

Britain: Student meetings hear report on socialist perspective for the Middle East

Our correspondent
3 March 2009

Jean Shaoul, who contributes regularly to the *World Socialist Web Site* on the Middle East, spoke recently to meetings in Britain held by the International Students for Socialist Equality on the war in Gaza. The meetings in Glasgow, Sheffield, Manchester, London and Brighton, which produced lively questions and debates, were held just as elections in Israel took place. Israeli President Shimon Peres has asked Likud Party chairman Benjamin Netanyahu to form Israel's next government.

Shaoul began by detailing the consequences of Israel's murderous assault on the Gaza Strip which had killed more than 1,300 Palestinians, destroyed entire neighbourhoods and vital infrastructure and plunged the population into even greater destitution.

Israel's claim that this was in self-defence for rocket attacks on Sderot, southern Israel, bore no relation to reality, she explained. "Israel has the most highly trained and best equipped military machine in the region. It has defeated numerous Arab armies in the 61 years of its existence, and waged countless assaults on the Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and Lebanon while suffering few casualties itself. Over the last eight years, the homemade rockets fired by Palestinian militants have killed a total of 20 Israelis. In this latest onslaught, 10 Israeli soldiers have died in combat, and three of these were the result of 'friendly fire.' Three civilians were killed by rocket attacks."

The real purpose of the Israeli offensive was to destroy the "capacity of the Palestinians to resist their oppression in any way. Its target is not merely Hamas but the 1.5 million impoverished people crammed into Gaza," she said. She went on to say that the horror and opposition of tens of millions towards Israel's actions are justified.

For many years after its founding in 1948, Israel had been viewed with sympathy, due to its origins in the greatest crime of the 20th century, the Nazi Holocaust. Up to this point, many Jews had looked to socialism as a means of overcoming their religious persecution and oppression. But the betrayals of Stalinism, which had prevented the working class from putting an end to the capitalist system, and thereby paving the way for the Nazi atrocities, led to disillusionment amongst many.

"Many Jews turned instead to the establishment of their own state where they hoped they would find a safe haven," she said. At the war's end, "with no Western country willing to take them, many Jews were living in displaced persons' camps in Europe. Public opinion supported their claims for a national home for the Jews in part of Palestine, which was then controlled by Britain under a mandate from the forerunner of the UN. The United States, France and the Soviet Union supported the establishment of Israel in order to pursue their own geopolitical interests in the region at the expense of Britain.

"But this safe haven for the Jews was realised in the form of a capitalist state," Shaoul explained. "Furthermore, it was created by the expulsion of two thirds of the pre-existing Palestinian population, who had formed the majority of the inhabitants, and the oppression and continuing dispossession of those Palestinians who remained. Israel was maintained

through war and repression, and social inequality at home."

Shaoul reviewed the outcomes of the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967 and 1973, which saw Israel illegally occupying territory. These were followed by Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1976, and again in 1982, its bombing of Beirut, and its complicity in the massacre of Palestinians in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla, under then-Defence Minister Ariel Sharon.

"After the second Palestinian uprising, or Intifada, it became clear to many that Israel, now ruled by Sharon, was not prepared to contemplate any opposition to its continuing oppression, much less any political autonomy for the Palestinian Authority under Yasser Arafat," she explained. Israel invaded the West Bank in April 2002, demolishing Arafat's offices and keeping him under virtual house arrest, despite his grave illness.

Popular opposition to Israel was inflamed by its attack on Lebanon in July 2006 that killed more than 1,000 people, and destroyed 50,000 homes and much of Lebanon's infrastructure. The latest war on Gaza has only solidified this opposition.

Shaoul noted the "wave of protests around the world not only against Israel but also their own governments' support for Israel." The war sparked an angry response from youth and many Muslims, and there were significant Jewish delegations among the protestors.

"The United Nations special rapporteur, Richard Falk, an Emeritus professor of international law at Princeton University and himself a Jew, has called for an independent inquiry into Israel's violation of international humanitarian law," Shaoul pointed out. He had "said that Israel's actions against the besieged Gazans were reminiscent of 'the worst kind of international memories of the Warsaw Ghetto' which included the starvation and murder of Polish Jews by Nazi Germany in World War II. His remarks have been echoed by scores of others, including it should be stressed, Israelis who in the past would have been considered absolutely loyal to Zionism."

