

# workers power

National day of  
action for Gaza

04.11.23

As UK and US continue to support Israeli war crimes in Gaza...

## HOW CAN WE BUILD THE MOVEMENT?

**Hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets every weekend to stand with Palestinians against Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza. Meetings, rallies and assemblies are overflowing with people asking one question: what can we do to stop the war?**

Social media feeds are saturated with lists of companies that people can boycott like Starbucks, McDonalds and Disney. But this is only one part of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign, and arguably its least effective. The strength of the BDS movement lies in the potential for workers to take direct action themselves to impose a workers' boycott to cut the supply chains, stop the boats and end the funding which oils the Israeli war machine.

### Boycott

The call for a boycott of Israel was first raised by Palestinians in the aftermath of the Second Intifada. Its aim was to mobilise an international campaign against Israel's settlement and annexation of West Bank land whose enduring symbol is the infamous Apartheid Wall.

Political parties, trade unions, Palestinian farmers' organisations and NGOs recognised that 'all forms of international intervention and peace-making have until now failed to convince or force Israel to comply with humanitarian law, to respect fundamental human rights and to end its occupation and oppression of the people of Palestine.'

Modelled on the boycott of Apartheid South Africa, the campaign vowed to use

'non-violent punitive measures' to 'impose broad boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel' until it dismantled the wall, ended occupation and colonisation of Palestinian lands, granted full equality to Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel, and allowed 'the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and properties.'

In 2011 the coordinating body for the worldwide campaign founded the Palestinian Trade Union Coalition for BDS, which is by several British trade unions, the TUC and Scottish TUC, and some student unions. The campaign commits supporters to imposing boycotts and implement divestment initiatives against Israel.

### Consumer power or workers power?

BDS takes particular aim at the US and British multinationals, whose global reach and branding make them potent symbols of the symbiotic relationship of Israeli colonialism and western imperialism. The latest campaign targets Starbucks who are attacking their new workers' union for a pro-Palestine tweet. The most effective way to support those workers is to organise Starbucks workers here into a union and a boycott.

Symbolic actions play an important role in raising popular awareness of Israel's crimes

and the complicity of the British ruling class. But consumer boycotts can only reach a small layer of committed activists and will not bring down Israeli apartheid.

More decisive is the struggle to win the trade unions, universities, councils and Labour party to blanket imposition of the boycott. Many unions are affiliated but in practice they do little. But in the 1980s it was different, for example Portsmouth NHS workers refused to handle South African medical supplies, and 120 councils withdrew their pension funds from South Africa and banned its products from their offices and schools. This is the kind of action we should emulate today—because it works, and it works to strengthen our own class organisation and power in battles against our bosses.

The BDS campaign is right to demand that not only goods, but also the 'soft power' of the Zionist state—Israeli theatre companies, exhibitions, bands and academics are boycotted. Where there are questions about whether to endorse a pro-Palestinian artist or academic, the Palestine solidarity movement can come together with the trade union movement to decide whether to give them a pass.

The ruling class in Israel, the US and the UK hates the boycott because it raises consciousness of the Palestinians' oppression, and can damage links and support for Israel if it reaches a sufficient scale. If it really had no effect, the Tories wouldn't be constantly trying to ban it.

But a myth circulates in the boycott movement about the role it played in South Africa. The final crisis of the Apartheid regime was brought about by the explosive class struggle

of the workers and poor: the township revolts and the mass strikes of the Cosatu trade union federation. Collective action by the Palestinian workers and farmers will be the decisive force in their own liberation.

But international solidarity is a vital ally. It helps to break down some of the obstacles in the way of their struggle and promote the struggle against exploitation and oppression in the imperialist states. In the Arab countries solidarity with the Palestinians takes the form of a struggle against the western backed dictatorships who hate and fear the Palestinian cause because it is an inspiration to their own people's fight for freedom.

### Mass action

To sustain and deepen a mass movement against Israel's war, we need to organise. Action committees elected at meetings of activists, drawing from all those organisations that support the Palestinian cause can coordinate the campaign, drawing in communities, campuses and the labour movement.

We need to take the argument for the boycott to trade unions and Labour party branches. This can win workers' support and help break Starmer's party from its pro-Zionist stance. Pressure from below has already forced the Manchester and London mayors to break his ban on calling for a ceasefire.

