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Community picket lines and social movement unionism on the U.S. docks, 2014–2021: Organizing lessons from the Block the Boat campaign for Palestine

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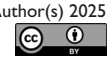

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Abstract

This paper examines community-initiated picket lines in solidarity with Palestine at the ports of Oakland, Long Beach, Seattle, and Port Elizabeth in 2014 and 2021 which sought to enable dockworkers to participate in effective de facto work stoppages for political ends despite a restrictive legal context. Using a comparative case study approach, the analysis highlights key contextual factors – including urban proximity, terminal accessibility, and union political history – that shaped the ability of campaigners to block vessels from the Zim shipping line. The research also identifies crucial organizing variables, including the capacity of community groups to mobilize large picket lines, the role of "bridge-builders" linking unions and community actors, and sustained research, education and outreach efforts. Findings provide critical insights into identifying promising targets for action and instituting effective organizing practices for labor and community activists seeking to jointly advance social justice goals at the workplace within a legally constrained environment.

Keywords

social movement unionism, labor, dockworkers, ports, Palestine, Block the Boat

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Introduction

Following Donald Trump's inauguration in 2017, varied groups of workers took workplace actions in protest of a range of social and political issues. These actions had a significant impact and sent tremors through the U.S. industrial relations landscape. Notable among these – but by no means a comprehensive list – were the New York taxi drivers' Muslim Ban work stoppage (Brooks, 2017); the flight attendants' mobilization for a strike, which ended the government shutdown (Featherstone, 2019); walkouts by tech workers during the Global Climate Strike (Paul, 2019); and the participation of many workers, particularly from the fast food and retail industry, in the Strike for Black Lives (Treisman, 2020). In each case, the difficulty of enacting change through legislative means, due to the country's political impasse and scarcity of allies in government, led organizers to seek power through innovative and sometimes unsanctioned forms of industrial action. Workplace actions, particularly in strategic industries like transportation, provided significant leverage to allied social movements, increasing pressure on the state to seek a resolution.

The spike in actions of this kind is surprising in the US context given the hostile legal environment. Political strikes and secondary action in general have been prohibited by law since the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013). Moreover, by custom rather than by law, most US unions enter into contractual agreements not to strike during the life of the contract, leaving them with short windows for striking should they allow their collective agreements to expire (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013). For these reasons, novel forms of action that creatively engage with these constraints have important strategic implications for unions and social movements.

A growing literature in recent years has investigated the possibilities of striking on demands encompassing broader societal issues under the banner of "Bargaining for the Common Good" (McCartin et al., 2020; Trongone, 2022). This approach involves leveraging collective bargaining to address issues such as racial inequality and the defunding of the public sector which impact both workers and service users. Yet, this promising strategy has been largely confined to unions in public services (Sneiderman and Fascione, 2017). In contrast, comparable openings for unions in the private sector to fight for broader public interests within the constraints of labor law remain underexplored. In this paper, then, we examine one such possibility which holds significant promise: community picket lines.

Community picket lines, established in support of political demands, typically provide both practical barriers to entry and legal cover for workers to refuse to enter the workplace – and therefore withhold their labor – without the need to call for a strike. Unlike blockades, which do not prioritize worker involvement (Chua and Bosworth, 2023), community picket lines depend on an intricate division of organizing labor and careful choreography of action between community activists and union sympathizers. Worker participation ensures success while community picket lines minimize the risk of employer sanctions in a hostile legal environment. Community picket lines have been explored within the historical literature on the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) in the United States (Cole, 2015, 2018; Cole and Limb, 2016). However, their contemporary relevance in ports – and their potential relevance to other sectors such as the defense industry and highly polluting industries – has been largely ignored in the academic literature despite increasing interest among activists on the ground.

In this paper, we aim to understand the conditions that make contemporary community picket lines effective in enabling workers in the private sector to participate in de facto work stoppages outside of the framework provided by the National Labor Relations Act. Community picket lines are analyzed through four case studies from 2014 and 2021 of port-based solidarity actions for Palestine in Oakland, Long Beach, Seattle and Port Elizabeth (New Jersey). The goal of these actions was to prevent the Israeli-owned shipping line Zim from docking. The dispersion of the

community picket line tactic in the Palestine solidarity movement to arms factories in North America and Europe since 2023 (Ziadah and Fox-Hodess, 2023) underlines the necessity of better understanding its conditions of efficacy.

In brief, we found that success depended both on the organizing context of each port and the organizing practices adopted by community activists. Successful actions were predicted by the proximity of the worksite to densely populated areas and accessibility of the worksite, as well as the pre-existing politics of the union. Effective organizers had the ability to mobilize a large community picket line, develop durable relationships with "bridgebuilders" within the union, and conduct research, education and outreach with union members. In the next section, we review the literature to situate our study. This is followed by a discussion of the research design and presentation of the four cases. In the final sections of the paper, we discuss the findings and consider their implications for social movement unionism more generally.

Literature review

Scholars of labor movement revitalization in North America and beyond have advanced "social movement unionism" as a promising renewal strategy against the dominant backdrop of "business unionism" (Blanc, 2019; Bradbury et al., 2014; McCartin et al., 2020; Moody, 1997). Social movement unionism in the US focuses on broad social issues impacting constituencies beyond the membership, and allying with community organizations to achieve these goals. It encompasses a range of activities, including local political pressure campaigns, "bargaining for the common good" and sectoral-level campaigns for workers' rights (Trongone, 2022). In this paper, we focus on the conditions that enable union-community coalitions to successfully coordinate action. As Rose (2000: 116) argues:

> Successful organizing requires the right marriage of strategy with circumstances. The development and outcomes of coalitions depend upon both the external context for organizing and the internal decisions about how to realize opportunities and overcome limitations.

We therefore divide the following discussion into contextual variables and organizing variables shaping campaign success.

Contextual variables

The physical and human geography of worksites and their surrounding areas impact the effectiveness of community-labor coalition work. The ILWU, like many other dockworkers unions around the world, is well-known for its long history of engaging in solidarity actions in support of workers and social movements domestically and in other countries (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013; Erem and Durrenberger, 2008; Fox-Hodess, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2022). Dockworkers' internationalist tendencies have often been attributed to the port context itself, with its inherently internationally-oriented work. Moreover, the "spatial fixity" of ports, with significant capital investment in particular locations and dependence on the natural geography of harbors and waterways; the reliance of shipping customers on just in time supply chains which are highly sensitive to even short disruptions; and the capital-intensive character of work following containerization in the 1960s and 1970s combine to create a situation in which

> The ports – and their customers – could ill afford work stoppages. Given that labor costs are a relatively small percentage of total costs, this situation gives power to the dockworkers . . . The steamship lines

> would rather give in to dockworker demands . . . than face a strike or some other glitch in the movement of cargo. (Bonacich and Alimahomed-Wilson, 2008: 177)

Because of their ability to stop the global flow of commodities, sending waves throughout the economy, dockworkers are often seen as the paradigmatic example of workers with "structural power" (Schmalz et al., 2018). Their structural power is complimented by a high degree of "associational power" (Schmalz et al., 2018) – with wall to wall unionization in most ports in the United States and a high propensity to strike (Silver, 2003).

On the other hand, the strategic character of the ports for both the domestic and global economies has continually subjected them to a high degree of intervention by states (Fox-Hodess, 2023; Khalili, 2021; Ziadah, 2018). Cowen (2014) emphasizes the rise of securitization since 9/11 in reconstituting the human geography of ports, as the US state has used its economic power to impose a new port security regime globally. She argues that today "Trade disruption has moved from an economic cost to a security threat" (Cowen, 2014), which may complicate efforts by workers and their trade unions to exercise structural and associational power. Societal power – in the form of coalitions with actors in the broader community (Schmalz et al., 2018) – may therefore provide additional leverage in this more constrained environment.