This and other instances indicate that Israel's reckless actions were beginning to undermine Zionism's political monopoly over Jews. But the events in Gaza raised crucial questions for Palestinians and the Israelis alike: "Irrespective of Hamas' claims to have resisted Israel, these tragic events are a disaster for the Palestinian people. They illustrate the impossibility of securing the democratic rights and the social needs of the Palestinian masses on the basis of a nationalist program, however militant its fighters."

Palestinian nationalism under the leadership of Fatah had emerged as part of broader pan-Arab nationalism in the 1960s. But the Arab bourgeoisie proved incapable of a consistent opposition to imperialism, due to its fear of the impoverished masses, and it was never able to recover from its defeat in the Six-Day War.

"Fatah came to the leadership of the PLO representing the most radical of all the various factions in the Palestinian national movement," Shaoul continued. "But a Palestinian national movement could not succeed where pan-Arabism had failed."

Washington's support for Israel, combined with Moscow's insistence on a ceasefire that left Israel in control of the Palestinian territories captured in 1967, led Egypt to conclude a peace deal with Israel at Camp David in 1978. While this was denounced by the other Arab states, none of them were prepared to go beyond ritualistic denunciations of Israel and provision of financial support for rival factions within the Palestinian movement. "This left the PLO isolated, while at the same time dependent upon their financial backers who were to betray them over and over again with the most devastating consequences," Shaoul said.

Hamas grew following the expulsion of the PLO from Lebanon to Tunis in 1982.

The growth of Islamic fundamentalism is the result of three factors, she continued. "First, the financial power and backing of the conservative oil powers in the Gulf who saw a popular and secular movement among the masses as a threat to their own power; second, support from the US—most notably to Al Qaeda; and third, support from Israel, which saw Hamas as a counterweight to the PLO."

The Islamists oppose a socialist perspective and instead seek a relationship with the imperialist powers that will allow them a share in the region's valuable natural resources and the exploitation of the working class and peasantry, she continued. In its initial formation, Hamas was "primarily a religious, cultural and social organisation, organising welfare facilities under the umbrella of the mosques and the protection of Israel. The outbreak of the first Intifada, the spontaneous movement opposing the Israeli occupation, forced Hamas to establish itself in 1988 as an Islamic political party dedicated to national liberation on a religious rather than secular foundation as championed by Fatah."

Its opposition to the 1993 Oslo Accords, which established the Palestinian Authority as the precursor to a mini-state alongside Israel, gained support from Syria and later Iran—for their own political ends.

"[Hamas] also benefited from the popular discontent at the extraordinary corruption of the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian bourgeoisie returned from exile and used the international loans and aid to set up businesses and enrich itself. Current PA leader Mahmoud Abbas epitomises this venal layer," she said. "In return for their newfound opportunities for personal enrichment, the PA was required to act as Israel's policeman and end all opposition to Israel, even as the settlement expansion on Palestinian land continued."

But Hamas offers no progressive alternative, Shaoul insisted. "Its rise is a regressive development even when compared with the secular nationalism of Fatah in its early years as a popular mass movement." And, "in terms of both its programme and methods, Hamas mirrors the ultra-rightwing religious zealots within Israel itself."

This is not changed one iota by Washington and Israel's hostility towards Hamas and their efforts to destroy it. In Gaza, Hamas like the PLO before it, found itself isolated by the Arab regimes. "Its main financial backer, Iran, anxious to do a deal with the incoming President Obama, refused to confront Israel and told its allies in the region, Syria, who is also anxious reach some accommodation with Washington, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, now part of a Lebanese National Unity Government, to keep their powder dry," Shaoul said. "Abbas and the PA stayed on the sidelines, hoping for Hamas' defeat and their own return to power in Gaza, and called for a ceasefire that would serve the interests of the PA, Israel and Egypt."

When Israel claims that the war on Hamas and Gaza was necessary to create the conditions for a "two state solution" to the conflict, it exposes the utterly reactionary character of this policy. Such a state would be little more than a truncated Israeli protectorate, with its population mired in poverty.

The war in Gaza was no less a catastrophe for the supposed Israeli victor.

"Israel stands exposed as an authoritarian regime whose aims are to expand its territorial rule while expelling its Arab population in order to maintain its Jewish majority," Shaoul said. "Such an agenda can never be achieved democratically or peacefully. It can only be secured by military means, if at all. The war has achieved none of its stated objectives: the end of Hamas' rocket attacks, the destruction of the tunnels between Gaza and Egypt, or political support for Hamas."

