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Sweden - Palestine Solidarity

Swedish Dockworkers' Union Leader Sacked for Gaza Solidarity Action

- Features -

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SECURITY IS A funny elixir. The more of it that you have, the less there is for someone else... or that's the conventional wisdom anyway. Erik Helgeson's experience, however, proves otherwise.

Erik, 42, is the vice-chair of the [Swedish Dockworkers' Union](#) and he cared deeply for the security of his members — and also for the safety of Gazan civilians, some of whom have been killed by weapons which may have passed through the port of Gothenburg, where he has worked for 20 years.

Erik cared so much in fact that in February of this year, he led a symbolic six-day blockade of 20 Swedish ports against military cargos destined for Israel. His employer — DFDS — responded by [sacking him](#), claiming that he had broken Sweden's [Security Protection Act](#).

The law, passed in 2018, is meant to protect “security-sensitive activities against espionage, sabotage [and] terrorist offences,” but, Erik says, its use against union activists raises the question of whose security the company — and the law — are really protecting?

“Some employers seem to see this law as a tool not only to protect the ports and other companies from criminal infiltration, but to give them carte blanche to do whatever they want, to people who they want to get rid of for other reasons,” he tells Equal Times. “I’m worried that a lot of other employers are looking at this — seeing that the case against me is so thin — and drawing up their own plans to take out union leaders.”

Erik's union had a tradition of international solidarity going back to the Vietnam War and [1973 Chilean coup](#), in which a generation of trade union activists were murdered.

In 2010, he helped to load cargo onto the ill-fated [freedom flotilla](#) which tried to break Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip. Israeli soldiers boarded the humanitarian mission and killed nine of the activists on board. According to [evidence presented to the International Court of Justice](#) some “were shot multiple times, in the face while trying to cover their heads, or from behind, or after they surrendered and pleaded with the Israeli Defence Forces to stop firing at civilians.”

Outraged, Erik tried to sail on the next flotilla but the lead vessel was [sabotaged in Greece](#). Finally, he visited the Strip in November 2011.

“It was a calm period, but they bombed the police station while I was there,” he says. “There was still a low-level brutality about everything. People were struggling in their own way — some union activists were also struggling with the Hamas authorities — but the main issue was the blockade of course, the record unemployment levels, the isolation, the blatant poverty in refugee camps — and also young children drinking unfit water and suffering diseases. It really made a mark on me.”

Israeli leaders at that time justified the blockade of Gaza as a [national security issue](#). But the denial of any common security to Gazans would ultimately spur an attack that eviscerated Israel's own sense of security.

Back in Sweden, Erik threw himself into union activity at the port, leading an industrial dispute with Maersk between

2015 and 2017 which turned into a six-week lock out, and then a national dispute. “We responded with the threat of an indefinite strike and eventually, the employers caved,” Erik remembers. Eventually, the union won a national collective bargaining agreement (CBA).

This, he believes, is the real reason why DFDS wanted him out of the docks and, also, why they have been unable to provide details to the union, journalists or the legal authorities of how national security had been threatened by the dockworkers' action.

When asked for specifics of how the union had threatened security, “management was very vague,” Erik says. “Their line of argument was to say: ‘We’ve had all these calls from different actors’ — they implied the military had been in contact with them — but they wouldn’t provide any specifics, details or evidence. Our view, then and now, is that this was a smokescreen.”

The employers claim against Erik — that he was responsible for dockworkers examining cargo trailers and containers — are disputed by Erik and the union, on the grounds that the dockers had neither the capacity nor intent to do so. The action was largely a symbolic bid to kickstart debate about Israel’s conduct in Gaza, they say.

The police authority and Sweden’s Chancellor of Justice rejected the company’s request to investigate Erik’s behaviour, as they [found no suspicion of criminal activity](#). But that did not stop the menacing messages addressed to Helgeson, which had begun arriving after DFDS put out a press release saying he had been sacked for reasons of national security.

