

LESSONS ON ORGANIZING WITH TRADE UNIONS TO BUILD SOLIDARITY ACTIONS

In 2014 and 2021, Palestine activists organized 'Block the Boat' actions at ports to stop Israeli-owned ZIM ships from docking as part of the global call to action by Palestinian trade unions. These experiences imparted important lessons for Palestine organizing with the trade union movement more generally that can be used to support successful actions now and in the future.

Workers In Palestine have called for actions targeting the manufacture and transportation of arms to Israel, but advise that such actions should only be taken with proper relationship building with the relevant trade unions in these sectors (i.e., dockworkers, seafarers, factory workers).

WHY SHOULD WE WORK WITH TRADE UNIONS TO BUILD SOLIDARITY ACTIONS?

Solidarity actions at workplaces that have been developed in close **collaboration between community activists and trade union activists** have been far **more effective** than solidarity actions at workplaces carried out by community activists alone.

Union members possess **insider knowledge** of their employers, workplaces and industries that can be crucial for carrying out a successful action, such as how to **identify targets** and the **best timing and location** for actions to take place.

In addition, in some cases, working with union members can provide **enhanced legal protection** for actions, as in the Block the Boat protests in Oakland, California, where the union invoked the 'health and safety' clause in its contract in response to a community picket line at the port.

Finally, working with trade unions enables us to **broaden our base of support**, making common cause with workers.

WHAT CHALLENGES COULD WE FACE IN WORKING WITH TRADE UNIONS?

In some countries, like the US and the UK, trade unions are subject to **legal restrictions on solidarity action at the workplace**, which require creative solutions, such as the invocation of 'health and safety' concerns in response to community picket lines.

In other countries, trade unions are legally allowed to carry out solidarity actions but may face other challenges, such as **notice periods for taking action**. In addition, many trade unions simply do not have a tradition of taking solidarity actions, or have **little understanding or engagement with Palestine**.

Work closely with trade union supporters to understand the challenges they face and develop **collaborative solutions**.

WHAT IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY FOR US TO APPROACH TRADE UNIONS?

The most successful actions have begun by utilizing existing activist networks to identify, and work closely with, '**bridge builders**' in unions.

Bridge builders – who can be union leaders or union activists – play a key role in **orienting community activists** to the union, the workplace, the employer and the industry. They help with navigating the legal terrain and internal politics of the union, understanding **how best to frame the issue** to union members, doing **outreach** to fellow union members and **mediating** differences.

Bridge builders can also help to **broker meetings** with union leadership and invitations to speak to the membership. Rather than taking a one-size-fits-all approach to action with the union, it's more effective to engage in a constructive manner. When you have the chance to communicate with the union, it's important to be **adaptable and receptive**, understanding their capabilities and concerns. In essence, meet them where they are at.

Building robust organizing relationships is rooted in **trust, mutual respect, and collaboration**, and these foundations should be laid from the outset.



WHAT IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY FOR US TO BUILD SUPPORT AMONG UNION MEMBERS?

With the assistance of bridge-builders, **identify opportunities to speak directly to workers**, such as outside the workplace, at the union hall or at other locations that workers frequent.

Develop **targeted informational materials** and maintain a **consistent presence** in the lead up to an action.

Listen attentively to union members' questions and concerns and adapt your 'pitch' as you develop a better understanding of where the workers are coming from.

Do not be antagonistic or get drawn into prolonged arguments: focus your energy on building support among people who are 'on the fence' and strengthening support among sympathizers.

HOW CAN WE ENSURE THAT OUR ACTION HAS THE BIGGEST POSSIBLE IMPACT?

Research and groundwork in advance are critical to ensuring that our actions have the biggest possible impact:

- Work with bridge-builders in the union to identify the best **targets** for action, as well the **timing** and **location**. Key questions to consider include whether you will need a continuous presence at the worksite, a rapid response network or some combination of the two.
 - Map out in advance **access to the protest location**. Is it easily accessible to members of the public? If not, consider organizing ride shares.
 - Create a **communications infrastructure** ahead of time to enable text blasts or other means for rapidly reaching supporters. Be prepared for police repression and plan ahead with **legal observers and advisors**.
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HOW CAN WE MAINTAIN SUPPORT AMONG UNION MEMBERS BETWEEN MOBILIZATIONS?

In order to build up the momentum for Palestine solidarity within the trade union movement, we must continue to **work with trade unions between mobilization**.

The best way to build a strong relationship with a trade union over time is to **show up for the union** when they need support from the community:

- Are they going on strike? Show up to their **picket line** to show your support!
- Are they campaigning locally on a workplace issue? Show up to a **city council meeting** to voice your support!

These actions over time create **strong and durable relationships** that make it far more likely for the union to step up in meaningful ways for Palestine.

