

Intervention

On Solidarity: Responses of European Labor to the Gaza Genocide

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Since October 7, 2023, workers' movements around the world have driven consequential mobilizations against Israel's genocidal war on Palestine. Responding to calls by Palestinian trade unions, they have refused to transport weapons bound for Israel, blocked cargo movement, picketed the factories of arms manufacturers, urged governments to cease arms trade, campaigned for a ceasefire, and signed up to Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions campaigns (Ali 2023; Burley 2023; MERIP 2023; Rosenfeld 2023; Ziadah 2023; Ziadah and Fox-Hodess 2023). Such mobilization has cast in relief the potential role of trade union internationalisms in the struggle for Palestinian liberation, reminiscent in recent history of workers' solidarities against apartheid in South Africa. However, we can observe significant differences between workers' movements regarding their vision of the conflict, and notions of solidarity with Palestine. For example, in late 2023, the European Dockworkers Council (EDC) issued a call for mass, collective action against Israel, accusing European officialdom of "aligning itself with the most warlike part of a West manipulated by NATO", and situating their call within a broader critique of a capitalism that "in crisis calls for war to prosper against social progress and peoples" (EDC 2023); whereas the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) echoed rhetoric of European capitals, condemning "the killing of civilians", urging "EU institutions to put their weight behind de-escalation and dialogue efforts", and "calling for dialogue, respect for international law ... and the full implementation of the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions to bring about a two-state solution" (ETUC 2023).

In contrasting the solidarity positions of the ETUC and the EDC, we observe that where the former's political horizon is bounded by colonial-imperial state structures, in that it seeks to

act through them, the EDC does not call for the state to act, as such, but for workers to do so, de facto against the state to mobilize working-class power. Their solidarity positions reflect their distinct tendencies of trade unionism, with the ETUC marking the dominant reformist unionism in Europe, which adopt defensive and submissive postures that seek to avoid contradicting the positions of the European Union itself and their respective states. Rather than contesting class and colonial relations of power, they practice internationalisms/solidarity as a “sort of diplomacy” (Wahl 2014) based on social pacts within the existing balance of class relations. The EDC’s position marks a more radical or “system-critical” (ibid.) trade unionism pointing to confrontational and combative union models that act to mobilize internationalist class-based solidarities.

These different political trajectories of solidarity in European syndicalism are also evident among the members of the European Trade Union Network for Justice in Palestine (ETUN), a network established in 2016 as the first attempt to coordinate workers’ mobilizations at the European level with the Palestinian struggle.¹ Its members² are divided in many respects in terms of their understanding of what solidarity with Palestine entails, and a notable symptom of this was their inability to produce a unified position statement regarding October 7, 2023. This intervention compares and contrasts the positions enunciated by two European member unions, UNISON in the UK, and the Confederación Intersindical Galega (CIG), a nationalist Galician union in the Spanish State. These examples are illustrative of the contestations within the network, with UNISON and CIG staking out particularly divergent positions. What is their vocabulary of solidarity? How are we to understand their divergences? What political trajectories of solidarity are intimated by their discourses?

In reflecting on their divergent articulations, the essay thinks with Gramsci’s critique of reformist unionism and his insights on the building of hegemony across uneven spatial geographies (Featherstone 2013; Morton 2007). Gramsci’s concept of the integral State points to

¹ The ETUN aims to target the EU’s economic and military support for Israel, particularly the EU-Israel Association Agreement.

² The endorsing unions are from Belgium, France, Ireland, Norway, the Netherlands, the Spanish State (including Galicia and Basque Country), and the UK (<https://www.etun-palestine.org/site/>).

how civil society, “far from being inimical to the State” (Buttigieg 1995: 4), is a pillar of political society, articulating and transmitting dominant ideology that perpetuates subalternity of dominated strata; a process of consent-making in which reformist trade unions collaborate. But, his concept simultaneously points to the political tasks for parties and movements to change the correlation of forces through a “war of position” in civil society with the aim of contesting the ideological apparatus of the state, and to develop an alternative *forma mentis* or conception of the world by cultural preparation (Buttigieg 1995: 19). I suggest that a dive into the position statements of these two unions helps us to grapple with the discursive, ideological contestations we observe in the contemporary moment: on the one hand, colonial solidarities expressed as symbolic support and humanitarian politics between fixed, nationally bounded entities; and, on the other, solidarity as a process of building a new hegemony across uneven spatial geographies to catalyze social and political change, that is, solidarity, understood as transformative relations to produce new political subjectivities or class solidarities by forging connections across anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles.

Geographies of Solidarities

In some respects, the fault lines within the ETUN also mirror those within European capitals. As the brutality of the assault on Gaza unfolded, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, and Belgium took early, if diverging, positions against Israel, while the United Kingdom and Germany continued to extend open support to the former, militarily as well diplomatically. UNISON, the largest union in the UK representing public sector workers (Looker 2019; Saundry and Willerby 2013), offers insight into how reformist unionism succumbs to the postures of their states, and participates in the historical complicity of social-democratic workers’ movements with imperialism. UNISON’s responses to the unfolding genocide in Gaza reproduce and reinforce colonial solidarities.

