

Protests held in UK cities in solidarity with people of Gaza

Our correspondents
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Rallies against Israel's genocidal onslaught in Gaza continued at the weekend in major cities across the UK.

Most took place shortly before Israel announced a unilateral ceasefire designed to entrench the major objectives of its offensive: the complete marginalisation of Hamas and the reduction of Gaza to an impoverished ghetto, policed by the major western powers.

That thousands have continued to turn-out in solidarity with the Palestinians is testimony to the depth of anger over the killing of more than 1,100 people and wounding of thousands more.

In central London, approximately 5,000 mainly young people attended a rally. Two university campuses, at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies and the London School of Economics have been occupied over the last days in support of the people in Gaza. A representative of the occupation, Mira Hammad, told the rally "to forget NUS (National Union of Students), forget the government. Stand up for yourself...The age of apathy is dead."

Similarly, a spokesperson for the Palestinian forum in Britain, representing students, condemned the student union and its leadership as "shameful. Until now you have not condemned the invasion of Lebanon and have not condemned the attack on Gaza. Students in the UK do not accept this and it better be the last time you do this."

Deborah Makebe, Jews for Justice for Palestinians, said membership of their organisation was growing in disgust at Israel's action and the group were trying to organise supplies for the besieged population in Gaza. But when a convoy carrying medical supplies, which had been cleared to enter Gaza, got to the border, it was forced back to Tel Aviv, she said. The drivers were threatened with having their licences confiscated. "The convoy never reached Gaza. The bus on the Gaza side that was take on supplies was bombed."

None of the main political speakers, however, addressed the underlying causes of Israel's actions and their long-term consequences. And they were especially unable to deal with the role of British imperialism in the horrific events, largely confining themselves to criticism of Israel and the US.

Labour MP Diane Abbot said she wanted to "peace" in the Middle East. Britain's Foreign Secretary David Miliband "has said some of the right things but he has to do more," she claimed.

In fact, Miliband praised Israel as a "beacon of democracy" in the Middle East, even while it was dropping tonnes of explosives on civilians, and has repeated the lie that the trigger for the violence was the "cruel choice" made by Hamas to fire rockets into Israeli territory—when it was Israel itself who broke the fragile truce agreed last year.

Baroness Jenny Tonge, a Liberal Democrat member of House of Lords, told the crowd, "It is a disgusting, obscene outrage what is going on in Gaza." But her only advice was that "we must look at *eventually*, if this

doesn't stop, to a full trade embargo and boycotting everything Israeli," [emphasis added].

Veteran Labourite Tony Benn said the attack on Gaza "has become a moral question". He claimed that the pressure of such protests could have a significant impact, calling for the British navy in Cyprus to be "used to escort humanitarian ships arriving into Gaza and the RAF should fly in relief supplies and reporters. The Israeli ambassador should be told to leave London."

Later that evening, Prime Minister Gordon Brown did offer British military resources—but only to enable Israel to enforce its encirclement of Gaza and prevent any resistance to its occupation. Brown pledged that UK naval resources could join US, German and French forces in policing an arms-embargo against Hamas.

Lindsey German, Socialist Workers Party and convener of Stop The War Coalition, did criticise Brown and Miliband but went on to suggest that incoming US President Barack Obama could prove more amenable to the Palestinian people. Obama should "break with US policy or we will continue campaigning against US policy," she said.

Sheffield

In Sheffield, several hundred protestors held a rally outside the town hall. Amongst them were medical students, Farhad and Raisa, who discussed their concerns with the WSWs reporting team.

Raisa said, "I think this is a massacre, and it's disgusting that the western media is portraying it as a conflict. If this genocide was taking place in any other country in the world, they wouldn't stand for it."

The Arab regimes, "are idly standing by", Raisa said. "The peace talks are an excuse. As each day goes by, people are dying."

Lucy, a 15 year old school student, said "There's a lot of anger and discussion at school about what's going on.

"My auntie lives in Israel and wants to get out of there. She doesn't agree with what's going on. She is afraid to go out of the house. People assume that everyone in Israel supports the war. People are stereotyping and saying that because everyone lives in the same area they have the same point of view."

Tommy and Danny, also 15 years old, have parents involved in movements opposed to the occupation of the Palestinian territories.

Tommy said, "The media always gives an unfair representation. If even two Israeli people die there is a lot of coverage. But they don't talk about

all the Palestinian people who are dying. There is a real bias towards Israel.”