In the universities, students should agitate and protest, oppose bans on pro-Palestine meetings, and challenge university investment policies.

Students, trade unions and the wider solidarity movement must urgently oppose the increasing state repression of our movement. We need a national defence campaign for all those victimised for standing with Palestine, like University of Manchester Friends of Palestine's Society President, Dana Abuqamar whose visa has been revoked by the government.

Demonstrations, sit-ins, and pickets show that the people stand with Palestine and reject our rulers' 'unconditional support' for Israel's crimes. But millions marching couldn't stop the Iraq war and on their own they won't stop Israel.

The decisive lever that can break Britain's vital support for the Zionist occupation and war is workers' action to impose the boycott. Already dock workers in South Africa, the US, Tunisia and Italy are refusing to handle military and other cargo bound for Italy. So have three major trade unions in Belgium. This is the example to follow.

- No cooperation with occupation!
- For a workers' blockade of Israel!
- End the war, end the occupation!

# FOR WORKERS' SANCTIONS AGAINST ISRAEL'S WAR

## Cut the supply chains, stop the factories and boats, end the funding!

Palestinian trade unions have issued a call for solidarity from the international labour movement, calling on workers to refuse to build or transport weapons to Israel, to break links with companies complicit in the occupation, and pressure their governments to end military trade and funding to Israel.

Israel carries out the colonisation of Palestine and the collective punishment of those who resist under the cover of unconditional military, financial and diplomatic support from the western powers.

The huge demonstrations against Israel's war demonstrate the gulf that separates the mass of ordinary workers and young people from our rulers' 'unconditional support' for Israel's crimes.

Faced with the UK's complicity with Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza, it is the duty of the British labour movement to act on the appeal for solidarity from our Palestinian sisters and brothers.

This takes on even more importance faced with the Labour party leadership's attempt to silence internal criticism of its pro-Zionist policy and ban public expressions of solidarity with Palestine.

### A workers' embargo

The RMT union's National Executive Committee has voted to support moves by railway workers to block arms shipments to Israel. All transport workers, including those in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, should refuse to handle goods or perform duties that could aid the Israeli war effort.

A first step has been taken by young trade unionists who blockaded a subsidiary of Israeli arms company Elbit in Kent on Thursday morning. Elbit has been the target of a long running campaign by direct action

group Palestine Action in Leicester, Bristol and elsewhere.

The value of UK military exports to Israel is low compared to other countries. But the UK hosts an arms industry of world importance, providing access to skilled workers, a chain of production, and research, exchange and collaboration with Israel's two most important security partners, the US and UK. This gives the UK importance to the Israeli war machine well beyond the monetary value of exports.

All Israel-UK trade contributes to supporting or legitimising Israel's occupation. But Israel is now a developed capitalist country, exporting pharmaceuticals, luxury goods and industrial products. Consumer boycotts are ineffective because they can't really dent the bosses' pockets, and, more importantly, they limit solidarity to the sphere of individual acts of conscience, instead of opening the road of struggle for workers' control in the workplace.

What we need is a campaign of workers' sanctions to boycott the production, transport and sale of all trade with the Apartheid state. Transport, logistics and distribution workers and their unions have the power to exercise supervision and control over goods bound for and from Israel. No worker should have to take responsibility for propping up an Israeli economy based on the expropriation, exploitation and plunder of the Palestinians.

The anti-union laws make such 'secondary action' illegal. They are designed to prevent workers taking effective solidarity action, not just within Britain, but internationally. But mass action can render the laws unenforceable. Trade union leaders should support all unofficial action and call on the TUC to back workers' sanctions against the apartheid state. At a minimum, Labour affiliated unions should speak out and demand Keir Starmer retract his shameful support for Israel's genocidal war. If he doesn't, unions should withhold funds and support.

The fight for effective solidarity with Palestine shows how workers can make the idea that 'their struggle is our struggle' reality, not just a slogan. Effective action means defying an unjust law, but it also means breaking with the trade union leaders who, when the time comes for action not words, put legality, and loyalty to capitalism and the British state before international solidarity. To fight for workers' control over production and transport means fighting for workers' control over our unions.

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