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Citation for published version (APA):
Ziadah, R. (2026). Labour Internationalism in a Time of Genocide: Beyond Episodic Solidarity. *The Global Labour Journal*, 109.

Citing this paper
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Download date: 14. Nov. 2026

Global Issues

Labour Internationalism in a Time of Genocide: Beyond Episodic Solidarity

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As Israel's military assault on Gaza escalated in late 2023, with mounting evidence of genocidal intention, Palestinian trade unions and professional associations issued an urgent appeal to workers around the world. They called on international trade unions and workers to "Stop Arming Israel," urging them to refuse participation in the manufacture, transport, and handling of weapons destined for the Israeli military (Workers in Palestine 2023). Although addressed globally, the call placed particular emphasis on labour movements in states supplying Israel with military and diplomatic support, including the United States, United Kingdom and countries across the European Union.

Rather than seeking general statements of solidarity, the appeal called on workers themselves to act, drawing on a long tradition of labour internationalism in which workers use their collective power to oppose war (Nastovski 2014). Palestinian unions invoked precedents including labour solidarity against apartheid South Africa and international worker support for struggles in Chile and Ethiopia. While focused on the arms trade and military supply chains, the appeal aimed to transform a moment of emergency into broad and durable support for Palestinian workers.

Crucially, the call centred Palestinian workers and the labour through which they sustain everyday life. This labour is often overlooked as attention focuses on military action and geopolitics. Yet Israel's system of control has long depended on controlling and fragmenting Palestinian labour through restrictions on movement, access to employment, and racialised labour markets (Farsakh 2005). Starting from Palestinian workers reframes labour internationalism not as an abstract moral commitment, but a politics rooted in the everyday conditions through which Palestinian workers sustain life and confront dispossession.

In the months following the Palestinian trade union appeal, unions and rank-and-file workers across several countries responded. For example, workers at the Port of Barcelona refused to handle weapons shipments bound for Israel and called for a ceasefire. Dockworkers in the Italian port of Genoa blockaded cargo destined for an Israeli shipping line, while transport unions in Belgium urged their members not to handle weapons shipments.

These responses have renewed attention to labour's potential role in opposing militarism. Yet the proliferation of statements and protests also raises deeper questions: What does it mean to organise labour solidarity during an ongoing catastrophe? And how can widespread anti-war sentiment be translated into sustained, rank-and-file organising within unions themselves?

The current moment reveals both the possibilities and the limits of labour internationalism. While Palestine has re-energised labour activism, it has also exposed persistent tensions within trade unionism, between emergency mobilisation and long-haul organising, and between episodic solidarity and the slow work of building durable worker power. The question, in other words, is not simply what unions can do about Palestine, but how workers can transform their organisations

so that internationalism becomes a sustained practice rather than a temporary response to emergency.

Situating the Present: Labour and Palestine in Historical Perspective

Labour solidarity with Palestine is not new. Palestinian workers and trade unions have long situated their struggle within broader traditions of anti-colonial and labour internationalism. Labour organising among Palestinian workers emerged in the early twentieth century and expanded significantly with the development of formal unions (Al'Sanah et al. 2021). These unions developed relationships with international labour federations and consistently raised questions of the plight of Palestinian workers in international fora. More recently, a reference point was the 2005 Palestinian civil society call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), issued by Palestinian civil society organisations, including trade unions.

There were also important moments of international labour action before the current genocide. In February 2009, members of the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) refused to unload a ship carrying Israeli goods in Durban following Israel's assault on Gaza. In June 2010, after the attack on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, the Swedish Dockworkers' Union announced a blockade of Israeli ships and goods for one week. In Oakland, California, members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) in 2010 and again in 2014 honoured community picket lines that prevented the unloading of vessels operated by the Israeli shipping company Zim.

