

The Power of Civil Society

by Mary Beaudoin

A few weeks prior to the Israeli military assault on the Free Gaza flotilla, boycotts and divestment campaigns were in support of breaking the siege of Gaza. Students at Evergreen College, Washington State voted to divest funds from Israeli bonds. Italy's largest supermarket COOP and Nordiconad announced a boycott of the Israeli produce company. Germany's largest bank, Deutsche Bank, announced divestment from Elbit Systems, the Israeli firm supplying technology for the Israeli military and wall (supplies for walls both on Palestinian land in Israel; on the U.S. border with Mexico). Sweden's largest national pension funds were divested from Elbit (Norway did likewise a year ago). The Swedish Port Workers Union planned to stop handling Israeli cargo. Britain's largest union, Unite, voted to promote divestment from Israeli.

After the Israeli attack on the Free Gaza flotilla, there were outcries from governments of many, many Middle East and western nations; they summoned Israeli ambassadors in their countries and issued strong statements of condemnation and protest to the world. But the people who are not heads of state or representatives of their government stood first and are standing still in solidarity, determined to stop the suffering and strangulation of Gaza. They continue to employ several different tactics of nonviolent direct action to overcome the murderous violence perpetrated against the Palestinian people by the Israel government, with the tacit or direct support of the United States. In the face of international condemnation, the United States has since expressed enough disapproval of Israel's actions to influence an easing of some goods entering Gaza, but appears to approve a continuation of the siege—which is precisely why the Free Gaza Movement needs to continue. In their words: “Our voyages to defy Israel's blockade are legal and necessary, as civil society is compelled to step up to defend human rights when governments refuse to do so, and we are already organizing another voyage called Freedom Flotilla Two.”

In the meantime, the Rachel Corrie, a cargo ship named after the young woman run over by an Israeli bulldozer as she was trying to protect a Palestinian family's home, was on the way to Gaza on June 4. The ship, flying under Malaysian and Irish flags, carried hundreds of tons of medical equipment and cement, as well as 20 tons of paper donated by the people of Norway to UN-run schools in Gaza. Unfortunately, it was apprehended by the Israeli military and its passengers arrested. However, that won't stop the ships from coming. The Mariam, a ship flying under the Lebanese flag, carrying only women—Muslim and Christian who have come together on a spiritual, as well as humanitarian quest—was reported to be preparing to set sail for Gaza with a cargo of medicine at the end of June. The women are from Syria, Egypt, Kuwait, several European countries, and the United States.

Ret. Col. and former diplomat Ann Wright, who was part of the Gaza flotilla has embarked on a speaking tour throughout the United States, including a talk in Minneapolis, sponsored by the Middle East Committee of Women Against Military Madness. She is dedicated to breaking the Siege of Gaza.

People have been holding rallies in cities since the siege began, but are joined with more support than ever now. On June 21, the San Francisco Chronicle reported that longshoremen refused to cross the picket line when hundreds of demonstrators protesting the blockade of Gaza prevented an Israeli cargo ship from unloading for a day. And the following musicians canceled concert tours in Israel: Santana, Gil Scott-Heron, Snoop Dog, Sting, Elvis Costello, Klaxons, Gorillaz, Pixies.

Free Gaza made this statement: “We will pursue legal action around the world, intensify boycott, divestment and sanctions efforts, and continue to send ships to Gaza until the illegal blockade is ended...”

Civil society has been active throughout the world. Across Africa women in some nations have banded together, empowering themselves to achieve just victories. Their success stories need to be widely known and celebrated, as well. Closer to home 12,800 nurses in Minnesota, in the largest nurses’ strike ever in the nation, picketed for better patient care. And teachers with the support of their union, Education Minnesota, defeated attempts by the governor, some state legislators and corporate media to have them replaced with non-union people, untrained and inexperienced in the field of education. It’s all proof that once engaged and working together, people can start to take back their power, achieve amazing things and begin to get the world in balance.

Sources: IfAmericansKnew, Free Gaza, Gaza March, Reuters, San Francisco Chronicle Telegraph.uk, tcdailyplanet, Education Minnesota. Polly Mann contributed to research for this article.