The human geography of the surrounding community shapes coalition work in important ways as well. Across a range of case studies, including labor-environmental and labor and immigrant rights coalitions, scholars have argued that successful organizing is facilitated by "demographic factors, political dynamics, and civil society characteristics" of progressive cities (De Graauw et al., 2019). By contrast, in smaller, more conservative locales, organizing is hindered by "minimal human services and limited recourse to the social and institutional networks," setting "geographical limits" on the potential for such coalitions (Doussard, 2016). As a result of these differential contexts for organizing, "similar events may produce quite different outcomes in different places depending on the local context within which they develop" (Herod, 1998: 123).

Finally, the history and politics of unions themselves are determinative of success. Ahlquist and Levi (2013: 6), in their longitudinal study of activism by transportation unions in the US and Australia (including both of the dockworker unions included in this study), find that "sustained political mobilization requires an ideologically motivated founding leadership cohort" able to first guarantee success at the bargaining table on bread and butter issues in order to win the membership's trust to take on broader social issues. They note that participating in political protest through taking action at the workplace can bolster a union's position in bargaining by signaling "strength to employers without enduring as many industrial strikes" (2013: 236, 245). However, whether unions view political action through this lens depends on their history and politics – a context that can subsequently be reshaped as an outcome of labor-community action.

Organizing variables

Scholars emphasize the quality of relationships between activists on both sides of the labor/community divide as central to building effective coalitions (Obach, 2014). Tattersall (2010: 167), for example, finds that successful coalitions "embraced reciprocal, positive-sum relationships . . . Genuine union power is realized when a 'culture of exchange' develops between organizations." Rose (2000: 31) likewise argues:

> Coalitions persist on the basis of their internal politics – trustful relationships, shared values, negotiated strategies, and alliances of opinion – not just their common interests. If cooperation is to be sustained, the process of working together must deepen understandings of the other side, strengthen relationships, and develop an inclusive sense of purpose.

Unfortunately, "the history of too many labor–community alliances were transactional in nature: 'Support us on this campaign and we will support or fund you in some way'" (Sneiderman and Fascione, 2017). As a result, the quality, depth and sustainability of labor-community coalitions differs significantly (Obach, 1999).

The contemporary social movement unionism practice of "bargaining for the common good," in which public services unions seek to make common cause with service users on issues of mutual concern has been viewed as an attempt to break with the transactional approach to labor-community coalitions (Kolins and Lang, 2020). Proponents of BCG have argued that, in the context of austerity politics and attacks on public sector unions, BCG's strength lies in going beyond "temporary alliances of convenience" to achieving long-term alignment of goals and values between trade unions and the communities their members serve (Sneiderman and Fascione, 2017).

However, misunderstandings and tensions are a recurrent feature of labor-community coalitions because of differing organizational cultures and, oftentimes, the differing class backgrounds of their activists (Rose, 2000). Organizational "bridge builders," who serve as go-betweens, play a crucial role in overcoming common barriers to sustain coalitions. They enable unions and community groups to work together productively, including resolving issues that arise and mitigating conflict (Mayer, 2009a; Robinson, 2020; Senier et al., 2007). Bridge-builders are often working-class union activists with social movement experience, or middle-class social movement activists from working-class backgrounds, enabling them to "know how to express concerns in ways that speak to the life experiences and world view of peers" (Rose, 2000: 177). Bridge-builders assist directly or indirectly in "initiating contacts"; "communicating inside member groups"; "dialoguing across movements"; and "defining a common purpose" (Rose, 2000: 176). They play a particularly critical role in resolving tensions and framing issues of common concern, particularly when there is the potential for both intersecting and conflicting interests (Hultgren and Stevis, 2019; Mayer, 2009b; Mayer et al., 2010; Mijin Cha et al., 2022; Robinson, 2020).

Finally, in-depth research, education and worker outreach are critical organizing variables, serving as the foundation for viable strategy. McAlevey (2016), in her defense of the power of "deep organizing" over "shallow mobilizing," argues that the success of the former depends on power structure analysis to shape strategy and long-term systematic outreach to build numbers and commitment – especially among those who are not already on board with a given campaign or action. Mobilizing, by contrast, is short-term in focus, seeking to rally those who are already on board, and therefore does not fundamentally shift the balance of power. In the context of community picket lines, in-depth research into workplace geographies and union history and politics ensures that campaigns are deeply rooted in an understanding of the specific challenges and opportunities facing potential union allies. Systematic and ongoing education and outreach with union members facilitates not only the success of individual actions but the development of durable relationships that sustain organizing efforts over the long-term.

Research design

A comparative study of port-based actions

Ports are important targets for social movement protests due to their visibility and central role in global commodity circulation. Today, even brief disruptions can significantly impact global supply chains, pressuring shipowners, terminal operators, and governments to swiftly resolve issues. The Block the Boat (BTB) campaign, initiated in 2014 by the San Francisco-based Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC) sought to leverage these features of ports in solidarity with Palestine. The BTB actions drew inspiration from previous port-based solidarity actions, including widespread

support for the South African anti-apartheid movement. BTB established community picket lines at the ports and urged unionized dockworkers not to cross in order to prevent Zim Integrated Shipping Services, Israel's inaugural national shipping company, from docking and unloading at US ports.

BTB actions across multiple ports in 2014 and 2021 (Block the Boat, 2021), including Oakland, Seattle, Port Elizabeth and Long Beach, provide a compelling research opportunity for comparative analysis of social movement unionism, and the use of community picket lines in particular. Trongone (2022: 155), in a metareview of 76 case studies of social movement unionism in the United States, argued that scholars of social movement unionism have tended to select on the dependent variable, with the result that there are few available studies of unsuccessful cases. Studying differentially effective actions within the context of a single social movement seeking to build relationships with workers in a single industry over the same period of time enables "apples to apples" comparisons across the port-based cases, providing significant analytical leverage. The nested comparative case study approach, bringing together analysis of BTB actions in three ILWU ports and one ILA port, enables a detailed examination of the impact of both contextual and organizing variables on campaign success, providing insights into the conditions of effectiveness for community picket lines more generally. This methodological approach offers valuable insights both for theory development and practice in social movement organizing. While a better understanding of key contextual variables provides academics and organizers with a framework for evaluating the most effective targets for action, a better understanding of the key organizing variables tells organizers what they need to do to achieve success once a target has been identified.

Case selection and data analysis

Data was collected from four case studies, covering the largest and most significant Block the Boat actions, which took place at the ports of Long Beach, Oakland and Seattle on the West Coast, and Port Elizabeth, part of the New York/New Jersey port complex, on the East Coast. The ports differ in important ways, in particular, in terms of their geography and the history and politics of their unions.

Dockworkers in the three West Coast ports are organized in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). The ILWU has a long and storied history of leftwing activism and militancy, going back to the 1930s (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013; Cole, 2018; Kimeldorf, 1992). Nevertheless, political and industrial legacies differ substantially among the locals, with Local 10, the San Francisco Bay Area local which represents workers at the Port of Oakland, well-known for its longstanding workplace political activism, including supporting the Civil Rights movement and opposing the wars in Vietnam and Iraq and apartheid in South Africa. The port of Long Beach has tended to be more moderate in both its political and industrial orientations, with Seattle falling in the middle. Political orientations of the union locals were determined through reference to academic literature and interviews with key organizers across the four sites.

