

Thousands march in Australia against Israel's aggression

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In a passionate display of support for the Palestinian people, more than 10,000 workers and youth marched on the Israeli consulate in Sydney on Saturday to demand the withdrawal of the Israeli military from the West Bank and Gaza. The demonstration filled the city's streets with a sea of flags, banners and placards and thunderous calls of "Free, Free Palestine". Dozens of women and girls used the Palestinian flag as head-scarves. Groups of youth chanted: "Israel, USA, How many kids have you killed today". Hand-written signs read: "Stop the Holocaust in Palestine"; "Sharon! Butcher"; "Wanted for killing innocent people—Sharon"; "Kill them all—Sharon's Final Solution"; "Bush and Sharon = Hitler" and "Where are the Human Rights in Palestine?"

While the majority of those taking part were from Sydney's large, predominantly working class Arab community, the demonstration also drew in hundreds of people from all over the city who were outraged at the war policy of the Israeli government. Significantly, a small number of Jews defied both Zionist pressure and anti-Semitism from layers of Islamic fundamentalists to show their solidarity with the Palestinian people. Protests of between 500 and 1,000 people were held in two other state capitals, Perth and Brisbane, on the same day.

The Sydney demonstration began at the city's town hall and marched to the US consulate in Martin Place and then to the Israeli consulate. The rally organisers—Palestinian and Islamic associations grouped as the "Australian Solidarity Committee for Palestine"—used the occasion to call on Australian Prime Minister John Howard to demand Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories. Throughout the entire Israeli intervention, Howard has acted as an open apologist for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's brutal actions. On April 2, with Israeli tanks isolating Palestinian chairman Yasser Arafat in his headquarters, Howard declared: "The Israelis are justified in asking him, demanding of him, that he do more to bring the terrorists under control."

Nevertheless, march organisers sought to prevent any overt criticism of either the Australian government or the US Bush administration. Marshals kept tight control over speaker-systems and megaphones. Demonstrators were prevented from converging on the US consulate and the rally was dispersed not long after reaching its destination.

The sentiments of many marchers were in stark contrast to those of the organisers. In Martin Place, several hundred broke away from the rally to protest at the steps of the US consulate. Later, others clashed with rally marshals and mounted police at the Israeli consulate, where they threw rocks and wood at its glass doors.

The Australian media made this incident the focus of its reports. The *Sydney Morning Herald's* coverage, headlined "Violent clashes in anti-Israel protest", downplayed the size of the protest and gave no sense of the anger and frustration motivating its participants. Hundreds were Palestinians whose family members have been killed or maimed by the Israeli Defense Forces in the past 18 months, or at some point during Israel's 35-year occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

The WSWWS spoke with several demonstrators. Ziad, a Palestinian who came to Australia in 1992 said: "I'm here to support freedom for the Palestinians and to ask the world community to stop supporting this war criminal Sharon and to force him to stop killing the Palestinian people. There is so much injustice. So many Palestinian families have suffered. My cousin was killed in Gaza last week by Israeli soldiers. He was a civilian, he didn't carry a gun but they shot him.

"My auntie was killed in 1989 in Gaza. She was 62-years-old, an old woman. They (Israeli soldiers) hit her in the back until she died. People like Osama bin Laden will use the anger of the people, their anger about injustice. For example, these suicide bombers, they sacrifice their lives because they have lived in injustice for so long. They don't have a life. I had a family member whose husband was killed by Israeli soldiers, and she had a very hard life. I was not surprised when I heard she decided to sacrifice herself. It's terrible.

"This *intifada* was started on September 28, 2000 when Sharon went to Aqsa Mosque (Temple Mount). It's a holy place for Muslims. He went there because he wanted to kill the peace. When Oslo was signed Sharon said at the time 'if I am still alive I will kill the Oslo agreement'. Sharon is the head terrorist. There's no doubt about it. If you want to stop the terror then get out of Palestinian land."

