

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article9053>



Sweden - Palestine Solidarity

# He's suddenly a risk to 'national security'

- Features -

Publication date: Wednesday 18 June 2025

---

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights  
reserved

---

**“When you’re a dock worker, it’s very hard to look the other way,” explained Erik Helgeson. Having spent the last 20 years working at the port of Gothenburg, unloading everything from bananas to trucks, he sees the commodities shipped to and from Sweden up close.**

“Let’s say you’re handling South African cargo or Chilean fruit,” Helgeson said. “It’s very obvious that you’re contributing to trade that is upholding a fascist or an apartheid regime.”

The Swedish Dockworkers’ Union – of which Helgeson is national deputy chair and spokesperson – has a long history of fighting against injustice. But now, Helgeson is fighting for himself: in February, when the union blockaded military cargo to and from Israel, he was fired from his job.

Given the close proximity to the country’s imports and exports, it’s no surprise that members of the Swedish Dockworkers’ Union voted last December to block the handling of military equipment destined for or originating from Israel.

“When at least 3,000 Palestinian children under the age of five have been killed, our members refuse to accept ‘business as usual,’” said Helgeson in December.

Dock workers anticipated pushback to the blockade, which swiftly arrived in the form of a legal challenge to their action from employer association Ports of Sweden. Following a hearing on the anticipated consequences of the blockade, the country’s specialised labour court, which rules on labour disputes, gave workers the green light for their six-day boycott of military cargo.

Then came the unexpected. The same day that the court handed down its judgement, Helgeson was fired by DFDS, the Danish international shipping and logistics firm that owns the majority of the Gothenburg ro-ro terminal – a term for the specialised vessels known as roll-on roll-off ships – where Helgeson worked.

“They called me at eight o’clock on a Sunday night and said I had to go to a meeting on Monday morning,” he said. At the meeting, DFDS said that the termination was the result of a breach of security and disloyalty, and informed Helgeson that they had filed a police report against him in connection with the charges.

That same day, DFDS put out a press release stating that Helgeson’s dismissal was “with reference to national security,” using language from Sweden’s national security law. Sweden joined NATO in 2024 and port workers were given enhanced responsibilities for security.

This new allegation was a shock to Helgeson, and far more serious than the one that had been levelled at him during the meeting.

The employer had initially explained Erik’s termination with reference to port security, which, Helgeson explained, covers misdemeanours like “showing up in the port without bringing your ID, but you still manage to get in.” That allegation was a world away from the one the company is now making publicly: that he was a national security threat.

Despite the severity of this new allegation, the police quickly made clear that they would not pursue charges against

Helgeson, stating publicly that there was no case to answer.

In spite of this, the company has maintained its decision to dismiss Helgeson, all while refusing to expand on its reasons. Helgeson's story – the sacking of an elected union official over Gaza – has shocked not only Sweden, but become a global news item.

"It is normally the employer who has the obligation to provide objective reasons to take away the livelihood of an employee and union representative," said the Swedish Dockworkers' Union in a statement.

"However, given the media exposure that Erik has been subjected to, followed by weeks in which the employer has refused to comment or specify its accusations, it is instead the employee who must publicly try to prove his innocence in order to defend himself."

While unwanted, Helgeson noted that the media attention has helped draw attention to Sweden's trade relationship with Israel: "People in Sweden have an impression that we only sell to neutral countries, or countries that are not engaged in war," he said. "People didn't know what was going on."

While Sweden does export weapons to Israel, they are outnumbered by its imports of Israeli arms, including from Elbit and Rafael. Elbit, which is Israel's largest defence firm, and the state-owned arms manufacturer Rafael, have both seen profits soar since the genocide in Gaza.

Sweden is one of several countries in which workers have objected to military shipments to and from Israel.

"Dockworkers in many countries, including Sweden, the United States, Morocco, South Africa and Italy, have taken solidarity actions for Palestine since 2010 by blockading Israeli ships and military cargo," said Katy Fox-Hodess, an academic researching dockworker solidarity.

Both Helgeson and the union suspect that the company sought to use the blockade as a smokescreen for his sacking. "We think they thought that Gaza was such a divisive issue that it would form a very good backdrop for us to be isolated, or for it to be seen as a left or right-wing issue," said Helgeson.

It's a theory echoed by Fox-Hodess: "Erik's firing followed a nearly decade long local and national dispute between the union and Swedish port employers in which Erik has been among the most prominent leaders. There is every reason to believe that Swedish port employers have used the blockade as a pretext to get rid of a popular and effective union representative."

The Palestinian Youth Movement have launched a campaign targeting shipping giant Maersk, alleging that it has shipped military cargo to Israel during the genocide.

Last month, dock workers in France stopped a Maersk ship carrying F-35 fighter jet components, reportedly destined for Israel, from docking, delaying the ship's journey.

The ship was due to dock in Morocco, but the Port Workers' Union of Morocco released a statement calling on "workers, employees, and companies" to boycott it. Maersk accepted that the shipment contained F-35 jet parts, but denied that they were destined for Israel.

Solidarity actions like these have a long history. It was Swedish dockworkers who first refused to handle cargo from Chile after the coup d'état and installation of Pinochet, and who pioneered the Swedish boycott on South African cargo in solidarity with the anti-apartheid movement.

In 2010, following an Israeli attack on a flotilla of civilian activists carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza that killed nine passengers, Swedish dock workers held a week-long blockade of Israeli goods.

"It's a culture that we're very proud of," said Helgeson. "You're standing on the shoulders of others just by continuing the tradition."

Helgeson is awaiting to have his dismissal contested in the country's labour courts. However, under Swedish law, his employer is not required to rehire him.

Meanwhile, the Swedish Dockworkers' Union, alongside the Transport Workers' Union, is in the process of negotiating a new collective agreement with the ports' employers association. After negotiations stalled last week, dock workers voted in favour of national strike action. Among workers demands are for enhanced protections for union representatives, as a direct result of Helgeson's case, as well as stricter controls on the use of agency labour.

Despite all of this, Helgeson doesn't regret the blockade. "Solidarity is a source of power," he said. "It's not only a kind act or a transactional thing. If you don't have a culture of solidarity that expands outside of just narrow bread and butter issues in your immediate national area, then you're kind of bound to be isolated when it's your turn. We've never worked like that, and I don't want to either."

"People say: 'this is not a union issue, because it's not about money or work schemes.' But human rights is not just some soft leftist concept. It's the basis for trade union organising all over the world."

DFDS and Gothenburg ro-ro terminal did not respond to a request for comment.

19 May 2025

Source: [Novara media](#).

PS:

*If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint.* Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.