Contrasts between the ILWU and its East Coast and Gulf Coast counterpart, the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA, 2024), are even more stark (Table 1). While the ILWU's national leadership faced government attacks for decades for alleged ties to the Communist Party in the postwar period, the ILA's national leadership has a history of strong support for US foreign, including a hundred year plus pledge to continue to handle US military cargo during strikes (ILA website). In addition, the ILA has been dogged by allegations of ties to organized crime, particularly at the Port of New York/New Jersey, and the port itself has faced federal oversight for this reason since the early 1950s (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013; Kimeldorf, 1992). These legacies are reflected in the structure of the unions: the ILWU is known for the strength of internal democracy in the union, while the ILA is a hierarchical and oligarchic organization with few opportunities for meaningful membership participation in decision-making (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013: 54).

Table 1. Key characteristics of the ports, unions and community organizations.

Port	Location	Size	Community organization	Union local and political leaning
Oakland	Urban center	Medium: 2.4 million TEU (2021)	Arab Resource Organizing Center (*Arab community-based organization*)	International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 10 (*left-leaning*)
Long Beach	Industrial periphery	Large: 9.38 million TEU (2021)	Ad hoc community-based organizing committee	International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 13 (*moderate*)
Seattle	Urban center	Medium: 3.74 million TEU (2021)	Falastiniyat (*Palestinian feminist collective*)	International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) Local 19 (*politically divided between left and right*)
Port Elizabeth	Industrial periphery	Large: 8.9 million TEU (2021)	Labor for Palestine (*Labor movement advocacy network*)	International Longshoremen's Association (*right leaning*)

Table 2. The table summarizes key contextual and organizing variables (both internal and external) that influence the effectiveness of community picket lines.

Internal/ External	Contextual variables	Organizing variables
Internal to union	• Union history and politics (i.e., traditions of militancy and internationalism; past experiences working with the community) • Physical hiring hall accessible to the public	• Availability of union bridge-builders with capacity to connect and harmonize union and community efforts (i.e., by translating community and union contexts and concerns, mediating tensions and brokering invitations to speak with union membership and leadership).
External to union	• Port proximity to densely populated, progressive areas • Physical access to the workplace for the public (i.e., degree of port securitization and transportation infrastructure)	• Community organizers' capacity to build and sustain coalitions, including ability to resolve tensions. • Community organizers' capacity to engage in research, education and worker outreach. • Community organizers' capacity to mobilize large numbers for picket lines.

Actions across the four sites were organized by a diverse array of community organizations, enabling comparative analysis of key variables of interest (see Table 2).

The research utilized a multi-methods approach. Semi-structured interviews of 1–2 hours in length were conducted with sixteen key informants from the community-based organizations and, in the cases where there was meaningful engagement with the labor unions (Oakland and Seattle), with union members who played key roles as "bridge-builders." Interviews were conducted in person in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2019 and 2022 and additional interviews were conducted online in 2022. Two participants from the San Francisco Bay Area were re-interviewed in 2022 to bring the project up to date with the 2021 action in Oakland. Participants were identified by initially contacting key activists and organizers identified in news reports of the actions and building further contacts through the use of the snowball sampling technique. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, except in cases where participants expressed a preference for notes to be taken instead. Please see Appendix I for an anonymized list of participants.

Interview-based data was triangulated with content analysis of media reporting and grey literature, including leaflets and other campaign materials, social media, union and community organization

website content, meeting minutes, union resolutions, press releases, photos and videos of actions, and internal activist correspondence. Media coverage was divided into two categories. Mainstream media was used in conjunction with grey literature to corroborate key facts from interview-based research, including dates, participation numbers, port authority and employer actions, union positions and responses from Zim. Activist media was used in conjunction with grey literature as an adjunct to interviews to understand the meanings that broader movement participants attributed to the actions as well as internal processes of strategic decision making. In total, the data set from media coverage and grey literature comprised 212 discrete pieces of data. For further details on this data set, please see Appendix II.

Data was analyzed utilizing the template analysis approach. Themes were identified collaboratively and iteratively by the researchers and were coded manually. Initial themes included the local context for organizing and the challenges organizers encountered in building relationships with the local union. Through further iterations, themes were refined, leading to an analytical distinction between contextual and organizing variables and the identification of sub-variables (i.e., presence of effective bridgebuilders; proximity to densely populated urban areas). These themes were then triangulated further with data emerging from content analysis of the media coverage and grey literature.

Findings

Oakland: "Worker power is more powerful than those bombs Israel is dropping"

During Israel's military assault on Gaza in 2008–2009, the BDS movement urged dockworkers globally to refuse handling Israeli cargo. Responding to this call, dockworkers from the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) in Durban became the first in the world to refuse to offload an Israeli ship, symbolically linking the former anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa to Palestine today (BDS Movement, 2009). Building on union resolutions from 1988 and 2002 condemning Israeli aggression, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) passed a 2009 resolution commending South African dockworkers for their action.

One year later, the Israeli Defense Forces attacked the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, an international civil society initiative to break the Israeli blockade of Gaza by sea with ships bringing humanitarian aid and construction materials directly to Palestinians. Nine Freedom Flotilla activists were killed by the IDF and the ships and their cargo were seized. In response, the Swedish Dockworkers Union announced that they would refuse to handle Israeli cargo. This action inspired activists in the San Francisco Bay Area to organize a community picket line targeting an Israeli-owned Zim vessel at the Port of Oakland.

The action was facilitated by the ILWU's union-controlled hiring hall, as well as the coastwide arbitration procedure established in the late 1940s (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013: 99). When dockworkers are dispatched through the hiring hall, rather than holding permanent positions in the port, they "have the right to decide which jobs they want to take, with the option not to work on a daily basis," providing a legally-sanctioned means to refuse work without declaring official strike action (Bonacich and Alimahomed-Wilson, 2008: 179) Moreover, arbitrators jointly agreed on in advance are on-call "to intercede whenever and wherever longshore stops work because of a safety issue" through "instant arbitration" (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013: 99) Safety issues have been construed broadly to include public political demonstrations at terminal gates. When the arbitrator rules in the union's favor, workers receive "stand-by pay" while not working (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013). When the arbitrator rules against the union, workers do not receive "stand-by pay," but as long as they can demonstrate that they were acting in good faith, they are not penalized for refusing to enter the

workplace (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013). Together, these features provide fertile ground for ILWU members to refuse work during community-initiated protests.

The plan for the community picket in 2010 was endorsed by a large number of local community and labor organizations, including the San Francisco Labor Council and Alameda Labor Council (Electronic Intifada, 2010), to which the majority of trade unions in the San Francisco Bay Area are affiliated. This represented the most significant support from the US trade union movement for a Palestine solidarity action to date. Approximately 700 activists turned out to community picket lines to block two gates into the port. The ILWU called the arbitrator who ruled that crossing the picket line would pose an unacceptable health and safety risk to longshore workers (Interview, ILWU Local 10 member). This approach was utilized again the following year during the Occupy Movement when the port was blockaded by tens of thousands of protesters, amplifying local interest in the tactic (Interview, ILWU Inlandboatmen's Union member).

In 2014, following another Israeli attack on Gaza and a subsequent call from the BDS movement for dockworkers to take action (BDS Movement, 2014), the San Francisco-based Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC) launched the BTB Coalition. The coalition consisted of eighty local labor and community organizations. The objective was to disrupt "business as usual" while Israel continued its assault on Gaza by preventing the Israeli shipping company ZIM from docking and unloading its cargo at the Port of Oakland. Local Palestinian organizers saw this as an opportunity to shift from symbolic protests to actions that materially impacted the Israeli economy (Interview, AROC organizer).

