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**France - Palestine Solidarity**

# **French Dockers Block Weapons to Israel**

- Features -

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**On Wednesday 4 June, workers at a port in southern France searched a cargo ship headed for Haifa — and found it carried 19 pallets of machine-gun parts. They blocked the shipment, refusing to be complicit in Israel's war crimes.**

This Wednesday [4 June], three months into Israel's total blockade on Gaza, the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) union of port workers at Fos-sur-Mer, northwest of Marseille, announced they had set aside nineteen pallets of ammunition belt links from a cargo ship headed to Haifa. In a statement, they said: "The dockers and port workers of the Gulf of Fos will not participate in the ongoing genocide orchestrated by the Israeli government."

While searching the cargo, they discovered two other containers, with canon parts manufactured by engineering firm Aubert & Duval, also destined for Israel. The next day they released a second statement: "These two containers have also been blocked. . . . The workers of Fos do not wish to be complicit in the massacres and human losses. If others wish to pass this type of merchandise through our port, we will respond in kind in the coming days and weeks by mobilizing all the dock and port workers of the gulf of Fos."

Thirty miles away in Marseille, 400 people gathered on Thursday evening on the sunny square of Joliette. "We're here to salute the actions of the dockworkers, who are showing us an exemplary fight against the genocide," said one activist with Stop Arming Israel, a nationwide collective organizing against France's military links with Israel.

Thus far, union tactics have been mostly absent from the Palestine movement in France. The dockers' announcements have been met with much support from pro-Palestinian activists, but also from other unions at an unprecedented level, speaking to a deeper shift in public opinion. The echo has been such that Sophie Binet, the national leader of the CGT, has called on the government to halt arms shipments to Israel.

The reaction to the southern dockers' actions speaks both to the potential of these tactics in the eyes of the pro-Palestine movement, and to the lore surrounding their anti-militarist history. By Friday, they had obtained a victory: the Israel-bound ship had sailed on without its military cargo, to be returned to sender.

This isn't the first time that dockers in Fos, an industrial area in the south of France, have taken a stand against weapons shipments to Israel. In April, after learning about a ship allegedly carrying F-35 parts to Israel, they threatened to stop work. The company, Maersk, agreed to let them examine the containers, which turned up clean. The ship was delayed by several days, but a week later, Maersk discretely removed Marseille from its route to Haifa, assuring its clients that it sought to "keep your supply chain moving with as little disruption as possible."

It seems that there is some justification for fears that these French dockworkers will strike at the heart of shipping firms' operations. This week, dockers in Genoa, Italy, the ship's next stop, announced they would follow in the CGT's footsteps. Dockers in Piraeus, Greece, also released a statement. Along with Secretary-General Binet, other sections of the CGT have expressed support, including the union representing customs agents, who work closely with the dockers, and have demanded that arms exports to Israel be banned outright. "It's the first time our union has taken a position on the war since 2023," says Oliver Balzer, a union secretary at the CGT-Douanes. "Although individual members have been talking about it for a long time, the fact that our docker comrades are putting themselves forward helps us assert ourselves, too."

While president Emmanuel Macron, along with other European leaders, has recently been adopting a more critical

tone on Benjamin Netanyahu's government, the news that France continues to ship weapons to Israel via revelations from Disclose media (despite official denials) sparked outrage. "It's total hypocrisy," says Balzer. "We have the tools to block these weapons." Several hours after Disclose's article was published, the dockers at Fos-sur-Mer announced that the cargo would not be moving.

## A Combative History

These actions strike a historical nerve, mostly going back to the Marseille port blockages against France's colonial war in Indochina. In 1949, two years into the war, the Marseille port was a military hub: ammunitions and soldiers went out, and the coffins came in, the bodies sometimes spilling out "like common goods, like dates, like potatoes, like oranges," as one former docker remembered in an interview with France Inter. In December 1949, the dockers, encouraged by the CGT and the Parti communiste français (PCF), voted that not one more weapon would leave from any Mediterranean port.

The forty-day strike was brutally attacked on several fronts, with repression from the police to the Corsican mafia to the anti-communist American Irving Brown, who helped create a concurrent union to the CGT, Force Ouvrière, with CIA funding. Marseille's role as France's main port made it a strategic center not only for the country's empire, but also for NATO, as the site of passage for Marshall Plan exports. Worker resistance posed a serious risk.

Synonymous with hard strikes and working-class pride, the dockers of Marseille are also symbolic of the city's colonial history. Many West and Central Africans worked as dockers and had a lower status than their French counterparts. Not many Africans were in the unions, and some were even employed to break the dockers' strikes in 1949, feeding into racist narratives about immigrant workers.

Their precarious existence, marked by racism and violence, is vibrantly captured in Claude McKay's *Banjo*, or in *Le Docker noir* by Ousmane Sembène, the Senegalese filmmaker ("Europe is not my center"), who also worked the docks in his youth after his time in the colonial army during World War II. He, too, joined the CGT and the PCF, and was active in organizing against France's colonial wars in Indochina, then in Algeria.

Today the figure of the dirt-poor, politically combative Marseille docker belongs mostly to the past: Marseille is no longer the bustling port it once was, and the dockers are much more concentrated in Fos-sur-Mer. But the stories remain and are still proudly claimed by the CGT. "We've always been opposed to wars everywhere in the world, and today, the workers don't want to participate in arms shipments and in the genocide in Gaza," dockers' union secretary Christophe Claret told Maritima.

In 2019, the same history was cited when the union refused to load French-made weapons to Saudi Arabia, destined to fight Yemeni civilians. Two years ago, they were on the front line when police tried to force strikers back to work at Fos-sur-Mer, during the national movement against Macron's pension reform. That same year, they also supported students who occupied their campus at Aix-Marseille University, some of whom showed up to the rally on Thursday, eager to profess this shared history.

## A New Phase?

Although the dockers' statements have elicited much enthusiasm in the pro-Palestine movement, the question remains: How will their involvement develop? The dockers themselves have remained mysterious, absent from

Thursday's rally and refusing to speak to the press, and Balzer, the customs union secretary, admits he'd be skeptical about calling for a strike at this point.

But Fatou, a hospital worker and activist with Stop Arming Israel who declined to give her last name due to her job, thinks that the dockworkers' actions have the potential to open something deeper. "The dockers have said they would consider striking, it's a huge opening," she told Jacobin at Thursday's rally. "It might have an echo in the health care and education sectors."

Despite continued repression from Macron's government, targeting trade unionists like CGT secretary Jean-Paul Delescaut or Sud railworker Anasse Kazib, solidarity with Palestine lives on in France and is finding new expressions. Recently, education unions denounced the repression against students and teachers, organizing rallies in support of a teacher suspended for holding a minute of silence for Palestine in class. Today the symbol of the Fos-sur-Mer dockers, steeped in the myth and history of an anti-militarist working class, might spark something beyond folklore alone.

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Source: [Jacobian](#).

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