“We had threats — including one death threat — and then harassment from anonymous people with apparently far right views, mainly on voicemail,” Erik says. “It scared the hell out of me because there might be ‘lone wolf’ types in these groupings on a crusade for national security. I was really scared that I would be tarred and feathered in the press and that that might attract the worst lunatics out there, which would be a threat to my family and kids.”

A “moral obligation” to strike

Death threats against peace advocates have been widespread since October 7 2023, and the UN’s special rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories Francesca Albanese [has also been a victim](#). While she was not familiar with the details of Erik’s case, she told *Equal Times* that workers’ solidarity protests such as [recent dockers’ actions in Morocco](#) were sorely needed.

“In a time of crisis, when crimes against humanity are being committed, it is absolutely necessary for workers to go on strike,” she said. “This is a moral obligation on all of us. It is also our system that is complicit in what Israel is doing.”

“History will judge us and those who are silent today — it is also on them. We need to use our power and our capacity to provoke a change. If we are united, we are much more powerful than the establishment itself.”

She added that if she were a dockworker “contributing to the slaughter of children, mothers and grandparents in Gaza... my mental health would have been much more damaged than it is now, as a chronicler of genocide.”

The wealth of information on how participating in oppression degrades the quality of life for oppressor and victim alike

is an under-represented aspect of the security issue.

In 1974, British workers threatened by redundancy in an arms factory run by Lucas Aerospace tacitly acknowledged this when they set up an unofficial trade union '[Combine](#)' to [draft alternative plans](#) for socially useful production.

Their idea is currently

More broadly, the concept that there can be no long-term security for only one side in a dispute was reinforced at a conference organised by the International Peace Bureau (IPB), the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and the Olof Palme International Centre in April titled [Common Security Conference 2025: Redefining Security for the 21st Century-><https://ipb.org/events/common-security-conference-2025-redefining-security-for-the-21st-century/>] enjoying a renaissance. As Omar Faruk Osman, the general secretary of the Federation of Somali Trade Unions (FESTU) said speaking at the conference: "No country, community or individual can be truly safe unless we all are."

"When workers are hungry and unemployed and excluded from decision-making, they're vulnerable to being used in conflicts," he added. "Promoting decent work is promoting peace."

The "presence of justice"

Far from being a zero-sum game, security within the IPB's worldview must be enjoyed commonly by all parties to a dispute. Otherwise, the imbalance will sooner or later swing the protagonists back into conflict, with destructive impacts for all.

"The peace we seek is not just an absence of guns but the presence of justice," Osman said. 'Common security' speaks our language and reflects our aspirations."

In its absence, unilateral security manoeuvres are always liable to boomerang back against their initiators, as Erik's case shows all too well. As we go to press, Sweden's dockworkers are preparing for a potential strike over a contractual issue that may prevent Erik from getting his job back.

Sweden's unique labour laws only allow workers to strike to obtain a collective bargaining agreement (CBA), which then settles subsequent disputes without recourse to industrial action. But the Swedish dockers' national CBA ran out at the end of April and industrial action is now very much on the agenda.

Under Swedish labour law, even if Erik wins his case for unfair dismissal in a labour court, his employer can "buy out" his contract with a monthly stipend for each year worked, while maintaining his dismissal. The sum involved would be "peanuts" to a multinational like DFDS, according to Erik.

However, Martin Berg, the chair of the Swedish Dockworkers' Union tells Equal Times that in discussions over the next CBA: "One of our primary demands will be a regulation to protect our union's trustees — if they win in the labour court — so they can't be subjected to cheap buy outs. Everyone who does work for the union should be protected so that if an employer chooses to buy you out, they also have to pay the union a hefty fine related to company turnover in the previous year. If we go into an industrial conflict for our CBA, we will strike for it and then under Swedish law, every union is entitled to support us with sympathy actions. We will also request solidarity action from dockworkers in other countries."

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As it turns out the less security that Sweden's dockworkers have, the less security their employers will enjoy too. Any Swedish boss who thought that sacking their union activists would solidify their profit expectations may be about to get a rude wake up call.

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Source: [Against the Current](#).

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