“Some people, especially some Muslim kids, have grown resentment towards Jewish people. But this is not a solution. Hamas is not innocent either. But Israel has US backing and can do whatever it wants.”

Danny complained, “There is not enough coverage of what is happening. There should be much more. In the news, people are not getting both sides of the story.” He had gained a better appreciation of the situation in Gaza after some of his teachers had opened up some school lessons to a debate on the issues, he remarked.

Leeds

Several hundred people also gathered in Leeds city centre to protest the attack on Gaza, including a large contingent of Palestinian family groups, other youth and students.

Austin Young, a Film and Television student from Chicago attending Leeds Metropolitan University, told the WSW, “I’m against the war in Gaza. I’m supporting Palestinian rights though I’m not with either side. My family has Jewish heritage and roots and in my position this is hard. No one agrees with war.”

“The West split [the Middle East] into states and the fight is over land. As the economy is driven down, countries are scared to lose out.”

“There shouldn’t be this distinction”, between Jews and Arabs Austin continued. “There should be democracy, equality for every religion... Under the Israeli Prime Minister [Olmert] the crises will get worse. With the US backing the Israeli government, the Palestinian/Israeli conflict could lead to World War Three.”

Birmingham

Seven thousand participated in the Birmingham demonstration called by the Palestine Solidarity Committee, Stop the War and the Muslim Association of Britain. A large number of women had brought their children and grandchildren to express their disgust and anger at Israel’s action. Trade union delegations were present as well as scores of Muslim and minority groups.

Kerry Webb, a 45-year old mother, was part of a delegation from Shrewsbury College on the demonstration. She had attended the national demonstration in London the week before, she said. It was the first demonstration she had ever taken part in. “I attended that demonstration more on a humanitarian aspect. Children are being killed in their hundreds, and I felt I had to do something. As a mother I cannot sit still and do nothing,” she said.

Nick Callaghan, from Wolverhampton and district council told how Wolverhampton MP Pat McFadden, a minister in the Brown government, is part of the body that grants export licences to Israel. “In the first six months of last year they granted over £20 million worth of arms licenses to Israel, three times the amount for the whole of 2007,” he said.

Manchester

Notwithstanding claims that “peace” had returned, almost 500 people joined a protest in Manchester on Sunday evening. A number had made their own anti-war placards and many brought spare shoes with them to place in front of the Town Hall as a protest.

Ashar, an accountant who is originally from Pakistan, told the WSW: “Since day one when Hamas were elected, they have been under an embargo supported by just about everyone. And even one or two years ago you kept reading reports about how bad the situation was then--that they were running out of supplies and running out of fuel, running out of medicines.

“They are a nation under siege”, he continued. “It is really sad that the whole world is just watching. Look at Israel, they have shelled three United Nation’s compounds now and there is talk of that actually constituting a war crime. But what is anyone going to actually do about it?”

“... Is it any wonder that sometimes the US is so hated in the Muslim world? I think under Obama it is going to be the same.”

Benjamin and his partner Carlotta are originally from Milan, Italy. Benjamin said, “I was at a big demonstration in Milan 10 days ago against the war. There we didn’t just put the shoes down but it was much more angry. We went right to the front and the demonstration was very angry and aggressive. Israel have got many arms and helicopters and we have seen what they have done in the Palestinian territory. The Palestinians have little rights. They have no arms except small rockets. These are nothing against the helicopters and bombs of Israel.”

Deborah Davies, a young mother attending the demonstration with her son, was carrying a home-made banner linking the use of white phosphorus bombs to similar weapons used in Vietnam and denouncing it as a war crime.

She said, “no one has the right to behave as the Israeli army is doing... The use of white phosphorus cannot be justified by any commentator on the Middle East crisis, or by anybody at all. That is why I have put this on my banner today--I am appalled by the war crimes being carried out in Gaza.

“Now that [Prime Minister] Olmert has called a so-called ceasefire, the emphasis has to be on the fight for justice, and that means bringing to trial all those responsible for the war crimes in Gaza.

“In the longer term, the demand must be for Israel to get out of Palestine. I do not believe in the ‘two-state solution’ put forward by a number of players in the Middle East. I do not have much confidence in a one-state solution, let alone a two-state one.

“I definitely think the long-running problems in the Middle East have to be solved on the basis of socialism... We have to argue for a socialist solution”.



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