

“No Arms to Apartheid”: South African Activists Target Israel-Linked Arms Trader

By Maya Bhardwaj

A group of South African activists shut down the main entrance to Paramount Group, an arms trader with ties to Israel.

On the morning of November 10, a small group of South African activists shut down the main entrance to Paramount Group, the African continent’s largest arms trader, located in Gauteng, about 20 minutes north of Johannesburg. Chants of “free, free, Palestine” and “shut down Paramount, no arms to apartheid” rang out in front of the sprawling factory in a quiet suburb in Midrand, and banners proclaimed Paramount Group to be “war criminals par excellence” and demanded that they “stop funding genocide.” Activists blocked cars from entering and exiting the Paramount Group facility. Some of the blockaders then marched to a higher-traffic street corner where they spoke out against Paramount Group, spoke with workers and passers-by about the call for Palestinian liberation, and poured fake blood on Paramount’s logo and on bundles representing murdered Palestinian children.

As the Israeli military’s assault on Palestine rages on, and the death toll in Gaza reaches over 11,000 people, the South African government has vocally criticized the violence that Israel has unleashed against civilians in Gaza in response to Hamas’s October 7 attack against Israel.

“We are ... extremely concerned at the continued killing of children and innocent civilians in the Palestinian territories and we believe the nature of response by Israel has become one of collective punishment,” South African Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor said. South Africa also [joined the diplomatic boycott](#) against Israel on November 6.

South Africa’s support for Palestinian liberation has a long history, with anti-apartheid movements long having noted parallels between the Palestinian liberation struggle and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

But activists urged the government to do more. They argued that it was unacceptable that the Israeli embassy in South Africa continues to function. And activists also pointed to Paramount Group’s factory in Midrand as another place for governmental action. They urged South African officials to take action against the group given its office in Israel and its involvement in global warfare, saying, “a factory of death is operating on our doorstep.” These activists gathered in a wildcat formation for direct action that they hoped would shed light on and interrogate these contradictions.

Paramount’s founder and executive chairman, Ivor Ichikowitz, is an [esoteric](#) and prominent “philanthropist” in South Africa. Paramount has made its money through involvement in armed conflicts across the world, by selling weapons, military equipment, technology and vehicles, and through defense contracts to dubious actors. This includes governmental and paramilitary forces involved in ethnic cleansing in Kazakhstan, state repression in Saudi Arabia, and fighting that provides cover for oil extractivism in Mozambique.

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Paramount trades arms through their Tel Aviv office, where they pay taxes and registration fees. Paramount’s Vice President for Europe, Shane Cohen, was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Israeli Army.

Ichikowitz and Paramount hold close ties to the South African government, and have provided [logistical support like helicopters and private jets](#) for flights taken by former and current South African presidents. The affiliated Ichikowitz Family Foundation has funded the ruling party, the African National Congress (which developed as an anti-apartheid force).

In the face of what they saw as hypocrisy, Palestine solidarity activists in South Africa hearkened back to the pre-1994 years when local direct action and international solidarity toppled apartheid in South Africa. They drew these connections in hopes that direct actions across the world that are targeting the arms trade to Israel, could help to topple Israeli apartheid today. Many of the activists present at the November 10 action cut their teeth during Fees Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall, two student movements that spoke out against what they saw as the broken promises of the ruling party, in a country where rampant inequality parallels apartheid-era hierarchies of racial capitalism. Raees, an activist with the Socialist Youth Movement, told me: “We participated because our current politics is insufficient. It does not meet the catastrophe in Gaza right now, or broader injustice. This shutdown is a necessary turn towards direct action and engaging new targets. Ichikowitz has managed to get away with murder, for decades – so this is our new real pushback.”

Throughout the action in Gauteng, activists emphasized the tensions between the South African government’s professed support for Palestine and the presence of companies like Paramount Group on South African soil. While Paramount has issued a press release that denies supplying arms directly to Israel, University of Johannesburg academic Patrick Bond, who has studied Paramount for many years, told me, “Paramount has indeed supplied armored vehicles to one of the Israeli Defense Forces’ core military contractors, Elbit Systems.” Elbit, which is based in Israel, has collaborated with Paramount through distributing [armored vehicles that Paramount produces](#) and that Elbit equips with digital technology.

Bond also shared with me a screenshot from the affiliated Ichikowitz family foundation’s website and the Tefillin Bank of Africa. This website — run by the same Ichikowitz of Paramount Group — asks for supporters of the IDF to “provid[e] them with spiritual support.”

Bond noted that it is difficult to confirm the direct flow of arms from Paramount to Israel due to what he called the “insufficiency of the NCACC to trace where arms are going.” Bond said that although the NCACC, a South African regulatory body, prevents the direct sale of arms to conflict zones, arms provided to Saudi Arabia from South African manufacturers have been used in Yemen, and those provided to Kazakhstan have been used in Russia. Bond emphasized that protesting at Paramount was the right step, saying, “We can’t trace that Paramount is directly providing arms to Israel, but they certainly hold close ties to the Israeli government, and they collaborate with Elbit — that’s enough to need to intervene.”

