

Thousands demonstrate in German city of Duisburg against Gaza onslaught

Our reporters
21 January 2009

About 2,000 people demonstrated in the German city of Duisburg last Saturday against Israeli aggression and its war in the Gaza Strip. The demonstration was called by the Muslim group Organization for Human Dignity and Rights (HDR).

Participants in the demonstration expressed their anger and indignation over the massacre of Palestinians in Gaza, but also protested against the stance taken by European governments. One banner read: "Why is Israel able to do anything it likes?" Another banner read: "Today the European Union shows its true face."

The demonstration was accompanied by a huge contingent of police. Squads were deployed at the front, alongside and behind the demonstrators, even though the march route had been cleared ahead of time. The reason for this enormous police presence was a minor incident that occurred at the major protest in Duisburg a week earlier.

On the preceding Saturday 10,000 people demonstrated in Duisburg against the Gaza war and Israeli policy. The protest march and subsequent rally were largely peaceful, with relatively low numbers of police in attendance. However, as the demonstration made its way through the city centre the anger of participants was provoked by the presence of two large Israeli flags hanging from a house along the route. Some demonstrators threw snowballs at the flags.

In order to de-escalate the situation, one policeman intervened to remove the two flags. Since the apartment was empty, the policeman broke down the door. It emerged later that the apartment belonged to a student who admitted he stood on the street to observe the reaction to the Israeli flags.

This incident was then blown up in the course of last week into a quasi-hysterical campaign. The Social

Democratic Party (SPD) in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia demanded a state parliamentary debate and the dismissal of the local police chief. The Central Council of Jews also criticized the action of the police. The Duisburg police chief was forced to publicly apologize, and the two police officers who removed the flags are threatened with disciplinary action.

Feeling strengthened by this campaign, pro-Israeli forces, which had originally planned a rally in Essen, moved their demonstration to Duisburg. The rally was called by a group set up a few days before calling itself "Students in solidarity with Israel in the Ruhr district." The group is part of a right-wing political organization and included the student who hung the two flags from his window. It's characterised by a fanatical defence of Zionism. Some of them also defend the US war in Iraq, on the basis that it toppled a regime that threatened Israel.

Supporters of this group openly function as troublemakers, particularly against Muslims and their organizations. Their own "demonstration" in Duisburg consisted of around 30 to 40 supporters of the group, who gathered in the city centre waving Israeli and US flags. Later some proceeded to the anti-war demonstration in the neighbouring suburb to provoke the participants by waving their flags and loudly chanting "Israel, Israel."

Anticipating further provocations, the organizers of the HDR demonstration ended their protest prematurely, to avoid any escalation of the situation.

Reporters of the WSWs spoke with participants at the demonstration.

Zeyneb from Duisburg came to the demonstration with two friends, Pinar and Sevinc. She said: "I find it totally inhuman, what is happening in the Gaza Strip—innocent women, children and others are

bombarded and murdered. The Israeli army intentionally bombed a UN camp that provided urgently needed food and assistance to the population. Afterward the army leadership apologized. But nobody believes them. What is happening there is inhuman!

"The worst thing is those who are attacked there cannot defend themselves. They have only stones, while the Israeli army, armed with the most modern weapons, proceeds against innocent people. Even hospitals for newborn children and homes for orphans have been attacked. How can one bombard a children's hospital? It is beyond belief!

"In view of this situation and the suffering of the Palestinian population one has to do something. Therefore we are here to demonstrate."

Zeyneb also criticized the German media and politicians: "There are many reports in the media which are not correct at all, or they ignore the crimes being committed in Gaza."

Melek Can Boutchich, a pharmacist in Duisburg, said she had responded to the call for the demonstration because she was opposed to Israeli policy. "People there [in the Gaza Strip] have neither food nor medical supplies. Even injured women and children have no chance of getting out of the theatre of war. The world cannot close its eyes to what is going on. We all have to defend and demonstrate for our rights."

She also disagreed with the attitude of the German government to the Gaza war, and in particular with regard to German history and the Holocaust. "Of course one cannot forget what took place at that time under National Socialism, but precisely for that reason Germany should react democratically and oppose the war." She had the feeling that many in Germany fear making public their opposition to the war because they would be subject to immediate criticism from the Israeli side.

Melek was also angry with the German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD). "The foreign minister flies to Egypt, and one thinks he is seeking to achieve peace, and then he proposes that Germany guard the border between Gaza and Egypt in order to stop the smuggling of arms. One is left speechless. I am really angry.

"There is barely anything about the war in the main newscasts," she continued. "My husband is an Arab, and we watch the Al-Jazeera television station. There

we see what is really taking place in Gaza.... You see mutilated people in hospitals. And they have to be evacuated from these hospitals because bombs are still falling there."

She declared her opposition to looking at things too simply. "I have seen that many people in Israel are also against the war. People in Egypt are against the closure of the border to the Gaza Strip. But the governments always have a different standpoint than the populations."

She sharply criticised the double standards of Western governments. "The US backs the war," she declared. "In Iraq they alleged there were missiles, and the US invaded immediately. It had nothing to do with Saddam Hussein. But now the US is just looking the other way."

She assumed that an armistice was now being prepared to coincide with the inauguration of the new US President Barack Obama so he could pose as a peace bringer. "But the war has cost the lives of thousands in Gaza. In fact, I think they will find many more dead when they clear the rubble. How can they count the dead under the destroyed houses? In addition, people there have more pressing needs at the moment than to count their dead."

Melek explained that in this conflict it was not a question of nationality. "I would also stand here on behalf of other people in this world who have been injured and damaged by war. I am standing here on behalf of the children, the women, the innocent people in Palestine, who must endure the war, and to ensure that we do not all look away."



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