creates “a hostile anti-Semitic environment” for Jewish students. Many Jewish students, however, find such allegations to be spurious and see the claims as dishonest attempts to silence criticism. The BDS movement is a fundamentally anti-racist movement, one that opposes racism in all of its forms, including and especially anti-Semitism. The President’s office has yet to respond to the petition, and one can only hope that Napolitano’s tenure will not add to her abysmal human rights record both as Governor of Arizona and Homeland Security Secretary.

The success of Oakland’s Block the Boat makes clear the centrality of organized labor to the global movement for Palestinian freedom. This, and the upcoming UAW 2865 vote on BDS, signal a sea change in US labor’s willingness to be complicit in apartheid and ethnic cleansing. As the larger Palestine solidarity movement picks up steam, we can expect the grassroots labor mobilization for Palestine to bear greater and greater fruits, until Israeli apartheid is no more.

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