30 days into Israel’s campaign in Gaza, by which time more than 11,000 Palestinians had been slaughtered and 50% of all houses in the Strip reduced to cinder, UNISON’s November 6 position statement continued to center on “the brutal and heinous attack by Hamas against innocent civilians in Israel”, while appealing for “an end to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza” and for donations to support “colleagues working to save lives ... in Gaza and Israel” (UNISON

2023a). Their December 6 statement calls on the British government to recognize Palestinian statehood, but continues to decry the Palestinian resistance of October 7 (UNISON 2023b). UNISON’s statements reflect a conception that equates oppressors and the oppressed, repositioning the conflict as a question of negotiation between two equal parties. Their narrative of October 7 exposes the inherent colonial relation in their seeming position of “neutrality”, in that they echo the positions of the British government (House of Commons Library 2024), which turns the rebellious colonized into a “quintessence of evil” (Fanon 1963: 41) in the understanding of which Palestinian resistance becomes terrorism. Delegitimization of their resistance shrinks the horizons of solidarity into humanitarian politics, expressive of liberal Western sensibility.

Their January 2024 statement on “the situation in the Red Sea” claims solidarity with members of the International Transport Workers Federation who have come under attack by fighters from Yemen. UNISON calls on “governments to guarantee security for shipping in the area and ensure the release of seafarers who have been taken hostage”, while expressing concern that “the diversion of shipping routes could lead to an increase in prices of manufactured goods and food heightening the cost of living crisis” (UNISON 2024). Turning itself into a de facto cheerleader for an imperial mission led by NATO members, UNISON also pits working-class interests in Europe and elsewhere as antagonistic with the resistance solidarities of the Houthis with the Palestinians.

A radically different kind of politics was staked out by the platform Galiza-Palestina, which joins CIG and other Galician organizations. Born of anti-fascist workers’ struggles in 1972, the CIG is the largest labor federation in Galicia and forms part of a Galician “national sovereignty” movement.³ Underwriting their praxis is an understanding of a struggle for hegemony in the “field of ideas” (Mera 2021, my translation) that refuses “master-sanctioned” narratives of imperial violence. Publicized during mobilizations across cities in Galicia on October 28, 2023, the platform’s manifesto (my translation) read:

³ Though the CIG only operates in Galicia, it has the status of “most representative union” at the level of the Spanish State due to its percentage of delegates—a status it shares with three other labor federations in the Spanish State.

Today we gather in this square—and around the world in many other squares—in revulsion for the crimes of the state of Israel against the people of Palestine. In the last 20 days, more than 7,000 Palestinians have been killed in massive bombings against Gaza or through terrorist attacks perpetrated by the Zionist army or fanatical settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. 7,000 people, a third of them children, who were part of a people that resists succumbing to the Israeli occupation and refuses to leave their homes and their lives to leave the field free for the establishment of a racist, supremacist State that acts as an imperialist advance in the Middle East ... Israel's problem is not Hamas. It is the fact that Palestine resists and does not lower its arms to disappear in silence.

This manifesto turns the UNISON narrative on its head, deploying concepts like fanaticism and terror to describe the Israeli state and its ideology. Most tellingly, the CIG anchor their solidarity with Palestinians not in victimhood as the UNISON does, but in the Palestinians' resistance and refusal to submit. This acknowledgement was not a rhetorical gesture. In a talk in A Coruña organized by the Fundación Galiza Sempre with the support of the Galiza-Palestina platform, Fayyaz Baddawi, the former head in Europe of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), spoke of October 7 and its aftermath in unapologetic terms—"We will resist; we will not die as slaves"—and was met with wholehearted applause (Author's fieldwork, 2023). Baddawi's refusal to submit to the master narrative to which UNISON's position statement answers resonates with the CIG's philosophy of praxis. Heeding Gramsci's critique of the tendency of the proletariat in advanced capitalist states to "remedy problems through reforms fought for and negotiated ... within the existing order" (Buttigieg 1995:13), the CIG advances "permanent social confrontation, against ideological, economic, and political power" (CIG 2021: 81, my translation). As such, the CIG sees its task not as gaining recognition from the State by parroting its discourse, but by confronting it in battle.

Hegemony Beyond the Nation-State

The perspective from the Confederación Intersindical Galega (CIG), Galicia in the Spanish State, brings into sharp focus the colonial nature of solidarities of reformist unionism within the

network. While recognizing the historical specificity of each national environment and the asymmetric relations of power with the State that condition the terms of workers' solidarities, Xosé Luís Riveira Jácome, responsible for CIG's international relations, insists that "we are accustomed to exercising counterpower" (Interview with author, 2023, my translation).

Following October 7, he asks:

Are we, as trade union organizations, obliged to maintain the same line as our respective governments or the EU itself? ... We cannot earn the respect of European countries, their states, and the EU itself by submitting to their positions and interests ... In Europe, the positions have a geo-centrism complex with equidistant positions, as if there were no colonized people and another occupier, and they keep talking about terrorism. Given this scenario, it is urgent to articulate international platforms to oppose [these logics] ... to coordinate joint pressure activities against the imperialism of Israel and the USA.

