

# *Israel, Gaza and the Unions: The Need for a Global Fight-Back Against Anti-Semitism*

Eric Lee

Fifteen years after the historic Oslo accords, Israel finds itself isolated as never before in the international labour movement.

The erosion of support for the Jewish state has not been affected in the slightest by Israeli concessions over the years. The withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon, the closing of all Jewish settlements in Gaza and the withdrawal of troops, the acceptance of the right of Palestinians to their own state, the ongoing attempts to reach agreement with the PLO – none of these has slowed down the growing hostility toward Israel on the Left and in the trade unions.

By the end of 2008, Israel had in its Kadima-Labour coalition the most dovish government it had ever known. First Ariel Sharon and later Ehud Olmert spoke in a way that was unheard of except on the far Left only fifteen years earlier.

None of this affected the growing calls for boycotts and divestment targeted at the 'apartheid regime' in Israel. It was as if the anti-Israel left were frozen in time, with events taking place in the real world having no influence at all.

Most of that Left was increasingly pro-Hamas and unfriendly not only towards Israel, but also towards the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority. The Left was choosing a sexist and homophobic clerical-fascist movement above the more secular (albeit corrupt) Fatah.

During the period leading up to the Gaza war, the focus of attention for many in the labour movement who care about Israel has been the academic boycott. In focussing primarily on that, in a sense we've taken our eyes off the ball.

The real battle is taking place in the giant industrial unions – not inside academia. The threat to Israel comes not from far Left academics with time on their hands to write long anti-Zionist manifestos. It comes from dock workers in Durban.

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### Operation Cast Lead

Israel's attack on Gaza at the end of 2008 was a legitimate act of self-defense. That's not just the view of the Israeli Right – that's the broad consensus of opinion inside Israel, including the Israeli Left. On the eve of the attack, even the dovish Meretz party called on the Government to use the military in Gaza. And throughout the war, Israel's main peace organization, Peace Now, refused to take to the streets in protest. (Smaller peace groups did, however, protest.)

The roots of the conflict go back to the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. Though the Israeli Left criticized the Sharon government for doing this unilaterally, they did welcome the decision to end the occupation. What they did not expect was that a few months later Hamas would violently wrest control of the strip from Fatah, and launch an ongoing rocket and mortar barrage directed against Israel.

In mid-2008 Hamas declared a unilateral cease-fire, which it used to re-arm. The day that cease-fire ended, it resumed rocket attacks. In the end, something like 6,000 rockets and mortars were fired against Israel. The firing of those rockets, which targeted civilians, was a war crime, as was Hamas' use of human shields during the Israeli assault.

Israel's ferocious response to those attacks can be debated – and indeed within Israel there was criticism over the conduct of the war. But what we saw on the Left outside of Israel was not criticism of this or that aspect of Israel's attempt to defend itself.

Instead we saw the Left *taking sides*, openly supporting Hamas, and moving far beyond legitimate criticism of the Jewish state. We saw an unprecedented rise in anti-Semitism inside the labour movement which if not confronted head-on will lead to disaster.

### The unions react

At first, unions around the world hardly reacted at all to the Israeli attack on Gaza. This is probably due to the fact that it took place over the Christmas break. Still, the Brussels-based International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) representing all the major national trade union centres, was quick to issue a statement which called for peace – but also blamed Hamas for triggering the current wave of violence and reiterating its support for a two-state solution.

The global union federations remained silent, with only the International Federation of Journalists issuing a statement condemning the attack on a television station in Gaza and warning journalists of the risks of reporting in a war zone.

The only ITUC affiliate to respond quickly to Israel's attack was the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) which demanded that its government break off all ties with Israel, which it saw as the aggressor.

The Histadrut, Israel's national trade union centre, said nothing at all to the world during the first few weeks of the fighting, nor could anyone tell what the union was thinking as its website remained 'under construction' the entire time. Had the war ended after a week, we could have described the trade union response as muted. But the war did not end after a week.

### Hostility mounts

As the war dragged on, and even after the announcements of separate cease-fires by Israel and Hamas, hostility towards the Jewish state mounted. In a couple of cases, that hostility led unions to cross the line from legitimate criticism of Israeli policies over to outright anti-Semitism. The first example came from Italy and received considerable press attention. A union in Rome, infuriated by Israel's actions, called for a boycott of Jewish stores. Not Israeli stores – *Jewish* ones. The reaction of the Italian political leadership (including the mayor of Rome) and of most national trade unions was to condemn the union for crossing a line.

