

LABOR PAEANS—February 2010

by Ira Grupper

*The Gaza Freedom March*

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*This column is about the Gaza Strip. So we have no room to discuss the U.S. economy's impact on the U.S. working class: mortgage foreclosures still swamping federal efforts; six million people with no income but food stamps; the hoopla when GE announced it would create 400 jobs in Louisville (of course, that will bring the number up to a total of about 4,500 workers—not the 26,000 in 1974). Unemployment is still on the rise in the land of the brave and the home of the free.*

We turn, instead, to the Middle East, and, specifically, Gaza, that tiny slice of land sandwiched between Israel and Egypt. Its population of 1,500,000 Palestinians, perhaps the densest compacting of humans on earth, is in a very slow death spiral: Israel will not allow food convoys in. Nor can Palestinian women with pregnancy complications easily, if at all, get to hospitals outside Gaza. Some women have literally died near the border checkpoints because Israel would not let them through.

This is collective punishment, a crime against humanity, a crime recognized by the civilized world as barbaric, retributive.

And now Egypt, ruled by Hosni Mubarak's iron hand all these years, and with that same hand stretched out for U.S. aid, is bowing to Israeli pressure, and maybe U.S. pressure, and walling in the Palestinians.

Hence, the Gaza Freedom March. One thousand four hundred people, hailing from forty three nations around the world, massed in late December in Cairo, Egypt. We attempted to enter Gaza, to march in solidarity with our walled-in Palestinian sisters and brothers.

How splendid were these internationalists, with so many different languages, different freedom songs. The Italians were singing the anti-fascist song of the 1930's, *Avanti Popolo*, the Americans with songs from the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. The South Africans, from their labor federation COSATU, came with a plan of action for Gaza based on their experience fighting apartheid in their homeland, now a free country.

We were young. We were old. We included Muslims, Christians, Jews, freethinkers. Our skins were light; our skins were dark. We embraced 85 year old Hedy Epstein, a Jewish survivor of Adolph Hitler's Holocaust, where her family perished, saying to Israel: "not in my name."

We spoke with a Scottish brogue, a French lilt, a Norwegian pitch. We were multi-national, international.

Our goal was to enter Gaza, where thousands of Palestinians would be waiting to march with us in a unified call for justice from all over the world: let my people live. Simultaneously, peace forces within Israel, Palestinian and Jewish, would march to the Israeli border with Gaza (Erez checkpoint), demanding freedom for the Palestinians in Gaza.

And there were the Egyptian national security police, with hard hats and hard-plastic visors, with large shields, with guns, with truncheons. And with a phalanx of plainclothes guardians of the law.

The Egyptian officials, it seemed, wanted no international incidents, no mass beatings, jailings, or worse. Still, there were a few beatings, a number of peaceful protesters roughed-up by the police.

The main leadership of our gathering, the U.S. peace group Code Pink, met with the United Nations representatives, but they were unable to influence the Egyptian government, it seemed. Meetings with officials at the U.S. embassy went nowhere. Ironically, the French government, hardly known for its progressivism nowadays, supported the French Gaza Freedom Marchers, or so it seemed.

President Mubarak's wife was different from her husband. She negotiated a compromise, where one hundred, from among our world assembly of 1,400, would be allowed to travel to Gaza. There was mixed reaction to this proposal—it was finally rejected by many leaders in Gaza: all or nothing. Sixty of our number, including many Gazans who had not been home in years, did manage to get into Gaza.

Your columnist participated in the U.N. demonstration, and a massive protest in the street, near the Egyptian Museum, with its world-renowned mummy collection. We blocked a main thoroughfare, and traffic was snarled. The Egyptian national security police pushed us back, and we were surrounded by them on three sides, and a wall behind us.

We learned that the morning television talk shows in Cairo, much like their U.S. counterparts—with mostly ads for shampoo, happy talk, inconsequential banter and fluff—discussed the Gaza Freedom March in depth. Coverage was good from many parts of the world. The U.S. press seemed less receptive.