"Bridge-builders" in the union helped to broker meetings between AROC leadership and leaders in ILWU Local 10, who were divided in their position on the proposed action. While some union leaders supported the action on principle and believed it would help the union to flex its muscles in the midst of difficult contract negotiations, others believed that it would be a distraction from their top priority of getting a good new contract in place (Interview, AROC organizer). As a result, "having rank and file workers and leaders at our coalition meetings made the difference in that they would be able to bring in that historical memory too, what worked and what didn't, and how we need to maybe look at things differently right now" (Interview, AROC organizer).

ILWU bridgebuilders helped BTB understand how best to tailor their messaging and approach to dockworkers. Based on their feedback, community activists with the BTB coalition, in particular, Palestinians, Arabs and other people of color, visited the hiring hall of the majority Black union during both daily shifts for the 3 weeks prior to the action to build support among the rank-and-file, which they saw as the key to a successful blockade (Interview, AROC organizer). In their organizing work, BTB activists emphasized the linkages between Israel's treatment of Palestinians and racist police violence in the United States, a key concern of the Black Lives Matter protests, which had garnered strong support in Oakland, including among dockworkers. These efforts laid the groundwork for long-term coalition work with the union, rooted in mutual respect and political alignment.

From August 16–19, thousands of protesters gathered for a continuous blockade of the Zim Piraeus vessel at the Port of Oakland. Though the action had initially been planned only for the 16th, the high community turnout and dockworkers' refusal to cross the picket line created momentum to carry on (Interview, AROC organizer). Supporters inside the union helped community activists to track the ship's movements and advised them to stay put while the ship waited offshore to dock (Interview, AROC organizer).

Unlike in 2010, at the time of the 2014 action, members of the ILWU were "out of contract" as negotiations had dragged on inconclusively with the employer association. This meant that the mechanism to call in the arbitrator was no longer available (Silver, 2014a). However, casual workers contracted on a day-to-day basis through the hiring hall simply refused work for the day,

forgoing pay in solidarity (Silver, 2019). When the ship finally docked, there were reports that workers on the terminal engaged in an unofficial slowdown and only a fraction of the ship's cargo destined for Oakland was unloaded (Salehi, 2014).

Later the following month, the Zim Shanghai docked in Oakland on a scheduled journey. While the official BTB coalition began planning for a subsequent action in October, a small group of activists split away and formed the Stop Zim Action Committee which organized a September community picket (Silver, 2014b; interview with ILWU Local 10 member). Here, the number of protesters was a fraction of what it had been the previous month, but they were successful in persuading dockworkers not to cross the community picket line because of the presence of bridgebuilders and the strong organizing groundwork that had already been laid. By October 28, AROC declared victory when it became clear that ZIM had canceled all future journeys to Oakland (Silver, 2014d). In fact, following the 2014 actions which spread from Oakland to Long Beach, Tacoma and Vancouver, Zim pulled all of its business from the West Coast.

The next time Zim arrived on the West Coast was not until 2021, against the backdrop of an Israeli military assault on Gaza and an escalation of forced home evictions in Jerusalem. Palestinian labor unions once again issued an international call for action, to "ensure that unions themselves are not complicit in supporting and sustaining Israeli oppression" (European Trade Union Initiative for Justice in Palestine, 2021). The appeal was direct and emphasized "concrete actions," including supporting workers who refused to handle Israeli goods and weapons.

In Oakland, BTB prepared to blockade the Zim Volans vessel with simultaneous pickets across six gates in both the morning and evening shifts. Zim bided its time, holding the ship off the coast for 2 weeks and finally docked on June 2. BTB alerted its rapid response network of 5000 community members to get to the port immediately (Arria, 2021). While the location of the terminal posed some logistical challenges, AROC responded effectively by organizing rideshares to shuttle protesters around the port (Interview, AROC organizer). The scale and coordination of the response reflected the coalition's high level of organizing capacity, including its ability to mobilize large numbers quickly and sustain logistical support under pressure. Compared to 2014, the victory was sooner in coming and more decisive: the port authority decided to close down the terminal for the shift after workers refused to work the vessel and protesters actually got to watch the ship leave the terminal without being unloaded (Arria, 2021; Barrows-Friedman, 2021; Interview, AROC organizer). Zim has not returned to Oakland since then.

Seven years after the first coalition-organized action in 2014, the relationship with ILWU Local 10 had strengthened as a result of ongoing education, outreach and mutual support on issues of work, racism and Islamophobia, among others (Interview, AROC Organizer, 2019, 2022). AROC Director Lara Kiswani was invited to speak to the membership directly in the lead up to the 2021 action and members came by the picket to show their support. The extent to which the campaign had been taken up by the union was perhaps best exemplified by the inclusion of a quote from ILWU Local 10 President Trent Willis in the official BTB victory press release in 2021:

> Workers' struggle is worldwide. . .when the workers of the world figure that out, and realize that we have to band together to make change, then it'll be a better world, including for the Palestinian people. Worker power, economic power, is real power—it's more powerful than those bombs Israel is dropping.

At the same time, between the 2014 and 2021 actions, BTB activists recognized the limitations of leaning too heavily on a single union local for support through their ongoing conversations with ILWU Local 10 members and leaders who intermittently expressed frustration and concern at the expectations many left groups in the Bay Area have of them to take action on their behalf. As a key bridgebuilder explained, if vessels are not worked and the shipping companies choose to no longer

do business with the port as a result, that undermines members' willingness to take further actions in the future (Interview, ILWU Local 10 member). As a result, bridgebuilders urged BTB to organize actions in other ports to make the possibility of diverting ships less attractive (Interview, ILWU Local 10 member).

While actions outside of Oakland in 2014 had been organized spontaneously by disparate community organizations in response to the call for blockades, by 2021, AROC had set up a sophisticated organizational infrastructure to support the development of BTB work in other parts of the US and beyond (Interview, AROC Organizer, 2022). Based out of AROC's San Francisco office and utilizing staff resources and the volunteer labor of 60–70 activists, BTB developed a set of committees covering areas such as research (primarily focused on tracking ships' movements), contact with the media and worker outreach. The text alert system, developed for Oakland, was also exported to other groups.

At the same time, as BTB would discover in 2014 and again in 2021, the Bay Area political context presented unique opportunities for organizing that are absent in much of the country. As one Bay Area community activist put it in a 2019 interview:

> I was immediately struck when I got here by how, in some ways, the Bay Area is like a mecca of activism in the United States . . . that, I think, led the coalitions to be made up of robust contingents of people that could each turn out hundreds of people in numbers . . . And if you look at other areas, you know, with maybe similar population or greater population but less of an organizing culture, it really is just how many people your group can turn out on a given day that constitutes your pressure in the public sphere.

As explained below, the difficulties that BTB faced in building similar coalitions with union locals and turning out comparable numbers of community members at other ports posed formidable challenges to the campaign's ability to carry out successful actions.

Seattle: "Every day the Zim ship didn't dock was a win for us"

The first BTB action in the Pacific Northwest took place in 2014 at the Port of Tacoma with a community picket line of approximately 150 activists to blockade the Zim Chicago (Mangaliman and Pestaño, 2014). Protesters were met by police and roadblocks; local media reported altercations between protesters and the dockworkers (Small, 2014). Despite the lack of support from ILWU Local 23 in Tacoma, the disruption created logistical difficulties for the port, resulting in a delay for Zim (Block the Boat Northwest, 2014). However, the ship ultimately docked successfully at another terminal (Kaiman, 2014). Although the results were mixed, the Tacoma action helped to lay the groundwork for future BTB actions in the Pacific Northwest.