The far more serious problem arose in South Africa in early February. COSATU took the decision to intensify its campaign of solidarity with the Palestinians following the cease-fires in Gaza – but did so by virtually declaring war on the country's Jewish community.

'We want to convey a message to the Jews in SA that our 1.9 million workers who are affiliated to COSATU are fully behind the people of Palestine,' said Bongani Masuku, COSATU's International Relations Secretary.

Masuku's reference to the Jewish community was not an isolated incident. He clarified COSATU's position, saying that 'any business owned by Israel supporters will be a target of workers in South Africa.' Note the use of the term 'Israel supporters' which is essentially a code for 'Jews.'

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COSATU moved beyond mere words by organizing a week of action in support of Palestine – the first event of which was a protest outside the offices of the South African Zionist Federation and Jewish Board of Deputies.

To justify a demonstration at a Jewish, rather than Israeli, site, the union noted that 'both these organisations unquestioningly supported the recent Israeli attacks against Gaza and supported the massacre of civilians and the attacks on schools, mosques, ambulances and UN refugee centres.'

The Palestine Solidarity Campaign, which is co-sponsoring the week of action with COSATU, claimed that the local Jewish community was 'aiding and abetting Israel's actions' and was therefore a legitimate target of protest. South African Jewish leaders expressed concern but not panic at the news. Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein called COSATU's actions a 'disgrace and immoral' and racism in its worst form.

The trade union demonstrators were met by a pro-Israel counter-demonstration and according to news reports 'insults were traded, flags were burnt and items were thrown by both sides.' Police turned away several bus loads of anti-Israel union demonstrators.

Meanwhile, the Histadrut protested the decision by the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union to refuse to offload an Israeli ship. Avi Edri, who heads up the Israeli transport workers union, noted that the South African unions are so violently anti-Israel that they even opposed an internationally-brokered cooperation agreement signed with the Palestinian transport workers union.

Several unions in other countries have expressed their support for the Durban dock workers. The Maritime Union of Australia which waged an historic fight against the right-wing Howard government in the late 1990s, wrote on its website that Western Australian members of union 'have announced they support sanctions and other actions against Israel.'

In the United States, some leaders of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, representing west coast dock workers, issued a statement expressing their solidarity with the Durban dock workers.

Several weeks ago it was reported that Greek dock workers threatened to block a ship carrying weapons to Israel.

The decision by the Durban dock workers to block the offloading of an Israeli ship and COSATU's deliberate targeting of the Jewish community represent a significant escalation of anti-Israel activity in the trade union movement and could spark similar actions in other countries.

Unlike the threatened academic boycott of Israel which has gotten more media attention, this would represent a genuine threat to the Israeli economy.

### **The need for a fightback**

The response of organisations which are tasked with defending Israel inside the labour movement was slow and ineffective.

It took the Histadrut weeks to issue its first statement which was such an obvious rehash of Israeli government propaganda that it backfired – to the extent that it was seen at all.

Groups like the Jewish Labor Committee in the USA and Trade Union Friends of Israel in Britain were also very slow to issue statements, and after issuing such statements seemed to run out of ideas of anything further to do.

This is clearly not the case with the pro-Palestinian groups in the labour movement, which have taken to the streets and mounted an ever-more effective campaign to promote boycotts and divestment from Israel.

Part of the problem is that while the pro-Hamas groups are operating globally with a single line and a very clear agenda, the pro-Israel groups operate nationally, if at all. There is no global co-ordination and little exchange of ideas and information.

There is also a lack of, for a better word, a *fighting spirit*.

This is not the case in the Jewish community as a whole, which did mount several very large demonstrations in Britain during the war, and which did challenge COSATU demonstrators in South Africa.

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But it should not be the task solely for the Jewish community to combat rising anti-Semitism.

Trade unionists themselves, Jews and non-Jews, should be spearheading a globally-coordinated effort to fight back. They should be able to mount an aggressive campaign to make the case that Israel has the right and duty to defend itself, and that its main enemy (Hamas) is a fascist terrorist organisation and a natural enemy of the unions and the Left.

Unless such an effective campaign is mounted – and soon – what happened in February in Durban will repeat itself with increasing frequency around the world.

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