Yet despite these important actions, labour solidarity with Palestine has often remained sporadic, concentrated in leadership-level statements and resolutions rather than sustained workplace organising. While the present wave of engagement builds on these earlier efforts, it confronts a familiar problem, how to extend solidarity beyond moments of mobilisation and embed it in everyday union practice.

Logistics, Militarism, and the Question of Structural Leverage

The current moment has renewed attention to logistics and militarised production as sites of labour solidarity. Scholarship over the past two decades has emphasised the centrality of business logistics, alongside the strategic position of workers within internationalised supply chains (Chua et al. 2018). These discussions are often framed through the concept of structural power (Silver 2003), referring to the capacity of workers to disrupt circulation by virtue of their position within key sectors.

Recent labour mobilisation around Gaza has highlighted these dynamics. Actions by dockworkers, transport workers, and others involved in the movement of goods, though highly geographically uneven, have demonstrated labour's potential to intervene directly in the infrastructures that sustain war. Refusals to handle weapons, protests at arms factories, and organising against defence-linked research in universities, point toward forms of action that move beyond declaratory solidarity to target the circuits of militarised production.

Historical experience helps explain why these sectors attract particular attention. Maritime labour has long been associated with traditions of internationalism and remains comparatively union-dense. Dockworkers and seafarers have played visible roles in anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles, including boycotts of South African cargo (Cole 2018).

Yet structural leverage does not automatically translate into political action. The ability of workers to act collectively depends on organisation, political consciousness, and the presence of

rank-and-file networks capable of sustaining action over time. The sites where disruption appears most possible are not simply strategic locations, but terrains of social struggle (Chua and Bosworth 2023), where the realisation of that potential depends on how workers are organised, the power relations within the workplace, and the political pressures they confront. As Fox-Hodess (2023) argues, there are no "magic bullets", structural leverage does not mechanically produce collective capacity.

In practice, workers in logistics and transport operate within legal and political constraints that are difficult to navigate in isolation. Evidence from the Block the Boat for Palestine actions shows that even bold actions, such as declining to handle cargo in response to community picket lines, are limited when confined to a single site (Fox-Hodess and Ziadah 2025). Ships can be diverted, and individual branches left exposed to retaliation. For this reason, labour organisers have emphasised the need to coordinate action across multiple locations, so that disruption cannot simply be rerouted.

Moreover, an exclusive focus on so-called strategic sectors risks obscuring that different forms of leverage are possible. Public sector workers, teachers, healthcare workers, and others are often among the most unionised in many countries and play critical roles in shaping public discourse. Their workplaces may not be sites of logistical disruption in the same way as ports or transport hubs, but they are nonetheless central to how solidarity is sustained and made visible. For example, through teachers' unions passing ceasefire resolutions and connecting to teachers unions in Palestine and healthcare workers organising protests to demand an end to attacks on medical infrastructure.

A narrow focus on disruption at key chokepoints risks overlooking other forms of organising that are essential to building a broader labour politics. The challenge is to connect different sites of organisation, across sectors, workplaces, and forms of leverage, into a collective practice of internationalism. As Al Sanah argues (2026), this requires a "grounded approach to labour organising that operates across multiple scales, from workplaces to union structures, and is rooted in the everyday realities of Palestinian workers."

In this sense, moments of disruption, at ports, factories, or research institutions, should be understood as openings rather than endpoints. They reveal the latent power embedded in workers' positions within the political economy of war, but realising that power at scale depends on the slower work of organising across sectors and over time, building workplace committees, developing internationalist political education, and cultivating relationships that can sustain collective action.

The historical experience of labour solidarity in the anti-apartheid struggle is instructive here. The effectiveness of those campaigns did not rest on singular moments of disruption alone, but on the gradual development of a broader political consensus within the labour movement - one in which different groups of workers, from dockworkers to postal workers to retail workers, could act in coordinated and mutually reinforcing ways. What emerged was not simply a series of spectacular actions, but a politics in which it became common sense within workplaces not to handle goods linked to apartheid. If this kind of common sense has yet to take hold in relation to Palestine, the lesson of anti-apartheid labour organising is that it can be built - not only through moments of disruption, but through the kind of long-haul organising that makes those moments possible and sustains them over time.