In 2021, Falastiniyat, a Palestinian feminist collective, led an action at the Port of Seattle with support from AROC in San Francisco. AROC's text messaging infrastructure and online platforms were used to galvanize community support and AROC provided additional resources and advice. As in Oakland, Seattle organizers had the advantage of mobilizing community members to a port in close proximity to an urban center with easy access for the public. The organizers focused on rapid mobilization, ensuring a substantial community presence at the picket lines upon the ZIM San Diego's anticipated arrival. Seattle protesters were initially successful in blocking the ZIM San Diego from docking for nearly 2 weeks by the threat of a community picket line. The main protest took place once the ship finally docked on June 12 with approximately 250 protestors convening on Harbor Island. Unloading was delayed for six more days as dockworkers respected the community picket line.

Falastiniyat had strong relationships with local community organizations, enabling mobilization of community picket lines. However, their ties to the union were much weaker. The urgency

of the situation in Palestine and the dates of coordinated national action led the group to prioritize taking action rapidly, leaving them with less time than in Oakland to build strong linkages with dockworkers. In addition, according to a union member interviewed for the project, the Seattle local of the ILWU was politically divided between left and right, with substantial support for Bernie Sanders, on the one hand, and the anti-vaxxer movement, which had galvanized the right, on the other. Earlier negative experiences of community action during the 2011 Occupy Movement had sewn seeds of suspicion towards community activists seeking support from the union. These internal political divisions within the union underscore the importance of local union context, where ideological orientation and past experiences with protest shaped the receptivity to community action and complicated bridge-building efforts

In contrast to Oakland, where extensive research, education and worker outreach served as precursors to the refusal by dockworkers from Local 10 to cross the community picket-line, these activities were more limited in Seattle due to the prioritization of a rapid response. During the picket in Seattle, organizers disseminated informational flyers and attempted to engage in discussions with ILWU members. However, as a community organizer noted in an interview, "We were not able to speak with them at the union hall, or set up any sort of webinar . . . we were very much scrambling. There were conversations that were led by rank-and-file members that may have been influenced by us in the union hall, but we were not physically there."

This generated tension within the politically-divided local union. "Having the membership learn about the issue for the first time when they get to work and see protesters standing between them and their jobs is never a good thing," one union member interviewed noted. While they sought to make contact with executive board members, community organizers never spoke at a union meeting, and communication remained ad hoc. The lack of pre-existing relationships with the union meant that community organizers struggled to gain traction.

Nevertheless, bridgebuilders in the union worked to build support for the action among members, against a backdrop of significant internal debate and disagreement (Interview, ILWU Local 19 member, 2022). They also played an important role in advising community organizers, providing instrumental information regarding the ship's scheduling, the port's management and the internal politics of the union. And they provided invaluable guidance in navigating the intricate geographic layout of the port.

For the community activists, "every day that ZIM remained delayed and unable to offload cargo was considered a victory" (Interview). When protesters were finally alerted that the ship would be unloaded, approximately one hundred community members assembled at the gates. However, this was far fewer than the numbers needed to effectively hold the line or justify a health and safety argument to prevent work. Port management and the police had bided their time, waiting for the momentum to die down before dislodging the protesters (Interview, ILWU Local 19 member). The police announced that protestors were blocking traffic and escalated the situation, including the use of bikes to push against protesters' faces, and made arrests. Eventually, organizers were forced to call off the picket due to the risk to people's safety (Interview, community activist). Thirteen protesters were arrested and one individual was held for interrogation for several hours. The smaller numbers at this late stage, coupled with divided support within the union, made the picket more vulnerable to repression, reinforcing the need for a large and sustained presence to deter police intervention.

The Seattle action highlighted the tension between the need for urgent mobilization in response to changing events in Palestine and the importance of establishing a deep-rooted and durable relationship with the union. Bridgebuilders played a crucial role in rapid mobilization with their practical knowledge of the port. However, they faced challenges in building support among fellow members due to the political dynamics within the local. Divided support among the union

membership meant community activists had to sustain large pickets over an extended period, unlike in Oakland, where stronger alignment helped consolidate action. This prolonged presence exposed activists to a more aggressive police response. The result underscored both the vulnerability to repression of actions reliant solely on outside presence and the importance of long-term relationship building with labor as a protective buffer. Without buy-in from rank-and-file workers and groundwork laid in advance by community organizers, even a well-timed and morally urgent action can falter.

Long Beach: "If you don't work with labor long-term, you're done"

In August 2014, protesters at the Port of Long Beach joined the Block the Boat campaign (Hagbard, 2014), delaying the Zim Savannah vessel from docking for 24 hours that October (Silver, 2014c). Unlike in Oakland and Seattle, however, community activists in Long Beach faced formidable challenges in turning out sufficient numbers for the picket lines due to the port's location far from the urban center of Los Angeles. The action was called by an ad-hoc coalition of Southern California activists. As one organizer explained, it was "Oakland that inspired a lot of us and so we said we could do that, let's work on this" (Interview, Long Beach community activist 1). Organizationally, the coalition was composed of committees responsible for monitoring and gathering information about the movement of ZIM ships at the port, as well as communicating and coordinating actions with unions and other BTB groups (Interview, Long Beach community activist 2). Coordination of action dates with other BTB groups through AROC helped to generate momentum. There was some contact with ILWU Local 13 through bridge-builders with existing connections. However, connections were far more limited than in the Oakland as a result of the moderate political orientation of the local and its limited history of joint action with the community.

Undeterred by the lack of support from union leadership, Southern California activists reported in interviews that they had followed the example of their Northern California counterparts and tried to find ways to connect directly with members of both the ILWU and the Teamsters, who represent port truck drivers. They leafleted and spoke with truck drivers and longshore workers at the terminal gates as they waited to enter the port and they formed a committee to talk to employees where they parked, gathered, and took breaks. They also reached out to union members through mutual contacts, asking them to call on the union to support the action, or to individually sign on and provide information to help the protestors (Interview, Long Beach community activist 3).

Community activists interviewed for the project believed Local 13's reluctance to support the action stemmed from both a general opposition to political action in the workplace and concerns about the specific political issues involved, as a result of a pro-Israel contingent in the local and the local's more mainstream political orientation overall (Interview, Long Beach community activist 3). This created significant challenges for the success of the action, which hinged on the union invoking its health and safety clause and calling in the independent arbitrator – or finding another workaround – as had been done in 2014 and 2021 in Oakland. In addition, the far smaller number of community members on the picket line at any given time – in the range of 100–300 compared to the thousands that converged in Oakland – made the health and safety argument more difficult. Nevertheless, activists undertook critical research and educational work as part of the protest, developing documents on ZIM and its role in Israel's economy, as well as information on how to track ship movements. These materials were disseminated more widely, assisting BTB activists across the country. However, the Southern California coalition was not sustained beyond this 2014 action.

In 2021, when a national call came from the BTB coalition, a new ad-hoc group was formed in Southern California. On August 21, a group of 200 protestors gathered at the port's entrance to

block the ZIM Volans from docking. On the day of the picket, and in contrast to the 2014 action, protesters were met with a heavy police presence, with officers in riot gear deployed to the scene. Protesters managed to disrupt the unloading of the ship for several hours but the ship eventually docked. Police dispersed the protesters, echoing BTB experiences in Seattle and Port Elizabeth, and 31 people were arrested.

Similarly to Seattle, this action was called on short notice due to the situation in Palestine. Unfortunately, organizing infrastructure and relations with the union had not been developed or maintained since the previous action. Although activists did engage in leafleting at the port, the organizing momentum on the community side significantly outpaced the development of strong relations with the union, resulting in limited participation by union members. Reflecting on their experiences in 2014 and 2021, community organizers stressed the need to prioritize education and outreach in collaboration with the union. They also highlighted the importance of maintaining continuous organizing infrastructure between periods of heightened activity. As one organizer put it, the key take away was "if you don't work with labor long-term – you're done . . . there's just no way this would have been a useful and effective stoppage without getting Local 13 to agree to invoking a safety clause." (Interview, Long Beach community activist 4) At the same time, organizers emphasized that there were fewer opportunities for developing a strong relationship with Local 13 than with Local 10 in the Bay Area because of the local's history and politics as well as the scarcity of effective bridge builders in the union (Interview, Long Beach community activists 3 and 4). Combined with the far less favorable location of the port from the perspective of mobilizing large numbers of community members, success in Los Angeles remained elusive.

