

# India's port workers strike is an act of anti-colonial solidarity with Gaza

Monday 4 March 2024, by [WILSON-BHATTACHARYA Ananya](#) (Date first published: 29 February 2024).

**Refusing to load Israeli weapons, Indian workers are rebuking the colonial ideologies of Zionism and Hindu nationalism, writes Ananya Wilson-Bhattacharya.**

On 18 February, news broke that port workers in India have been boycotting Israel by [refusing to load Israeli arms shipments](#) on account of its war on Gaza, which has [killed](#) more than 30,000 Palestinians, and calling for a ceasefire.

The workers are led by the [Centre of Indian Trade Unions](#) (CITU), a national level trade union affiliated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

This display of workers' solidarity with the Palestinian people is in sharp contrast to the Indian government's long established [alliance with Israel](#).

Despite [joining global calls for a ceasefire](#) in December, India - under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) - hypocritically remains the [top buyer of Israeli military exports](#) since the war on Gaza began.

But the port workers' boycott is more than simply an act of resistance against the government or a show of solidarity with the Palestinians: it is also, at multiple levels, an [anti-colonial move](#).

“The close relationship between Modi's India and Israel is not surprising. There are clear ideological links between Hindutva and Zionism”

## Shifting alliances

The boycott harks back to India's long history of solidarity with Palestine post-independence from British colonialism and prior to [the rise of the Hindu right](#), or Hindutva, in recent decades.

In 1947, India's secular post-independence government [voted against the partition of Palestine](#) at the United Nations General Assembly, with anti-colonial freedom fighter Mahatma Gandhi [condemning](#) the founding of the state of Israel as “inhuman”.

Now, with the rise of Hindu nationalism, Modi and the BJP [claim](#) that Hindutva is a return to India's pre-colonial order, [dismissing](#) critics of Hindutva as ‘colonial’.

However, the BJP government's current alliance with Israel - a settler-colonial state essentially [created](#) by Britain, at the time a colonial power with a large empire - is just one of many indicators of the true proximity of Hindutva ideology to colonialism.

For decades after independence, India's approach to the world was shaped by its experience of colonialism. But as the Israel-Hamas war has shown, the “non-aligned”

stance this produced may not be as unassailable as it once seemed, writes [@ShashiTharoor](#) ↓ <https://t.co/w3KyFY9n3J>

— The New Arab (@The\_NewArab) [November 16, 2023](#)

The [close relationship](#) between Modi's India and Israel is not surprising. There are clear ideological links between Hindutva and Zionism - Hindutva [advocates](#) for a Hindu supremacist state, with an eventual goal being the [ethnic cleansing of Muslims](#).

Meanwhile, Zionism advocates for a Jewish state and the erasure of the Palestinian people. Both ideologies are inherently hugely Islamophobic; V.D. Savarkar, a leading figure in the development of Hindutva, was known to [admire Zionism](#) and condoned Israel's illegal settlement building.

## **Resisting repression**

Since the current war on Gaza began on 7 October, the Modi regime has [clamped down heavily on pro-Palestine protests](#). This is no surprise given not only their alliance with Israel but also their wider authoritarian repression of protest in recent years.

For example, the government has regularly exploited the [Unlawful Activities Prevention Act](#) - which is widely considered unconstitutional and undemocratic - to silence dissenters including lawyers, journalists and activists.

In this context, the port workers' boycott is all the more radical - an act of international solidarity from within a country where resisting fascistic policies and violence at home [regularly results in jail](#).

The port workers' boycott is far from the Indian people's first major display of solidarity with Palestine during the current war. On 23 February, the organisation Indians for Palestine [released a statement](#) calling on the government to publicly endorse the International Court of Justice's ruling to stand against human rights violations of Palestinians in Gaza.

Previously in November, many in the southern state of [Kerala](#), including political parties and Muslim organisations, were joining protests, rallies and candlelight vigils calling for a ceasefire.

But the dock workers' boycott is especially significant in demonstrating the agency of Indian workers in relation to Israel and Palestine, particularly at a time when large numbers of Indian workers are being sent to work in Israel to [replace Palestinian labour](#).

“The Indian port workers' boycott is an unflinching show of anti-colonial solidarity not only with the people of Palestine but also with the indentured labourers being sent to Israel”

## **Workers' solidarity**

Long before the current war on Gaza began, India was sending indentured workers to Israel, with the Indian and Israeli governments [signing an agreement](#) in May 2023 for 42,000 Indian workers to be sent - including [34,000 within the construction industry](#).

This is an instrumental aspect of Israel's genocidal agenda: these Indian workers are being brought in to fill the gaps after the Israeli government revoked work permits for thousands of Palestinians in October, a key method of undermining their citizenship.

But as Indian trade unions have consistently pointed out, these Indian workers are simply being commodified by Israel with no consideration for their safety

Israel's construction sector is considered to be one of the most dangerous employment sectors, with [more than half of all workplace accidents](#) in the country in 2021 occurring in the construction industry.

The crisis of joblessness in India has encouraged workers to move to Israel, demonstrating how - despite long held claims of economic success - Modi's government is more concerned with strengthening international relations with colonial powers than with creating jobs for ordinary people at home.

The All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU) has [warned](#) the Modi government against investing in the Israeli occupation of Palestine and called upon Indian construction workers to refuse to work for Israel.

"The settler-colonial state - namely Israel - is making a deal with the BJP government to promote a new form of indenture and bonded labour," Clifton D'Rozario, national secretary of the AICCTU, tells me.

"We can see the export of Indian workers to Israel as a new geopolitics of indenture, in which two fascist states in alliance with each other are exploiting precarious and marginalised labour across borders."

As the AICCTU [notes](#), the history of indentured labourers being sent abroad from India is in fact also deeply colonial, with the British exporting workers to islands such as Mauritius and Fiji as far back as 1834.

Similarly to the workers migrating to Israel today, these historic indentured labourers were [seeking to escape poverty](#) but were ultimately heavily exploited, working in harsh conditions for low wages.

The export of indentured labourers to Israel is thus indicative of the ongoing use of colonial tactics by the Modi regime - in this case, directly furthering the genocidal agenda of a current colonial state.

In this context, the port workers boycotting Israeli equipment is a powerful anti-colonial statement, demonstrating Indian workers' choice to show solidarity with the Palestinians, the colonised, even as their far-right government exploits their fellow workers to strengthen its ties with the colonial state of Israel.

The Indian port workers' boycott is an unflinching show of anti-colonial solidarity not only with the people of Palestine but also with the indentured labourers being sent to Israel and used as commodities in Israel's genocidal project.

This boycott is a crucial step in Israel becoming increasingly isolated on the world stage as its war on Gaza intensifies and global calls for a ceasefire - from people and, thanks to overwhelming pressure, from governments - grow louder than ever.

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**P.S.**

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