Limits of 'Bread-and-Butter' Unionism

Organising around Palestine, particularly efforts to disrupt arms trade and military supply chains, confronts a deeper contradiction within contemporary trade unionism. Beyond the surface level

of disruption, it exposes how unions are embedded within the very war economies they are being asked to challenge. Efforts to organise against militarism take place from within labour unions whose members' jobs are tied, directly or indirectly, to military production, logistics, and state contracts.

Campaigns targeting arms factories and military supply chains are often framed by union leaderships as threats to jobs and local industry. This reflects a familiar "bread-and-butter" approach to unionism, in which the defence of wages, jobs, and employment is treated as the primary task, largely irrespective of what is being produced (Hanieh, Knox, Ziadah 2025). In this context, efforts to oppose militarism can be recast as undermining workers' livelihoods. This dynamic is particularly visible in unions representing workers in defence industries. In the UK, for example, Sharon Graham, General Secretary of Unite, has argued for increased domestic defence procurement as a means of securing jobs and industrial capacity (Graham 2025). Here, the protection of employment becomes tied to the expansion of militarism, narrowing labour politics to negotiating within war economies rather than contesting their reproduction.

Organising around Palestine has forced debate not only over whether unions should oppose war, but over their relationship to the forms of production that sustain it. In doing so, it has revived questions of arms conversion, how existing industrial capacity, skills, and investment might be redirected away from military production towards socially useful forms of work. While such discussions are not new within labour movements (Stavrianakis 2024), they take on renewed urgency, as workers confront their own entanglement in the infrastructures of militarism. In this sense, what is at stake is not only solidarity with Palestine, but the capacity of labour movements to articulate and organise around alternative economic priorities beyond those structured by war.

Organising in a Time of Genocide

Organising in the midst of an ongoing catastrophe produces a fundamental temporal tension. The scale and immediacy of violence generate urgent demands for action, statements, boycotts, and visible solidarity. Yet the forms of power required to intervene in the infrastructures of war depend on organising processes that unfold over longer time horizons.

When genocidal military violence is continuous and highly visible, calls for slow, patient organising can appear insufficient. At the same time, without long-haul organising, the capacity for disruption at a large scale remains limited. The risk is that solidarity becomes confined to episodic mobilisation, moments of visibility that do not consolidate into lasting forms of worker power.

In many cases, unions have responded to demands from their members around Palestine through declaratory politics - resolutions, public statements, and symbolic endorsements. These interventions matter on some level. They can shift discourse, create openings, and provide political opportunities for activists to discuss Palestine in their local branches. But they are not, in themselves, the end goal. Motions, for example, are most effective when they form part of a broader organising strategy, used not only to secure a declaration, but to initiate ongoing work within unions. The point is not to treat such actions as endpoints, but to think strategically about how they can be converted into organising processes that extend beyond the immediate crisis.

There are no singular solutions to the problem of how labour solidarity can move beyond episodic and declaratory responses. There are no shortcuts and no "magic" sectors capable of carrying labour internationalism on their own. Strategic leverage in logistics or defence industries is significant, but it remains contingent on broader organisational capacity. At the same time, a narrow "bread-and-butter" focus on jobs and contracts limits the scope of labour politics, tying trade unions to war economies rather than challenging them. Addressing these tensions requires

connecting action across sectors and building forms of organising capable of sustaining and generalising solidarity over time.

Whether this moment leads to lasting change remains uncertain. The proliferation of actions, blockades, and organising initiatives signals real possibility. But their durability will depend on the ability to bridge urgency and duration, to connect moments of disruption to longer-term organising, to move across sectors, and to build forms of internationalism that are embedded in the everyday life of unions. The task, in other words, is to transform solidarity from an urgent response into a sustained practice.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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