New York: "We knew we had a lot of work to do"

In 2021, Palestine activists in the New York area organized an action to blockade Zim at Port Elizabeth in New Jersey. Drawing on lessons from Oakland, activists understood the importance of building support within the union. As one activist put it, "we knew we had a lot of work to do because nobody had any contacts with the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA). . . it was a whole different union. . . didn't have that radical history and didn't have ties to the issue of Palestine" (Tova Frye interviewed in Arria, 2021). The ILA, which represents dockworkers on the Gulf Coast and East Coast, had long been known for the conservatism of its national leadership with respect to US foreign policy (Cole, 2018; Erem and Durrenberger, 2008), exemplified by the union's hundred year plus long pledge to continue to handle US military cargo during strikes (ILA website).

The New York/New Jersey activists were encouraged, however, by a May 21 statement from the International Dockworkers Council (2021), a global union organization, condemning "the Israeli massacre of civilians and children in Palestine" and calling on

> all dockworkers to show the solidarity that has been demonstrated so many times in so many conflicts. We cannot allow ourselves to be complicit in this violence by working on ships that operate war merchandise destined to massacre civilians and children. Let us not allow this to stain our name or tarnish our consciences. It is in struggles and defeats that one learns solidarity and empathy for the groups that suffer inequalities and abuses. The only way to win this war is with the solidarity and empathy of all.

The letter was signed by IDC International Labor Coordinator Jordi Aragunde and IDC General Coordinator Dennis Daggett, Executive Vice President of the ILA nationally and President of Local 1804–1841, one of the locals representing ILA members in the New York/New Jersey area (ILA website). Activists hoped that Daggett's signing of the letter would provide an opening for

building support or a BTB action. However, "We tried emailing them, we tried calling them . . . [we] couldn't get any response to even be able to meet with them," one organizer recalled (ILA, 2023).

A further complication stemmed from the fact that unlike on the US West Coast, ILA members in New York/New Jersey are dispatched through an electronic system rather than a hiring hall, meaning that "there's no place where the workers gather" (Interview, New York/New Jersey community activist 1). As a result, "Flyering the workers was not gonna be an easy thing. Since the pandemic . . . access to the port had been even more restricted" (Interview, New York/New Jersey community activist 1). Instead, community activists pursued contacts with rank-and-file members who had been involved with efforts to reform the ILA. Community members reported in interviews that although ILA contacts were helpful in providing an overview of the geography of the terminal, union dispatching procedures and shift information, as well as advice on how to frame the issue to fellow members, ultimately none of the ILA members got involved in organizing the action or were present on the day (Interview, New York/New Jersey community activist 2).

The physical and human geography of the port itself proved to be a formidable obstacle to organizing efforts as well. As one organizer explained in a 2022 interview, "The access to get there was more difficult, not like the Port of Oakland. So we had to give complex instructions. . . people coming from New York had to leave pretty early, you're talking about getting up possibly five o'clock, it was very complex." In addition, the final leg of the journey to the terminal gate was only accessible by car via a privately owned road with nowhere to park and no facilities.

Furthermore, following 9/11, the ports in the New York area were highly securitized, providing a marked contrast with the relative accessibility of West Coast ports. When two Labor for Palestine activists showed up to leaflet workers one morning in the lead up to the first action, they were met by private port security, followed by a large fleet of local police cars along with officials from the federal Department of Homeland Security, responsible for monitoring terrorist activity at the ports (Interviews, New York/New Jersey community activists 1 and 2). Homeland Security determined that any BTB protests would need to take place from a penned-in area, significantly decreasing protesters' chances of speaking with union members on their way in to work.

Despite the difficulties of building a coalition with the union and accessing the terminal, a first action was organized on June 6 targeting the Zim Tarragona and a second action was organized on July 21 targeting the Zim Qingdao, with approximately 100–150 community-based participants on each occasion. Despite leaving the Homeland Security designated protest area for the gate to the terminal on both occasions, most workers were already inside and the protesters were not able to dissuade any workers from entering. The ships were successfully unloaded (Arria, 2021). Like the Long Beach case, then, the New York/New Jersey case highlights the significant obstacles created by lack of support and involvement of the union, as well as by human and physical geography.

Discussion

Comparative analysis across the cases pinpoints the contextual and organizing variables that determined the effectiveness of BTB's community picket lines across four locations. The following discussion examines these internal and external factors (Table 3).

Contextual variables: Geography and the importance of union politics

Geography significantly shaped outcomes in all four cases. As Herod (1998: 123, 125) notes, while under the best-case scenario, "labor organizers may bring . . . traditions of militancy and labor politics developed elsewhere," at the same time, "similar events may produce quite different

Table 3. The table compares key contextual and organizing variables related to Block the Boat community picket lines as reported by community based activists organizing at four ports: Oakland, Seattle, Long Beach, and Port Elizabeth.

Variables	Oakland	Seattle	Long Beach	Port Elizabeth
Union politics	Left-wing	Polarized left/ right	Centrist	Right-wing leadership on foreign policy (Membership politics unknown)
Location	Adjacent to city center	Adjacent to city center	Located in urban periphery	Located in urban periphery
Physical access to worksite	Yes	Yes	Yes	No – privatized roads and presence of multiple police agencies
Presence of bridgebuilders	Yes	Yes	No	No
Research, education and worker outreach	Substantial	Limited (due to time pressures)	Substantial	Limited (due to lack of access)
Mobilizing capacity and size of community picket lines	Substantial (several thousand)	Substantial (but dwindled to 100 over a continuous ten-day period of action)	Modest (100–300)	Modest (100–150)

outcomes in different places depending on the local context within which they develop." While geography is a contextual factor largely outside of the control of community activists, understanding the impediments or opportunities it creates is critical to selecting the most promising targets for organizing. Key factors included the proximity of ports to city centers, public access to ports both in terms of transportation linkages and privatization of roads, the presence of a physical hiring hall and the extent to which port spaces have been securitized.

Oakland and Seattle, whose ports are located just next to city centers, provided conditions more conducive to the formation of mass community pickets than Long Beach and Port Elizabeth. The layout of the Port of Long Beach and its distance from vibrant activist communities in Los Angeles created difficulties in maintaining a regular community picket line. Port Elizabeth provided an even more extreme case of geographic distance and inaccessibility due to its distance from New York City, the lack of public transportation linkages, the privatized roads leading to the terminal gates, the lack of a physical hiring hall and the presence of multiple police agencies.

Organizers drew heavily on ride-share practices developed in Oakland to ensure that Los Angeles and New York based activists could attend. In addition, AROC provided logistical support across all the cases through use of the "text alert" system developed in Oakland to quickly mobilize community activists when new information on the ZIM ships' movements became available. Nevertheless, community participation in both the Long Beach and Port Elizabeth cases was in the hundreds rather than in the thousands, as in Oakland and Seattle. This had important repercussions as the strongest legal argument for unionized dockworkers to not cross the community picket lines was on health and safety grounds (i.e., that doing so could lead to altercations) – an argument that carried significantly less weight when numbers on the ground were too thin to convincingly picket the gates.

