

Australia: thousands join global protests to condemn Israel's war on Lebanon

Our reporters
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More than 25,000 people demonstrated in Australian capital cities over the weekend—in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Adelaide—condemning Israel's war of aggression against Lebanon. The largest protest saw more than 15,000 gather at Sydney's Town Hall, joining the crowds who rallied over the weekend in London, Paris, Warsaw, Tel Aviv and other major cities.

In Sydney, home to the largest Lebanese population in Australia, demonstrators assembled outside Town Hall after a last-minute change of venue forced by "anti-terror" exercises that closed down the city rail network on Saturday morning.

Entire families filled the Town Hall forecourt and kept arriving well after midday.

Many protestors carried handmade placards. "They kill our children, demolish our homes and call us terrorists," read a large hand-painted banner. Placards carried graphic images, reproduced via the Internet, of the devastation wreaked on southern Lebanese towns and villages: "Targeted Killing or Collective Punishment?", "United Nations or United Negligence?" and "Thankyou World Leaders for Giving the Greenlight for Slaughter".

In Melbourne more than 3,000 predominantly Lebanese protestors marched from the State Library to Federation Square, while smaller rallies were held in Canberra and Adelaide.

The rallies were called by the Australian Arabic Committee in Solidarity with the People of Lebanon and Palestine, representing over 50 local and national organisations. Speakers condemned Israel's war on Lebanon as a crime under international law, but could advance no viable perspective to defeat it, instead advocating various forms of nationalism.

Large numbers of demonstrators carried Lebanese and Australian flags, with a concerted effort made by the Lebanese leadership to show their support for the Australian government. World Lebanese Cultural Union leader Abraham Constantin claimed the Howard government "will not rest" until the last Lebanese Australian was evacuated from the war-torn country, an extraordinary claim in light of the government's contemptuous stonewalling. He urged the government to intercede and call for a halt to the bombing. But Howard and his senior ministers have made clear their unwavering commitment to the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon and complete destruction of Hezbollah.

Other cultural leaders demanded the crowds refrain from chanting in Arabic and repeatedly urged demonstrators to show they were law-abiding Australians. This culminated at the end of the demonstration in a call from the platform for a round of applause for the hundreds of police mobilised for the occasion by the state Labor government. These actions on the part of the leadership amounted to a shameless capitulation to the campaign of vilification, intimidation and repression carried out by both major parties, the mass media and the police over the past few years against people of Middle Eastern origin, particularly the youth.

Among the first speakers at the rally were New South Wales Greens senator Kerry Nettle and Labor MP for Canterbury Linda Burnie. Burnie

said she stood firmly behind the demonstrators on the basis of three principles, "Justice, Decency and Peace", but did not explain how these principles could co-exist with her own party's vocal support for Israel's illegal war.

Nettle's remarks underscored the protest perspective characteristic of the Greens. She called upon Howard to pressure Israel for a "ceasefire" and claimed that "the international community needs to do a lot more" to help Lebanon. But "the international community"—including the United States, Europe, the Arab League and United Nations—has lined up entirely behind the Israeli offensive on Lebanon.

The political line of the rally organisers repeated the same deceptive rhetoric that was advanced on the eve of the US-led war on Iraq. In February 2003, mass global antiwar protests, the largest in history, demanded a halt to the impending onslaught. But the rallies were told that mass pressure could force the UN, the European powers or Bush and Blair to halt their predatory war for oil.

Stop the War Coalition's Pip Hinman, a member of the Democratic Socialist Perspective, made no attempt to differentiate from the Greens, the Labor Party or the religious and Arab national leaders who spoke from the platform. She sowed illusions in the ability of protest politics to bring about peace, calling on those present to, demonstrate "again and again and again, in bigger and bigger and bigger numbers, until this war is stopped."

Supporters of the SEP campaigned at the rallies in Melbourne and Sydney, distributing thousands of leaflets of recent statements of the WSWS editorial board, including the July 21 statement entitled: "The real aims of the US-backed war on Lebanon". They explained to demonstrators that the new imperialist carve-up of the Middle East, and the fomenting of religious and national divisions that this entails, could only be fought on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program—one that advances the unification of the working class of all countries, including Israel, Lebanon, Iraq and the United States, against the capitalist profit system.

The SEP intervention won important support, with discussion between groups of young demonstrators and party supporters continuing for some time after the conclusion of the rally.