There was no question that the war had strengthened right wing forces within Israel, as shown by the rise to power of Benjamin Netanyahu, leader of the right wing Likud party, and the fascistic Yisrael Beiteynu of Avigdor Lieberman, which came third in the recent elections, ahead of the Labour party.

No small role in this was played by parties such as Labour and Meretz, once associated with the "peace process," which have become arch-warmongers and allies of the party created by Ariel Sharon, Shaoul continued.

"Labour has provided two defence ministers in the Kadima government who have fought three major offensives: against Lebanon and Gaza in 2006 and this recent assault on Gaza," she went on. It supported the suppression of news from Gaza during the war in order to prevent Israelis seeing on their television screens the atrocities of the IDF. It also supported the banning of Arab parties in the recent elections, a decision that was subsequently overturned by the courts, as well as the arrests of hundreds of peace protestors within Israel during the Gaza offensive.

The potential consequences for the future of Israel, as well as tens of millions of Jews the world over, has been the subject of many commentaries, Shaoul pointed out. Gideon Levy wrote that the world had been shocked by Israel's actions in Gaza: "The conclusion is that Israel is a violent and dangerous country, devoid of all restraints and blatantly ignoring the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, while not giving a hoot about international law. The investigations are on their way."

In another excoriating article entitled "The silence of the jurists," Levy said that the silence of Israel's 41,000 lawyers over Gaza "is abominable." The writer asks, "Does Israel have its own standard? Can everything be legitimised? Can international law be twisted and distorted, covered up with a Band-Aid to the point where mass killing and destruction are given the stamp of justification by our leading lights of justice?"

Those like Levy understand only too well that "outside Israel where the state is not able to exercise such censorship and control, and people don't face intimidation by rightwing zealots who support Israel's expansion and act as cheerleaders for the armed forces, Israel's moral authority is in tatters," said Shaoul. "Millions of Jewish people, who once saw Israel as a symbol of hope, now see its oppression of the Palestinians as a potent source of a new form of anti-Semitism. In this context it is worth noting a recent report showing that the number of attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions had risen significantly since the war on Gaza."

At the same time, Israel itself is a deeply divided society, split along social, ethnic, religious and ideological lines. "The global economic crisis has not left Israel unaffected: exports have fallen and growth is slowing, making a new round of austerity measures inevitable," and preparing the way for social confrontations within Israel itself.

Under these conditions, the unity of Arab and Jewish workers in the struggle for the United Socialist States of the Middle East was crucial, Shaoul said. This position is in stark contrast to that of the Socialist Workers Party and other supposedly left groups in Britain who, while claiming to be socialists, act as cheerleaders for the Arab bourgeoisie.

Shaoul pointed to a recent article in the *Socialist Worker*, arguing that "Hamas remains the legitimate government of Palestine—and the bearer of a tradition of Palestinian resistance." She said that such a position was a betrayal of socialist principles. "While it is absolutely necessary to defend Hamas against Israel's blockade and military onslaught, this can not be

used to give Hamas a clean bill of health, politically speaking."

"To embrace and portray movements such as Hamas, Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood as progressive, or to glorify them as leaders of the resistance against imperialism, serve to conceal their role in dividing the working class while establishing their own relations with global corporations and obtaining subsidies from some of the most reactionary states in the region."

"Although the SWP recognises that there are divisions 'between the Arab ruling classes, their Western allies and the people of the region', it says nothing about similar class divisions within Israel itself," she continued. "The SWP thereby repudiates the possibility of uniting workers across ethnic and religious divisions. It never calls for the unification of the entire working class in the Middle East including the Arab, Jewish, Iranian and Kurdish working class, and the creation of the United Socialist States of the Middle East, but urges instead working class leadership of a movement of Arab resistance."

The International Students for Social Equality rejects the embracing of bourgeois nationalism as a way forward for the Middle East, Shaoul stressed.

"The international economic crisis will inevitably provoke intense class struggles—in the Middle East, Europe and the US. These will provide the basis for a combined offensive by the international working class. The precondition for such a struggle is a complete break with all those parties and organisations that subordinate the working class to the national interests of the bourgeoisie. An independent socialist perspective is required.

"In contrast to the supposed radicals, we insist that a socialist perspective for workers and the rural poor in both the Arab countries and Iran must be based upon a struggle to unite Arab, Jewish and other ethnic minority workers in the region to establish a Socialist Federation of the Middle East. This perspective is inseparably bound up with the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism all over the world."



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