Organizers faced particularly adverse conditions at Port Elizabeth because of the dramatic increase in securitization in the post-9/11 era, highlighting the importance of human geography in terms of the social production of spaces that facilitate or inhibit collective action (Cowen, 2014). On the first occasion they attempted to leaflet workers in the run up to the action, the two activists who arrived were met almost immediately by a cavalcade of local police, port police and Homeland Security, and threatened with arrest for leafleting on private property. On the day of the main action, activists were restricted to protesting from a designated "free speech zone" which made it all but impossible to carry out effective conversations with workers. For the New York based organizers, these experiences brought home the importance of building strong ties with the rank-and-file outside of the workplace ahead of any future actions – that is, through visiting bars frequented by dockworkers or through sympathetic bridgebuilders in the community, given the absence of a physical hiring hall. Finally, the cases underline the importance of mobilizing large numbers to community pickets as a buffer against police repression, which was seen in three of the four cases (Seattle, Port Elizabeth, Long Beach) when picketers numbered in the hundreds rather than the thousands.

The pre-existing politics and history of the union locals formed a critical component of the context for organizing as well. ILWU Local 10 in Oakland had a strong history of leftwing politics and a decades-long practice of respecting community-based picket lines on principle and as an opportunity for the union to flex its muscles to the employer in a relatively low-stakes manner (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013: 236–237). In contrast, the politically moderate ILWU Local 13 in Los Angeles viewed external community-based protests as a distraction from core union issues, and ultimately, outside of the union's remit. ILWU Local 19 in Seattle fell somewhere in between, as a local divided between left and right leaning members, with some history of support for community-based action. However, a negative experience with community protesters during the 2011 Occupy Movement had soured many in the Seattle local on community-based actions, sewing seeds of suspicion during the BTB protests. Finally, the ILA in New York/New Jersey was in many respects Local 10's polar opposite: a union with little history of workplace engagement with external political issues and strong support for US foreign policy. The depth of understanding of these political histories, as well as legal constraints on industrial action and potential workarounds, shaped the effectiveness of activists' work with each local union.

Organizing variables: Bridgebuilders and the importance of research, education, outreach and community mobilization

In each case, the presence of effective "bridge builders" (Mayer, 2009b; Robinson, 2020; Senier et al., 2007) within the unions was a "make or break" factor for the success of community pickets. Bridge-builders played a key role in educating and organizing fellow union members; helping community activists to negotiate the structure and culture of the union; and supporting the coalitions in identifying common goals and resolving tensions. Across the cases, bridge-building wasn't simply a matter of the absence or presence of politically like-minded allies in unions but of the "quality of the organizational relationships" that were built (Tattersall, 2010: 167). Fostering a genuine "culture of exchange" (Tattersall, 2010) and building "relationships of trust" (Robinson, 2020) between unions and community organizations, then, was fundamental. Bridge-builders helped sensitize community organizers to issues that may not otherwise have been apparent to outsiders. They built support among both rank-and-file members and, at times, leadership of branches, and supported community organizations in navigating internal pushback. Tensions and misunderstandings were not uncommon in these labor-community partnerships, so success hinged on the capacity and commitment of key activists to reach resolutions that maintained the

organizing relationship. The contrast between the Oakland and Seattle cases is instructive here: while both relationships experienced strain, AROC's commitment to preserving and strengthening the partnership with Local 10 during and after the actions was critical to their success.

In addition, careful research into the specificities of the workplace and the internal politics of each local union played a critical role in enabling community activists to navigate a complex terrain for organizing. AROC supported organizing across all four sites by building independent capacity for research that was then adopted and built upon in other locations. This research included production of a guide, collaboratively produced by community activists and union activists, for tracking ships and deciphering port geographies to determine the most suitable terminal locations and timing for community pickets. Other key issues for research included understanding internal political divisions within the unions and legal constraints on industrial action; understanding how to create maximum disruption for shipping companies; and understanding how to translate global issues to the local context.

The early success of BTB in Oakland led activists to expect that they might find similar success in other ports. However, as they began organizing in Seattle, Long Beach and Port Elizabeth, they quickly understood that the internal political landscape of the unions was highly varied, with significant consequences for coalition-building. Within the United States, the prevalence of service unionism and the prohibition on political strikes and secondary action since 1947 (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013: 236–237), have reinforced the idea that addressing workplace issues is the only appropriate reason for workplace action while political work remains largely electoral. Moving unions to take workplace action for political ends therefore requires community organizers and bridge builders to first win the argument that the workplace is an appropriate venue for political action by trade unionists and then to win the argument on the specific political question at stake.

Yet, even in ILWU Local 10, which has a long history of taking action on external political issues, collaboration with social movements has been far from automatic as the union has at times felt overburdened by community requests for support, particularly in the wake of the 2011 Occupy Movement. Thus, both in cases where unions are likely to be sympathetic and in cases where they are likely to be antagonistic, community mobilizations like BTB stand to benefit from developing a methodical and carefully planned approach to education and outreach. Embedding education and outreach work at the core of organizing is especially important when the political issue at stake – in this case, Palestinian human rights – is one that has not yet won universal support within the labor movement.

Comparative analysis of the cases suggests that the education and worker outreach process worked best when it was undertaken in a slow and methodical manner targeting both union leaders through closed door meetings and the rank-and-file through leafleting in union halls and outside the workplace, as well as through invitations by sympathetic union bridgebuilders to speak at membership meetings. In addition, outreach was most effective when the strategic aims and rationale for engagement were carefully targeted for the local union audience, for example, by drawing out the connections between Palestinian liberation and Black Lives Matter in outreach with the majority Black union membership in Oakland. Community organizers who rushed to take action before building strong relationships and support within the union struggled to deliver effective actions.

AROC, based in San Francisco, played a critical role across all four cases through serving as an "anchor organization," sharing learnings from earlier actions and maintaining the critically important relationship with ILWU Local 10 over a number of years. Bridge-builders from Local 10 in turn played a key role via AROC in briefing community activists across the cases, as well as passing along sympathetic contacts in the other union locals. AROC supported community activists across all four sites in doing education and outreach with union members by producing adaptable

flyers and messaging on the history and role of Zim in Israel; the significance of BTB actions to Palestinians; and connections between BTB and anti-racist organizing in the United States.

Nevertheless, activists faced trade-offs in balancing the need for a forceful and rapid response to Israeli military attacks on Gaza with the need to engage in deep organizing to build strong and lasting support among union members who might not yet share their political commitments. In Oakland, BTB activists heeded the advice of ILWU Local 10 bridge-builders and delayed taking action for a number of weeks in order to prioritize outreach and education through daily visits to speak with union members at the hiring hall and through meetings and discussions with the union's leadership. The result was a strong consensus among ILWU members not to cross the community picket line. In Seattle, by contrast, BTB activists prioritized a rapid community response over strengthening relationships with union members and leadership, leading to tensions in the organizing relationship. The relative lack of attention to membership outreach and education in Seattle, as well as the politically divided context within the union, meant that only a minority of members were "on board" with the action. As a result, when the community picket line inevitably thinned over time, the "health and safety" argument carried less weight. Police then moved in to disperse protesters and the dockworkers returned to work. In Long Beach and Port Elizabeth, community picket lines themselves were considerably smaller, and support from the union significantly weaker, accounting for the more muted actions in both locations.

Finally, the ability to mobilize large picket lines proved a critical factor shaping the overall effectiveness of the BTB campaign. Size mattered not only for visibility and media impact but because large turnouts created the conditions for legally defensible refusal to enter the workplace. Moreover, organizing infrastructure, including coordinated rideshares and well-tested communication systems like text alerts, enabled community organizations to rapidly mobilize and sustain large numbers of supporters over multiple shifts. In addition to providing a legally defensible means for workers to refuse to enter the workplace, this also served as a powerful deterrent to aggressive police action. Larger crowds created a buffer against police escalation, especially when unions publicly signaled their unwillingness to work under tense conditions..