### **The truth about Gaza, actually, has been known to the world for a long time.**

About a year ago, the spokesperson for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), Christopher Gunness, pointed out that, according to international law, the Gaza Strip is still considered under Israeli occupation. Israel had claimed it ended its occupation of Gaza in 2005. Truth is, Gaza has actually been under Israeli occupation (along with East Jerusalem and the West Bank) since 1967.

“In international law, there's the concept of effective control: if you control the airspace, the land and the sea borders of a place, you occupy it. And from the UN's point of view, there is one occupied territory. So if there's one Israeli soldier occupying the West Bank, then Gaza is also occupied. I'm afraid that is how international law works. Gaza has continued to be occupied,” explained Gunness. Of course, there are many Israeli soldiers occupying the West Bank.

Once Israel effectively turned much of Gaza into a debris-filled parking lot, it unilaterally called a ceasefire, bringing on praise from its western allies. The fact that the UN Security Council called for a ceasefire early on into the assault, and millions worldwide took to the streets in protest of Israel's massacres, is merely a footnote.

A year ago I returned from two weeks in Vietnam. Our delegation traveled to Hanoi, Da Nang, Hue, Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), the Cu Chi tunnels, and elsewhere. We saw old people and young people, the deformed victims of Agent Orange, a poisonous deadly defoliant made in the USA and

dropped on so many innocent Vietnamese people. Is the white phosphorus Israel has used in Gaza that much different?

The Israeli-Palestinian catastrophe would change in a heartbeat if US military support for Israel were to be cut, or--failing that--conditions were attached to any legislation that would bar Israel from using arms obtained from the US for anything but self-defense.

On the Palestinian side, the absence of a common representation, including both Fatah and Hamas, has left the Palestinians divided just when unity is most needed.

### **We must support any steps that make negotiations unavoidable for Israel.**

The plaintive plea from Gaza, a plea for justice for an oppressed people, cannot be ignored without serious consequences for humankind. Listen to the words of James Yates, an African American who fought in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939): "In July of 1936 General Francisco Franco led a revolt against the democratically elected government of Spain. Under his command was a well-trained army of mercenaries from Morocco. Italy's Benito Mussolini kept his pledge to Franco by sending one hundred thousand soldiers directly to Spain from the war in Ethiopia. From Germany Adolph Hitler sent artillery, technicians, a large air force and twenty-five thousand tanks. Meanwhile, the Portuguese dispatched two divisions of soldiers to aid Franco.

"These events in Spain stunned and shocked the conscience of people throughout Europe and the world. The government of Spain, in its effort to withstand the attack of the fascist armies, appealed to the democratic governments of the world for their support. Instead of sending help, the governments of England, France and the United States placed an embargo on arms to Spain.

"Nevertheless, freedom-loving people from around the world answered Spain's call for help. Within a few months thousands of men and women from many countries flocked to Spain with the hope of stopping fascism."

The fascists won this war, and soon World War II was upon us. The fighters in Spain were called "premature anti-fascists," and many historians have contended Spain was the dress rehearsal for World War II. When I look at Gaza I think of Spain, and I must agree with the words of Santayana: "Those who refuse to learn from history are condemned to repeat it."

I have been to Gaza a number of times. On one trip, with a dear American friend, we visited Elias Chacour, the Archbishop of Galilee of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church. He is also a noted author and peace activist keen to promote reconciliation between Arabs and Israelis. Father Chacour took us to a newly-opened Palestinian restaurant in Gaza, right on the beach near the deep-blue Mediterranean Sea.

What a wonderful lunch we had. I had St. Peter Fish; it was the best tilapia I had ever eaten. The Palestinians were building an airport a few miles away. Hopes for the future were bright. Then the airport was bombed. I really don't know if the restaurant survived, but I doubt it. Have we no decency? **Free Gaza. Free Gaza. Free Gaza.**

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