

## **Should labour withdraw from the Agoa summit while Israel bombs Gaza?**

By Woody Aroun

24 October 2023

Israel continues to bomb the Gaza Strip with an estimated hundreds of patients being killed after Israel's bombing on 17 October of the Al-Ahli Baptist hospital in Gaza City.

At home, the Department of International Relations and Cooperation and Department of Trade, Industry and Competition are otherwise preoccupied with hosting the African Growth Opportunity Act (Agoa) summit scheduled for November 2-4. This trade agreement with the United States seeks to increase preferential market access to the US for Sub-Saharan African countries keen to do business with American companies.

Organised labour, which customarily jumps at the opportunity to join government delegations to trade deal talks, has lapped up a place in these negotiations. This although the US is the world's biggest financial supporter of Israel, an apartheid state whose separate roads for Israelis and Palestinians, repeated military attacks on Palestinians by air and land, checkpoints to prevent Palestinian freedom of movement, and hawiyya (dompas for Palestinians) bear striking resemblances to past structures of apartheid in South Africa.

Organised labour's continued participation in high-level talks with the US government amounts to a passive and muted response on the part of unions towards Israel's continued aggression against the people of Palestine. This, in spite of the many resolutions that the country's largest trade union federation Cosatu has adopted pledging its unconditional support for the liberation of the Palestinian people.

South African trade unions are rarely treated as an important partner in trade deals, which are not always in the interests of workers anyway - in 2015, South Africa and the US concluded the Paris Deal on Poultry that allows for the export of chicken bone-in cuts from the US on a quota basis, duty free. The quota is increased annually and now stands at 71,963 metric tonnes. As the influx of cheap chicken flooded into South Africa, local producers witnessed their industry decimated, with job losses in the thousands and job creation in the chicken industry on the back burner.

Labour's current meek and uncritical participation in preparation for the Agoa summit sharply contrasts with their publicly stated positions of "unwavering solidarity with the Palestinian people in their quest for justice, peace and for the end of violence". Matthew Parks, head of Cosatu's Parliamentary unit and spokesperson confirmed that South African labour federations would be attending the Agoa summit and that it would be "economic suicide" for them not to. Asked whether it was appropriate for the federation to participate in the Agoa summit while Israel bombs Gaza with the support of the US and its allies Parks did not respond directly, nor even mention the US, saying that "if the Israeli government refuses to negotiate for a just end to the occupation of Palestinian territories, then the world must impose comprehensive sanctions on it and refer its government to the International Criminal Court for war crimes".

Haidar Eid, a South African-Palestinian Associate Professor in Literature and Cultural Studies living in Gaza, has been providing daily updates to the South African media from the Southern Gaza Strip. His own flat bombed, he refers to the “complicity and even direct participation of the so-called international community” in Israel’s attacks on the Palestinian people.

Eid added “it is genocide and the world is doing absolutely nothing about it ... We bank on people of conscience. We bank on comrades, especially South African comrades ... We want that support, we want it from you. We want it to go to the Israeli embassy in Pretoria. We want you to go to the American consulate in Sandton, to the American embassy in Pretoria and ask them why they are killing our children here. Enough is enough”

The Palestinian Solidarity Alliance and the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement has made similar calls on the South African government to cut all diplomatic ties with Israel, including imposing economic sanctions.

With the Agoa summit just around the corner, it is highly unlikely that the South African or Southern African Development Community (SADC) governments will rock the boat given the dominance of the US in drafting the protocols to the trade agreement. But we should expect more from organised labour in South Africa, particularly given its role in ending apartheid through general strikes and mass organising.

Ultimately, labour has to make a political choice: participate in Agoa as a co-opted partner and rubber stamp the trade agreement or opt out and make true its commitment to support the Palestinian struggle to end apartheid and colonial occupation by Israel.

\*Woody Aroun is a retired Numsa official and a Just Transition and trade researcher and author.

\*\*The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of Independent Media or IOL

*This article was syndicated from IOL (<https://www.iol.co.za/>) and was originally published on 22 October 2023. You may republish this article, so long as you credit the author, and do not change the text. Please include a link back to the original article (<https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/should-labour-withdraw-from-the-agoa-summit-while-israel-bombs-gaza-3f5ee2cf-ea77-4d94-b066-2783ce902e42>).*