Pro-Palestine activists target invisible genocide profiteer in arms supply chain

By Rimsha Syed
Freelance journalist

PERSPECTIVE

As Israel's campaign of mass killing in Palestine enters its second year and extends to Lebanon, the collective sense of urgency felt by people around the globe has inspired a shift in organizing strategy. Activists in the US have been organizing to quell the Israeli war machine by turning their attention to logistics companies that physically deliver munitions to Israel.

For the past several months, the Palestinian Youth Movement (PYM), a transnational coalition guided by principles of justice and liberation, has launched a new phase in its multipronged campaign against one of the world's largest genocide profiteers: Maersk. Maersk is a Danish logistics company that deals with shipping, port operation, supply chain management, and warehousing. As the world's largest container ship and supply vessel operator, Maersk has subsidiaries and offices in over 130 countries.

Since October 7, 2023, Maersk has shipped over $300 million in weapons components to US arms manufacturers, organizers have found. As a key culprit in the weapons trade, Maersk plays a direct role in maintaining the flow of weapons and weapon components used on the besieged population in Gaza, where the Ministry of Health reports more than 42,700 people have been confirmed to have been killed in Israel's genocide — widely considered to be a vast undercount. Truthout reached out to Maersk for comment, but did not receive a response in time for publication.

In a broader context, the US is Israel's largest foreign weapons provider; over 68 percent of the ammunition used to maintain their illegal apartheid is supplied by the American government. Taking inspiration from national organizing tactics, from direct actions outside Israeli arms company Elbit Systems to student-led encampments that have successfully pushed universities to divest from genocide, the "Mask Off Maersk" campaign is gearing up to demand a total arms embargo with myriad political organizing strategies. Simply put, the mask has fallen and the demands of the campaign are clear: Maersk must cut ties with genocide.

New campaign targets weapons supply chain

Earlier this year, thousands of participants in the movement for Palestine convened in Detroit for the People's Conference, where the "Mask Off Maersk" campaign was first announced. In July, students, activists, and community members in Houston, Texas, gathered for a Palestinian Youth Movement-led teach-in as part of a national week of action to bring the Maersk campaign to life. In this phase of the struggle to end the mass murder of Palestinians, campaign organizers understand the need to disrupt the supply chain that exists to fast-track the money-to-weaponry pipeline. Ending Maersk's relationship with Israel is one of the most explicit ways to stop the flow of heavy-grade artillery into Gaza — a concrete, tangible consequence for Israel after conducting genocide with relative impunity for more than a year.

Logistics companies and the facilitation of war go hand in hand; the latter cannot exist without the former. American weapon companies sit squarely at the top of the global arms industry. In 2022, the top five US weapons contractors made $196 billion in military-related revenue — leaving tens of thousands of Palestinians killed as the companies fulfilled their greed. Israel's largest arms manufacturer, Elbit Systems, is responsible for supplying MPR 500 bombs used in the indiscriminate bombing of the Gaza Strip — bombs that are explicitly designed for "densely populated urban warfare". Hermes 450 and 900 drones, also manufactured by Elbit Systems, have been deployed for surveillance missions and attacks on Gaza, the occupied West Bank, and Lebanon.

Elbit Systems, along with the US-based Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, to name a few, are culpable in the same blood-soaked weapons-industrial complex. Maersk is the common denominator in this supply chain, which is why it sits at the top of PYM's campaign demanding an end to any contracts that fuel genocide. For many, Maersk is a relatively new household name to add to the list of companies that are part of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. It's crucial to understand that the weapon components manufacturing system is typically decentralized: The wings of an F-35 fighter jet could be made at a factory in one corner of the world while the engine could be made in another country entirely. These components are then transported by Maersk to the US for assembly, an insidiously silent player in the war machine. The transport of weapons and their components through logistics companies allows the grenades, bombs, drones, and fighter jets to eventually reach Israel, where they are used for mass ethnic cleansing. The campaign hopes to spread understanding about how these supply chains function, garnering support across sectors and struggles as we deepen the bonds for collective liberation.

Connecting labor movement to movement for Palestine

PYM's multipronged approach against Maersk recognizes that coordinated efforts that take inspiration from successful organizing wins within the context of Palestinian liberation and beyond will guarantee a more robust campaign. There are four components to targeting Maersk: media and narrative, mobilization, labor, and city and campus. The media element hopes to illuminate the role that Maersk plays in the abetment of genocide, the mobilization element seeks to popularize Maersk as an international target, and the city and campus sector hopes to cut any partnerships, investments, or affiliations that institutions may have with Maersk. Each vein of the campaign aims to inflict financial and reputational damage through coordinated actions — making mass pressure against Maersk unavoidable. Activists call on labor unions, student movements, community-based organizations, legal organizations, and other progressive movements to join the call to halt the flow of capital and logistics.