An understanding of the national political space as always already transnational is reflected in the CIG's ideological formation. Taking inspiration from Marxism-Leninism and Third World anticolonialism, the Galician left nationalism of the Unión do Povo Galego (UPG), which is one of the dominant ideological currents among the leadership of the CIG, is defined by two main principles: pacificism and anti-imperialism (Correa 2023). Concomitantly, the movement maintains strong contemporary solidarities with the Palestinians, Saharawis, Cubans, Mapuche, and Kurds, among others. Arguing that the negation and suppression of "stateless nations" such as Galicia reproduces logics of colonial subjugation and geopolitical racism (Rodríguez and Suevos 1978),⁴ it extends the legacy of transnational articulations of Third World decolonization struggles with the imaginaries of left politics in the European mainland (Beramendi and Núñez Seixas 1995; Diéguez Cequiel 2014; Rodríguez and Suevos 1978).

⁴ They challenge the "historical nationalities" autonomy status accorded to Galicia in the 1977 Moncloa Pacts as a legal mirage, which sustains the structures of Galicia's unequal incorporation and peripheral condition within the Spanish State; exploitation of Galician land, workers, and economic base; racialization of Galicians; and cultural and linguistic repression (CIG 2021).

In framing class struggle and workers' counterpower as something that must be exercised transnationally, the CIG reflects an understanding of solidarity not as relation between fixed, stable, and bounded "national" identities, but as the building of dialogic, subaltern alliances that defy national geographies. In this way of thinking, the CIG mirrors Gramsci's thinking around the making and re-making of identities by means of political alliances and hegemony forged *within* uneven spatial geographies (Gramsci 1978). By this understanding, explains Featherstone (2012: 7), solidarities are "not just part of the binding together of pre-existing communities", but "the process of politicization" and conscientization that allows "new political terrains and possibilities ... [and] new conceptions of political subjects and actors to emerge". It is also in this sense, we can posit, that a politics of transnational solidarity must be understood as an organic, generative part of a movement's capacity to enact the feeling that another world is possible.

A telling example of the "connective tissues" (Gramsci 1977) being produced by the CIG's anti-colonial politics is the position statement of the Galician Platform Against NATO (Plataforma Galega contra a OTAN 2022). In contrast to UNISON's Red Sea statement, which divides transnational class solidarities, the Platform positions Galician national sovereignty as inextricably tied with Palestinian liberation. Contesting global epistemic hierarchies that silence resistance, the Platform center their narratives on a collective history of anti-imperialism rooted in cumulative processes of transnational class struggle. They note that their manifesto against imperialism is not "a simple slogan", but "a cumulative process, carried out by the efforts ... of those who have suffered and continue to suffer ... direct aggressions and of those who refuse to lower our heads and close our eyes to reality", emphasizing "the dignified resistance of peoples such as the Cuban, Venezuelan or Palestinian, among others" (Plataforma Galega contra a OTAN 2022, my translation). Protesting "the transfer of ports and air facilities and the provision of the territory for military exercises ... [which] make us accomplices of imperialist barbarism, despite the fact that the Galician people have historically and repeatedly demonstrated against NATO and its agenda" (ibid.), the Platform brings into view how struggles in seemingly distinct space-time geographies are joined, placing anti-imperial struggles across unequal spatial geographies in the "same global conjunctural and comparative frame" (Hart 2024). Framing the

“national” space in relation to interconnected forces of accumulation, dispossession, and exploitation that operate across multiple scales, their perspective foregrounds the nature of unity of struggles, as well as the contradictions within this unity.

Concluding Remarks

Palestinian resistance has once again propelled their liberation struggle to the world stage. My reflection focused on the responses of European labor movements and contestations in their discourses of solidarity since October 7, and in particular, the internal fissures within the European labor network for Palestine. Within the network operates clear power dynamics, in which the colonial narratives of reformist syndicalism in the imperial core silence the oppositional critiques of combative syndicalism on the “peripheries” of Europe. The juxtaposition of the British and Galician cases complicates notions of Europe as a monolithic colonizer and casts in relief the struggles for hegemony within the network. The internal fractures reveal the multiplicity of meanings, potentialities, and trajectories that solidarity between labor movements in Europe and Palestinian liberation can assume. On the one hand, we see expressions of de facto colonial solidarities, which obscure the nature of the relation between oppressor and oppressed by means of a depoliticizing, humanitarian rhetoric. UNISON’s articulations of solidarity with Palestine are configured by the defensive and submissive institutional roles they assume vis à vis the state. On the other hand, we see solidarities anchored in vocabularies and historiographies of resistance, emphasizing the ideological struggles that unions must wage against “master-sanctioned” state narratives. Avoiding divisive nationalist pitfalls, the CIG insists on trade union internationalism as a process to build a new hegemony, to create and unify class solidarities by welding the connective tissues across anti-colonial struggles; in the understanding of Palestinian liberation not as auxiliary to other national sovereignty struggles, but as integral and co-productive of these struggles.

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