Earlier, WSWS reporters spoke with demonstrators en-route to Martin Place. Mostafa, a cleaner who was originally from Morocco, said, "It is the first time I have been to a rally, but I wanted to see what is happening and to oppose what is going on in the Middle East.

"Innocent civilians are being killed. Israel is trampling on the rules of war in its targeting of roads and companies, which supply food, bread and petrol. It will lead to a humanitarian crisis now. It is not only the war."

"Why is this happening? Because Israel wants to change the area and that has been happening for a long time now. They call Hezbollah terrorists. I do not call Hezbollah terrorists. They are defending themselves and their families. If the media wants to talk about the two soldiers [captured by Hezbollah] then it should talk about the 10,000 people put in jail for over 20 years [by the Israeli government]. If you

want to be fair, you should look at both sides. If you are talking about democracy then the killing should stop on both sides and both sides should be free from war. The Lebanese people have seen enough war.”

Reema, a university student whose family migrated from Lebanon, said, “Israel is committing war crimes, innocent people are dying and a whole country is being destroyed. It is just unfair.

“I have two aunts from Australia in Lebanon at the moment. The rest of my extended family lives there permanently—grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, many people.

“I think there are a lot of political things behind this. The US has a lot to do with it. I do not think it is about two soldiers. If you look at the military preparations then obviously they have wanted to do this for some time.

“International governments and the UN should pull their fingers out and do something. There is a lack of food, lack of water, and lack of medication. There are villages that are cut off from the cities. The Europeans have sat back and supported this because the US is funding Israel and the US is a powerful country.”

Hilli, a middle-aged man from Germany, told the WWS: “I am here to show opposition to aggression in the world in every respect. I am certainly against the killing of innocent people who have nothing to do with the Middle East conflict. I am against the killing of innocent children and against terrorism, including state terrorism instigated by America and Israel against the innocent Lebanese people. That is why I am here.

“If everyone just put down their weapons then there would be peace. The US will not. It went to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon and on and on.

“I am from Germany, a country where the people paid the price for their government’s state terrorism in World War II. Now it looks like the German government is getting involved in US-style state terrorism. The German government was able to stay out of the war in Iraq and the German people are very happy about that. Probably the next time the German government will not stay out of it because they want to be part of the great game. They want to be in Africa and many other parts of the world.”

Graeme and Gillian were in Sydney visiting from Canberra and arrived at the rally after receiving a leaflet. “Whatever Hezbollah may have done, you cannot blame the Lebanese people for that. Obviously this is part of a broader process. Britain and the US are in Iraq for oil.

“Israel has been breaching the borders for years. There is no justification for attacking a sovereign country with very little provocation. There is no justification for destroying civilian infrastructure. They are bombing the power plants, bridges, TV stations, the international airport and convoys of fleeing people.”

Ersan was born in Turkey. “The US talks about human rights when it suits them, but what about the human rights of the Lebanese people, including children? It is only the rights of the US and Israel that are considered. How many has Israel killed for two soldiers?

“The European governments are lousy. They could have spoken up a long time ago and stopped the killing and all these wars and occupations. They do not want to step in because it suits them. It is all about business in capitalism. Whoever has billions of dollars dominates.”

Amer, a carpenter born in Tripoli in the north of Lebanon, marched in Melbourne. Seventy percent of his family still lives in Lebanon. He told SEP campaigners: “Bombs have gone off next to their house. This has nothing to do with the two Israeli soldiers. Former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri’s assassination last year was a plot by Israel and the US, who blamed it on the Syrians. Now no help is coming from Syria. They are telling Hezbollah to commit suicide.

“George Bush and John Howard are puppets to Israel. They are trying to take over the world. After they left in 2000, Lebanon was rebuilt in just

“Look at Iraq. They’re still in there overpowering the country, and they just went in there for oil.”

Rafaela Lopez also marched in Melbourne. She was born in Spain. “I am absolutely horrified at what’s happening. I’m horrified with our political leaders who won’t say anything to stop this. The US has given Israel a blank cheque.”

Indiana Saad, a student of politics and economics from South Lebanon, told WWS at the Melbourne rally, “The US and Israel are at the head of terrorism. There was a secret plan to attack Hezbollah. Hezbollah were defending everyone, including Christians, not just the Muslims.

John Howard is John Howard in the shadow of the USA. The White House writes what he says. The USA puts Israel under her shoe. The Lebanese didn’t start the war. No one takes action to defend us. It is our right to defend ourselves.”



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