

Pro-Palestine groups want Calgary to drop Green Line contractor

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Jeremy Appel

On Wednesday, Palestine solidarity organizers convened outside Calgary City Hall to call on the city to dissociate itself from a company contracted to build the light rail vehicles (LRVs) for the Green Line — Calgary’s long-awaited \$5.5-billion transit expansion and the largest infrastructure project in the city’s history.

In November 2021, the city’s Green Line Board announced it had selected Basque firm Construcciones y Auxiliar de Ferrocarriles (CAF) to provide 28 low floor LRVs for the Green Line. According to a press release, these LRVs “will improve accessibility, reduce station footprint and enhance safety for pedestrians and vehicles.”

Additionally, Green Line CEO Darshpreet Bhatti said CAF’s Urbos 100 LRVs “met all of the City’s technical and commercial requirements” and would provide “excellent value for Calgarians.”

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But there’s just one problem, pro-Palestine groups say — CAF is also working on an Israeli transit expansion project, which will connect Jerusalem to illegal Jewish-only settlements in the occupied West Bank, entrenching a system Israeli and international human rights organizations have characterized as apartheid.

CAF’s Israeli partner in the Jerusalem Light Rail project — Shapir Engineering and Industry Ltd. — is one of 112 companies on a United Nations Human Rights Council blacklist for doing business in the settlements. Pro-Palestine activists in Spain brought this relationship to the attention of their Canadian counterparts earlier this year.

As a result, campaigners are calling on the City of Calgary to drop CAF as a contractor, or update the contract’s terms to make it conditional upon the company’s withdrawal from the Jerusalem rail line.

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Saba Amro, an organizer with the Calgary chapter of activist group Justice for Palestinians told me she was surprised the city decided to contract not only with a multinational corporation, but one implicated in human rights abuses abroad.

“This Green Line project is going to be a legacy project in Calgary. Does the city want this legacy to be attached to a company like CAF? I think that's the big question here,” Amro said.

But even if Calgary moves forward with CAF as a contractor, other municipalities might think twice before signing them on, says Thomas Woodley, president of Montreal-based Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East (CJPME), who also attended the campaign launch.

“CAF is a growing company,” he said. “This is its first contract in Canada, which may pave the way for it to get other contracts with other cities. Ideally, we would want to nip that in the bud until CAF withdraws from its projects in Jerusalem.”

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Green Line spokesperson Wendy Tynan told me the board did its due diligence for the contract:

Prior to awarding the contract, a legal review confirmed that CAF is not in breach of any Law or any international regulations on Human Rights due to its participation in the [Jerusalem Light Rail] Project.

We understand that any decision to uphold our contract with CAF will not address concerns. We remain confident in the integrity of the procurement and the unqualified bid that CAF submitted.

Mayor Jyoti Gondek's office politely declined a request for comment.

Amro, who is originally from Palestine, said she finds Gondek's silence on this issue disappointing, given the mayor's otherwise strong support for anti-racism initiatives.

“I really respect and appreciate Mayor Gondek's position on anti-racism, and it's one of the reasons why I'm happy to say that I voted for Mayor Gondek,” she said. However, Amro believes the city's contracting with a company profiting from Israeli human rights abuses “undermines that position.”

Cancelling CAF's contract would likely further delay the Green Line while the city seeks another contractor, but Amro says this is ultimately the city's own fault for contracting with an ethically-dubious company.

She pointed to similar ethical dilemmas that occurred at the height of the boycott movement against apartheid South Africa.

"This is not the first time something like this has come up or happened throughout history," Amro said. "And really, what side of history does the city want to be on?"

Edited by Ximena González

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