A Palestinian woman, attending the rally with her daughter, had been in touch with her family in Gaza over the past few days: "They are just waiting for the tanks. Ramallah,

Bethlehem and Jenin have been hit, we are just waiting for them to attack Gaza. We don't know what is going to happen.

"We need people from other countries to stop this, from the Arab countries, from all over the world. Muslims and Jews have to live in peace, to bring peace to each other. Sharon doesn't want peace. He has planned to attack us for a long time. He is butchering the children of Palestine. Bush wants to rule the world. They will not have peace. If the Americans did not support Israel, nothing would be happening. Sharon got a green light from Bush. What can we do? I am a Palestinian. All my relatives and family are in Gaza."

Others at the demonstration knew of people besieged in their houses on the West Bank. Selma, a young woman who came to the rally with a group of friends, said: "One of my friend's sisters is trapped. They have virtually no water and have had no electricity or food for three days. They were given three hours to get food before the Israelis stopped anyone going on the streets. They shoot people on the streets. All her children are under the age of five.

"The only terrorists are the USA and Israel—not the people, but the American and Israeli governments. The Americans are supporting Sharon saying the Palestinians are terrorists. The Palestinians have nothing but rocks. How is the three-year-old killed the other day a terrorist? Or the 10-year-old boy?

"Sharon's power has to be taken away from him. He should never have got into power. He is a war criminal. And George Bush, he is Sharon's brother. They are both monsters. Neither should have power. People who have feelings should take over and rule countries from now on."

Jan, an American woman working in Australia, joined the demonstration. She told the WSWS: "I'm Jewish. I grew up loving Israel and feeling identified with Israel. I've lived there for a year. But I feel appalled at what is going on in the occupied territories now. Sharon's trying to piggyback on the anti-terrorism campaign and go all out as if he's got a license to take over. I think it's totally wrong. I think Israel needs to pull out and get the settlements out of there and help to create a strong and stable and peaceful Palestinian state. We have to help them."

Ahmed, an Arab-Australian in his late 20s, denounced both the American and Australian governments. "We're disgusted with their support for the Israeli government. It seems no government has the guts to stand up to Israel—for whatever reason. Sharon obviously intends to fully occupy and take over Palestine and no-one is going against him. The whole 'war on terrorism' is just a front for the American government to expand their interests. The war in Afghanistan relates to oil.

"The world will get up and stand for UN resolutions against some countries, like Iraq. But Israel has had UN resolutions against it since 1967. There was one passed two days ago for Israel to immediately end the occupation and withdraw but there's no-one out there enforcing it. Where's the US now, the policeman of the world?"

His friend Michael said: "I came here to support the ending of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and all the human rights abuses. Their actions are tantamount to war crimes. Sharon has shown human rights abuses since 1982, at Shatilla and Sabra [Palestinian refugee camps]. And no-one's restraining him. At the moment the Israelis and Americans are flexing their muscles against the Palestinians. But who knows who is going to be next?"

Mohamed Ali, a semi-retired railway maintenance worker who immigrated to Australia in the early 1970s, angrily denounced the Israeli invasion of the occupied territories: "Every day we are told about Palestinian terrorists, but Sharon is a proven war criminal and state terrorist. The media knows this but they never say anything about his real record or the views of ordinary people in Palestine or Israel. Thousands of Israeli people don't agree with Sharon, but the media refuses to report on the demonstrations and protests in Israel against the government.

"I'm very worried because it could easily develop into a full-scale war in the Middle East. This is a danger to every human being. Lebanon has been attacked, Syria is under threat and Bush and Blair want to attack Iraq. Bush says Iraq has weapons of mass destruction but this is an excuse for war by America, which has more weapons than anybody in the world. The Iraqi people are suffering and thousands of children have died because of these warmongers who want to make war to get their hands on the oil.

"The Palestinian people are like the Aborigines in Australia. They have been oppressed, persecuted and pushed off their lands. The only solution in the Middle East is for the Israeli army to withdraw and for Arabs and Jews to be allowed to live in peace. Workers in Australia and every other country should be demanding this."

Further demonstrations are being prepared in Sydney, Melbourne and other Australian cities.



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