

# Australian protests against Israeli invasion of the West Bank

Our correspondents  
23 April 2002

Demonstrations were held around Australia over the weekend against the Israeli invasion of the West Bank. In the largest action, some 2,000 people assembled at Melbourne's State Library on Saturday and marched on the Victorian state parliament.

The majority taking part were from Arabic communities. Whole families turned out to show their concern and grief for the Palestinian people, particularly in the Jenin refugee camp. Two men bearing a symbolic child's coffin, adorned with flowers, headed the march. As they progressed through the city, the crowd chanted "Free Palestine".

Many people carried the Palestinian flag. Others carried banners or placards with messages such as "Yes to peace, no to occupation", "Terrorism is Israel and USA made", "Sharon—Exterminator", "Remember Shatila and Sabra", "Zionism = Racism" and "Jenin: Crime of the Century". One read "Quiet, the Arab leaders are sleeping", denouncing the abandonment of the Palestinians by the bourgeois Arab regimes.

Outside the Victorian state parliament, the demonstration was addressed by a series of speakers invited onto a platform by the organisers, the Arab-Palestinian Solidarity Committee, interspersed with periods of chanting. Young Palestinians burnt Israeli and American flags.

The speakers, a Catholic priest, a former Labor Party politician, a trade union official and a representative of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia, urged the crowd to demand the conservative government of Prime Minister John Howard seek UN action on the Palestinian people's behalf. The Howard government, however, slavishly following the lead from Washington, has justified Israel's criminal actions as a response to terrorism, ruling out diplomatic or economic sanctions. As for the UN, it has repeatedly shown itself to be nothing but a tool of the major powers.

One speaker gave voice to the sentiments of many in the crowd. Randa Abdel-Fattah, a young law student and part-time worker for a Palestinian human rights association, read a passionate poem indicting the Australian government, the media, the UN and Arab governments. Her reading was

interrupted by sustained applause and cheering:

*We are ashamed. Ashamed of Howard, who has said nothing, done nothing, who sleeps through the cries and agonising screams of the Palestinian people.*

*We are ashamed of the media, who continue to bombard the public with the labels of terrorism whenever a Palestinian resolves to die on his feet, rather than live on his knees.*

*We are ashamed of the United Nations, a powerless body capable only of rhetoric.*

*We are ashamed of Arab leaders, whose complicity and subservience to the US has betrayed the Palestinian people.*

*That is why we owe it those whose voices are being silenced, to cry out loudly on their behalf, doing what we can, with what we have, wherever we are.*

The evening before, on April 19, rallies and marches in support of the Palestinians were held in every state capital as part of an "Asia-Pacific Day of Action". At least 1,000 people rallied at Sydney's town hall and marched on the US consulate in Martin Place. Among those present were members of the city's Arabic communities, Indonesians, university and high school students and members of an anti-Zionist Jewish association. According to the organisers, 600 rallied in Melbourne, 800 in Brisbane, and 150 to 300 in Adelaide, Perth and Canberra, with smaller rallies in Hobart and some other centres. Demonstrations were also being held in India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia and elsewhere in the region.

The Australian demonstrations were organised by those taking part in the "Asia-Pacific Solidarity Conference"—a gathering of radical, social democratic and Stalinist organisations from the Asia-Pacific region. The Sydney rally was addressed by a Catholic nun, a trade union official, a representative of the Greens and a member of the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), all of whom advanced the same bankrupt line—that protests could force the Australian government to take action.

Among those who spoke to the WSWs at the Sydney rally, there was a sense that the tragedy of the Palestinian people

raised far more complex political issues.

Melissa, a 23-year-old university student said: “The US and Australian governments are supporting Israel’s state-terrorism. I think we’ve got to realise this is part of our world and we can’t say it’s got nothing to do with us when it does. I was in Israel a few years ago and I met a lot of Jewish people, as well as Palestinians. I was mostly speaking to young people and they didn’t seem to support what their government was doing in the West Bank.”

Ahmed, a member of a Palestinian group, explained he had come mainly to “express outrage at the massacres going on for the last month in the Palestinian territories and draw the attention of the whole world to what has been happening. Sharon wants to implement his agenda, which is to destroy the Palestinian existence and all Palestinian rights. His agenda is the transfer of the Palestinian people to Jordan and other areas where refugees are living. He wants the world to accept this.

“I am not sure what the Americans are thinking now but they are giving Israel the green light to do what they have done in Jenin. They want to destroy the Palestinian Authority and want the Palestinian people to surrender. This won’t happen. The Labor Party (in Israel) has supported Sharon. This is not the first time. Rabin himself conducted massacres in 1996 and before against civilians. We cannot rely on Labor. We have to rely on the real left people in Israel.”

Nadia, a student from Iran, said: “What is happening in the Middle East today is part of a worked out plan by the Sharon and the US government. It always follows the same pattern. There is a suicide bombing and then the Israelis use this as an excuse for more war against every Palestinian and to destroy everything they can.

“I’m against fundamentalism and suicide bombings. This is not the answer. But I understand why they are doing it. The Palestinians are being treated worse than animals. And when you have tanks bulldozing your homes, what else can you do? These problems are caused by the capitalist system. There are millions of poor people in the US and nobody talks about them.

“The European governments have done nothing to assist the Palestinians over the last month. They make some criticisms but allow the massacre to go on. It is the same in my country where the government makes all sorts of statements about the heroic Palestinians, denounces the Zionists and the American government, but does nothing. The Iranian government has never really defended the Palestinians. Everything is just empty words.”

Our correspondents also met Taz Nasrallah, a 15-year-old Palestinian originally from Hebron, who has had recent reports on the plight of his family on the West Bank: “Four of my cousins and two uncles were blindfolded, handcuffed, stripped and then beaten up in the street. One of them was beaten to death and the others were dumped in another village. They had broken bones, their lips and faces were cut. It was terrible. Another uncle is a policeman with the Palestinian Authority. He has completely disappeared. Nobody knows what has happened to him. Their only crime is to be a Palestinian and to say that the land that their fathers or grandfathers worked all their lives is theirs too.

“I’m disgusted by the media and I can’t believe that Bush has called Sharon is a peacemaker. This is like calling Hitler a peacemaker. These lies about the real situation facing the Palestinian people are because the American government uses Israel as a military base in the Middle East. Everyday the government and the media talk about the September 11 attack on America but the World Trade Centre was attacked because of US foreign policy. The US has created a disaster not just with the Palestinians but in Iraq and throughout the Middle East. This is why people are becoming terrorists against America.”

In reaction to the growing revulsion over the atrocities of the Israeli military, pro-Zionist groups have held several rallies to repeat the justifications being given by the Sharon government for its crimes. At a pro-Israel rally of some 5,000 people in Sydney on April 21, the Israeli consul-general, Effie Ben Matityahu, berated the international media, claiming that its mild criticisms of Israeli actions amounted to “a campaign of defamation and vilification”. Another speaker, Stephen Rothman of the New South Wales Jewish board of Deputies, hailed the destruction of Palestinian towns and villages as dismantling an “infrastructure of terror”.



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