Community activists drew important organizing lessons from evaluating the trade-offs between the need for an urgent response to pressing situations of injustice, on the one hand, and the need to establish strong and enduring alliances with unions, on the other. As one Bay Area community activist put it,

> The lesson for Block the Boat I guess is just that nothing less than the most meticulous, the most conscientious, the most practical and painstaking organizing is going to make the point that we want it to, and that means you can't rush it. You have to postpone it sometimes, and it means you have to talk to people and really find out what it is that they want to be fully onboard and not just begrudgingly sort of like giving you lip service, which is something that unfortunately it's very tempting for people, including now with Palestine, to be satisfied with.

Conclusion

Comparative analysis of port-based solidarity actions for Palestine in Oakland, Long Beach, Seattle, and Port Elizabeth in 2014 and 2021 indicates the significance of both contextual and organizing variables in shaping outcomes. Key contextual factors include the proximity of the ports to urban centers, public access and securitization of the terminals, and the history and politics of the union locals. While activists cannot alter geographical factors or unions' pre-existing politics, greater attention to the constraints and opportunities they provide can enable more effective selection of targets for organizing. In addition, wherever activists chose to focus their efforts, their

ability to understand the specificities of the local context and implement effective education and worker outreach proved crucial for gaining worker buy-in and ensuring effective short- and long-term coalitions. Successful cases involved early and continuous engagement with bridgebuilders within unions who played a key role in enabling the identification of shared goals, the development of strategies and the negotiation of tensions. Overall, the success of community pickets depended on the ability of community organizers to foster genuine, collaborative and long-term relationships with union activists, even in the face of substantial disagreements.

A strategic approach to building community-union coalitions holds the potential to catalyze changes within unions that go beyond the immediate action, propelling greater political engagement by rank-and-file members and a transformed consciousness about the role and purpose of the labor movement. The BTB campaign serves as a compelling example of this. In the best-case scenario, the initial 2014 action in Oakland led to an enduring and mutually supportive coalition between AROC and ILWU Local 10, and a deepened appreciation by union members and leadership of the linkages between racist police violence in the United States and Israeli state policies. At the same time, however, bridge-builders from Local 10 cautioned AROC against over-reliance on a single branch for its actions. If ports lose shipping clients – and dockworkers lose work – because of the perception of excessive disruption due to labor-community action, support within the union for political action is likely to erode over time. For this reason, bridge-builders have argued that it is critical that organizers build an increased presence at other ports and workplaces to sustain future actions.

The implications of this study extend beyond the specific case of the BTB campaign to the broader, though understudied, phenomenon of community picket lines as a promising tactic of social movement unionism. Use of this tactic has been on an upwards trajectory in the United States and beyond since 2023 in the context of the global Palestine solidarity movement, targeting both transportation infrastructure and arms manufacturing plants. Coordinated labor-community actions of this kind represent one of the best possibilities for expanding the framework of "bargaining for the common good" to the private sector, and thus deserve further study. The potential to provide significant leverage to other social movements – such as the broader peace movement and the environmental movement – is substantial, though the topic has been underexplored. Nonetheless, as the case studies demonstrate, actions that go beyond symbolic protest to materially disrupting commerce require both mass mobilizations by the community and support and buy-in from workers and unions. A long-haul approach geared towards building strong and enduring organizing relationships upon a foundation of trust, respect and mutuality best serves this purpose.

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Appendix I. Interview participants.

Participant	Year of interview	Case study	Organization and role
Organizer	2019, 2022	Oakland	Arab Resource Organizing Center
ILWU Local 10 Activist (1)	2019, 2022	Oakland	Retired member, International Longshore and Warehouse Union; member, Transport Worker Solidarity Committee; member, Stop Zim Action Committee
ILWU Local 10 activist (2)	2022	Oakland	Retired member, International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 10
Students for Justice in Palestine activist	2019	Oakland	Activist, Students for Justice in Palestine, University of California, Berkeley
San Francisco community activist	2019	Oakland	Member, Transport Worker Solidarity Committee and Stop Zim Action Committee
ILWU-IBU member	2019	Oakland	Member, International Longshore and Warehouse Union – Inlandboatmen's Union (San Francisco Region) and Transport Worker Solidarity Committee
Seattle community activist	2022	Seattle	Member, Falastiniyat (Palestinian feminist collective)
ILWU Local 19 member	2022	Seattle	Member, International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 19
Long Beach community activist (1)	2022	Long Beach	Activist, ad hoc Block the Boat organizing committee
Long Beach community activist (2)	2022	Long Beach	Activist, ad hoc Block the Boat organizing committee
Long Beach community activist (3)	2022	Long Beach	Activist, ad hoc Block the Boat organizing committee
Long Beach community activist (4)	2022	Long Beach	Activist, ad hoc Block the Boat organizing committee
Labor for Palestine activist (1)	2022	New York/ New Jersey	Activist, Labor for Palestine
Labor for Palestine activist (2)	2022	New York/ New Jersey	Activist, Labor for Palestine
New York/New Jersey community activist (1)	2022	Oakland and New York/ New Jersey	Independent community activist
New York/New Jersey community activist (2)	2022	New York/ New Jersey	Independent community activist

Appendix II. Grey literature and media coverage.

Grey literature
Archival materials shared by participants
Materials from Long Beach (including leaflets, meeting minutes and correspondence) – 24 items
Materials from Oakland (union resolutions, leaflets) – 9 items
Materials from Port Elizabeth (leaflets, photos of actions, social media statements, press release) – 9 items
Materials from Seattle (leaflets) – 2 items
Website materials
AROC's Block the Boat website (leaflets, press releases, written and audiovisual campaign materials) – 13 items
Block the Boat NW's website (updates, press releases, calls to action, campaign materials) – 43 items
Social media pages
AROC Bay Area (X)
Falastiniyat Seattle (X)
Block the Boat for Gaza (Facebook)
Block the Boat Los Angeles (Facebook)
Block the Boat NW (Facebook)
Block the Boat NYC: Boycott Israeli Apartheid (Facebook)
Block the Boat Tampa (Facebook)
Falastiniyat (Facebook)
Media coverage
Mainstream media coverage
ABC7 San Francisco – (1 audiovisual report)
Al Jazeera – (2 articles)
Associated Press (AP News) – (1 article)
East Bay Times – (2 articles)
Haaretz – (6 articles)
KIRO7 (Seattle) – (1 audiovisual report)
KPIX CBS News San Francisco – (5 audiovisual reports)
KUOW (Seattle) – (1 audiovisual report)
Middle East Eye – (2 articles)
NBC Bay Area – (2 audiovisual reports)
Newsweek – (1 article)
OC Weekly (1 articles)
Portside – (1 articles)
Reuters – (1 article)
San Francisco Chronicle – (2 articles)
South Seattle Emerald (1 articles)
The Guardian – (3 articles)
The Jewish Forward – (1 articles)
The Seattle Times – (3 articles)
The Times of Israel – (7 articles)

(Continued)

Appendix II. (Continued)

Activist Media coverage

+972 (1 article)
Common Dreams – (3 articles)
Counterpunch – (8 articles)
Democracy Now! – (4 audiovisual reports)
Electronic Intifada – (9 articles/podcast)
In These Times – (1 article)
Jacobin – (5 articles)
Labor Notes (1 article)
Liberation News – (2 articles)
Mondoweiss – (11 articles)
Monthly Review (2 articles)
Oakland Voices – (1 article)
Palestine Chronicle – (2 articles)
Socialist Worker – (3 articles)
The Intercept – (1 article)
The Oaklandside (1 article)
The Seattle Globalist – (1 article)
TruthOut – (3 articles)
Vice – (1 article)