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The protest at Paramount was part of a deep ecosystem of South African resistance against the occupation of Palestine, including resistance by anti-Zionist Jewish activists. Members of South African Jews for Palestine (SAJFP) participated in the protest, pushing back against disingenuous attempts to conflate anti-Zionist organizing with antisemitism, as Paramount’s response to the action has already alleged. Rina, a SAJFP member said, “We’re horrified at this genocide happening, and at the 75 years of dispossession and ethnic cleansing. It’s in our moral duty as Jews to stop this, and to fight for justice, because without justice there’s no peace.”

Another SAJFP member added, “All my life I’ve been told that Israel was there to protect me from things like a genocide. But I refuse for a colonial government to enact this same genocide in my name or in the name of my people.”

These activists were clear — Zionism is not Judaism, and anti-Zionism is not antisemitism. Rather, Paramount Group’s warmongering — in Palestine, and across the globe — must be rejected, and direct action against arms dealers and companies profiting from Israeli apartheid is key to the way forward.

Members of the South African Palestine Solidarity Committee and members of Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) South Africa also joined in the Paramount Group shutdown, alongside independent activists. Organizers from these groups have been collaborating over many years and decades and stepped in to heighten the pressure with direct action in addition to mass marches around the ongoing assault on Gaza.

Each member of the blockade read off a statement about Paramount Group and Ichikowitz’s war crimes, and the group issued collective demands to shut down Paramount’s activities in South Africa, drop all South African government contracts with the company, shut Paramount’s Tel Aviv office, and for the South African government to expel the Israeli ambassador. Londi, one of the activists, told me, “In addition to making noise on the street, we have to target the actual arms dealers and companies who are facilitating Israel’s genocide in Palestine. We have to put economic and state pressure on these agents who are aiding and abetting genocide.” Activists had protested at the Israeli embassy in prior weeks, but felt those protests were not enough, and chose to also demonstrate at Paramount to highlight its ties to Israel and conflict zones across the globe. As the blockade continued to disrupt Paramount’s activities, Londi and other activists carried bundles stained with red, representing the thousands of Palestinian children murdered by the current Israeli onslaught.

The activists also collaborated with transnational movements in support of Palestinian liberation. The action was a response to the call from Workers in Palestine to down tools and prevent all arms trade to apartheid Israel. Mametlwe Sebei, a trade unionist from the South African union [GIWUSA](#) [General Industries Workers Union of South Africa], echoed the power of workers and activists joining together. Sebei spoke about the fight against Israeli bottling company Milco’s exploitation of Clover workers during the 2021-2022 strike, saying: “Paramount’s and Clover’s actions are a continuation of the exploitation of the Black and Palestinian working class.” Many of the activists present during the blockade

had also been deeply involved in the Clover strike and were actively engaged in organizing with workers, not only for Palestinian liberation but for worker justice here in South Africa.

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The arms blockade tactics were also part of transnational uprisings. They were inspired by prior [arms company shutdowns in the United States](#) and the United Kingdom by Palestine Action, Palestine Youth Movement and Jewish Voice for Peace. Also on November 10, activists shut down an arms factory in [Kent](#) in the U.K., and workers shut down four arms factories across Canada.

The commitment to transnational organizing was strategic as well as personal for many people at the Paramount shutdown. Aber, a Palestinian-American activist who had come to South Africa to study, told me, “It’s atrocious that Paramount, a company aiding and abetting genocide, is located in South Africa, a country which has fought apartheid and is supposedly standing for freedom and justice.” Explaining why she came to the action, she said, “as a Palestinian-American, it’s my people who are being killed by these arms, not just now but [in the] ongoing ethnic cleansing for 75 years. As an American citizen, I’m here standing up against the funding and arms that the U.S. is providing towards Israeli occupation.” Aber and other activists also drew connections between the South African government’s collaboration not only with Israel but also the US, as in the recent [AGOA](#) [African Growth and Opportunity Act] trade summit that activists had protested against one week prior. Demonstrating against arms dealers like Paramount Group wasn’t just an action of solidarity between South Africa and Palestine — activists saw it as an action against empire everywhere.

Activists also described the struggle for Palestinian liberation, and the fight against arms traders like Paramount Group, as an intersectional issue. Malik, a climate justice activist, told me, “I don’t want to be shouting into a void anymore.” He explained that he participated because “on climate justice, it’s pretty simple. The average Israeli consumes four times more water than the average Palestinian. Under climate change, when you don’t have enough water for both, who dies first? And with Ichikowitz being involved in Cabo Delgado, it brings all these intersections together. He’s benefiting off an arms conflict in Mozambique because of his exploitation of gas reserves there.”

These activists, and their comrades worldwide, are clear in making the connections between apartheid in South Africa and in Palestine, between extractivism and climate degradation in Northern Mozambique and in Israel, and between cutting off Palestinians’ access to water and Indigenous water protests across the U.S. By insisting on intersectionality, they are challenging the global violence of militarization.

At the end of the November 10 action, activists vowed to return, saying: “This is only the first of many actions targeting merchants of death [like Ivor Ichikowitz] who profit off the murder of Palestinians. We call on the South African government to shut down Paramount. But if they don’t, we’ll be back, to shut them down for good.”

Allied activists made good on these promises, turning out for a mega march for Palestine in Cape Town on November 11, a pro-Palestine rally that was brutalized by Cape Town police on November 12, and a weekend-long Palestine solidarity arts and culture festival in Johannesburg. As Israeli violence against Palestinians rages on, these activists have

pledged to keep working to show that South African citizens remain as committed to stopping apartheid in Israel as they have been in South Africa itself.

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