Pro-Palestinian demonstrators protest against Maersk shipping company at the Cabrillo Way Marina at the Port of Los Angeles on August 28, 2024.
ALLEN J. SCHABEN/ LOS ANGELES TIMES

A forest in Naqoura, southern Lebanon, is seen burned by white phosphorus munitions used in Israeli bombardments, on November 3, 2023.
THE GREEN SOUTHERNERS

Maersk has storage facilities, ports, and offices around the US, including training sites in Houston. During the national week of action against Maersk, one PYM Houston chapter organizer Obi (who preferred only to be identified by first name due to safety concerns) identified Houston as "an important node in Maersk's global operations" due to its location as both a port city connected to the Gulf of Mexico and as a regional railroad hub. After a trip down to the port, Obi told Truthout, "Talking to workers at the warehouses and longshoremen at the port has highlighted how they are specifically exploited by Maersk and highlights the dangerous working conditions." Building rank-and-file power among workers already disgruntled by subpar working conditions could be yet another benefit of the campaign. Maersk has already been subject to multiple strikes from the International Longshoremen's Association, demonstrating their preexisting grievances with Maersk. Several leading labor unions have also already called for a cease-fire and an end to the US government's complicity in the genocide.

"Building relationships with workers in order to stop the flow of weapons vis-à-vis Maersk enables us to raise popular consciousness and advance our politics of anti-Zionism and anti-imperialism through the lens of logistics companies and their role in facilitating the genocide in Gaza," says Obi.

The Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions has called for a picket line around the handling of arms destined for Israel. The worker-liaison role that Obi plays is meant to facilitate that picket line from the US.

Activists target Israel's perpetration of environmental injustice

In addition to the immediate need to stop the ongoing genocide and displacement in Palestine, and now Lebanon, there is also the need to end the subsequent ecocide that's caused by the mass destruction. We need look no further than the indiscriminate bombardment of entire villages, olive tree groves, hospitals, and schools, many of which were designated as "safe zones," to understand the connectedness between the environmental justice movement's shared rage against logistics companies that facilitate the destruction of life, land, and resources. The relentless assaults in both Palestine and Lebanon have inflicted lasting damage on the environment that adds a long-term threat to the region's health and sustainability. Although Israel has destroyed vital agriculture and contaminated Gaza's drinkable water long before October 7, what followed has only worsened the environmental crisis.

"Climate justice cannot be achieved in a reality where white phosphorus is used as a war technology to poison and suffocate Palestinians, and entire cities are flattened," Trinit, a Houston-based organizer with experience in eco-activism who asked to be identified by first name only for safety reasons, told Truthout. This pattern of US-backed environmental degradation as a tool of warfare has alarmed climate justice advocates, who are demanding accountability. Many youth and BIPOC-led groups like Climate Justice Alliance, Friends of the Earth, Youth vs. Apocalypse, and Movement Generation have connected the liberation of Palestine and the restoration of our planet. Greta Thunberg, a well-known climate activist, was arrested for protesting against the Israeli occupation's genocide in Palestine.

The Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) has also been prolific in their public call for a cease-fire. APEN also helped to successfully advocate the Richmond City Council to pass a resolution "in solidarity with the Palestinian people of Gaza," making Richmond the first city in the US to do so.

Between munitions that contain heavy metals being deployed in densely populated areas in Palestine to the egregious use of phosphorus gas, weapon manufacturers and logistics companies are profiting off war crimes and ecological disasters. In November, Israeli shells incinerated 40,000 olive trees in southern Lebanon — a cultural, spiritual, and agricultural disaster.

Many environmental justice groups, in conjunction with the official BDS movement, have championed boycotts around Chevron for its allegiance to climate colonialism by way of leading Israel's extraction of the region's gas fields. In this vein, striking an alliance with the existing infrastructure of leaders within the environmental justice movement could be paramount in applying maximum pressure against Maersk.

Weakening this part of the war machine through protest, boycott, and direct action, says Trinit, "could have a great material impact on the Palestinian struggle for liberation from their occupiers". Specifically, targeting environmental colonialism in this campaign has far-reaching impacts, like lowering the emissions that come from manufacturing, transporting, and shipping weapons. "Less weapons to the Zionist occupation is, first and foremost, significant in protecting the lives of our comrades in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen," Trinit told Truthout. "There is simply an added benefit of lowering the environmental impacts of sending those weapons to the occupation."

In March, the International Alliance of App-Based Transport Workers, a coalition of 100,000 drivers and couriers from 20 countries, announced it would boycott all gas stations linked to Chevron. This display of solidarity that flows between the movement for Palestinian liberation, the network of unionized masses, and the environmental justice movement is but one example of the road forward. Weaving together the material connectedness of our struggles toward liberation to maximize the impact of the "Mask Off Maersk" campaign has the potential to shift the moral culpability of companies that profit off the lives of the Palestinian people. It all comes back to the actuality that none of us are free until we're all free.

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