

Detroit protesters oppose Israeli assault on Gaza

Tom Hall
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Hundreds of demonstrators marched through downtown Detroit on Sunday to protest the Israeli bombardment of Gaza. The Detroit area is home to one of the largest Arabic populations in the US.

People from various backgrounds, including many recent immigrants from the Middle East, came wearing keffiyehs and carrying homemade signs, placards and Palestinian flags to register their outrage over the brutality meted out by the Israeli government against the helpless population of Gaza. Young people in particular constituted a large proportion of the rally.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party and the Wayne State University chapter of its youth wing, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, intervened at the rally to explain the class issues behind the explosion of Israeli militarism (see: The toxic crisis of Israeli society). Campaigners received a warm reception from the demonstrators, many of whom crowded around the party's literature table.

Mike Mahmud is a retired chef and Palestinian immigrant who has lived in the United States for 27 years. He told campaigners, "Palestine is my country, so of course this hurts me. I think they have to stop killing people. It is innocent children who are the ones who end up dying—and America supports this. Don't get me wrong, I love America, I love the American people, but this has got to stop. The bombing of innocent people has to stop."

Mike was outraged by the brutal murder of Muhammad Abu Khdeir by Israeli ultranationalists. "The boy who was burned, you know the 16-year-old boy whose mouth they poured gasoline in and then burned alive? He lived in my neighborhood. Did you see what the soldiers did to his cousin, the boy from Tampa? There are pictures of it—it's horrible."

Like many at the rally, Mike saw a definite link

between the austerity measures in Detroit and American support for unending wars in the Middle East: "The American government is bombing countries in the Middle East and supporting the Israeli government, but just look at what they are doing here. They are shutting off water to an entire city of people. Look around—there are homeless people everywhere. They should help these people. Helping your own people should be more important than bombing other countries."

Mike rejected attempts to portray Israeli society as a monolithic entity essentially hostile towards the aspirations of Palestinians. "I worked in Israel for six years. I would drive to work in Israel and I worked with Jewish people. There are a lot of nice Jewish people. They are not the enemy."

As the crowd made its way down Woodward Avenue, many onlookers honked and shouted their approval. The march ended in a vacant grass lot near Wayne State University, where the protest leaders, which included members of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) massed on a knoll near the sidewalk to begin delivering speeches.

Five speakers gave remarks but offered no way forward to oppose the US-backed war. Several drew comparisons between the attack on Gaza and the water shutoffs in Detroit but obscured the real interconnections, with Dawud Walid, the Michigan director of CAIR, saying the source was the "racism" of the US government. None of the speakers made any criticisms of the Obama administration or Democratic Party, which is spearheading both attacks.

The reason for this omission became apparent when organizers provided a platform to Michigan State Representative Rashida Tlaib, a Democrat, whose party fully supports Israeli militarism. Tlaib limited her

criticism entirely to the plight of children in the conflict. “Children should always be hands-off in a war, when these adults are idiots,” Rashida declared, before imploring the “mothers in the audience” to chant “not our children.”

SEP campaigners continued to interview people after the rally. Kamir is a student attending Henry Ford High School in Dearborn. He attended the rally with his friend, Rached, who recently immigrated from the West Bank. Kamir told campaigners, “I liked the speeches, especially when they drew the connection between the water shutoffs and providing resources for these wars.” Turning to Rached, Kamir explained, “My friend is from Palestine, and they don’t even have passports. They have no identity.”

Jamal Al-Uqdah is an electrician from Detroit. He told the WSWs, “It’s hard for me to understand why we are having the same conversation over and over again. It’s apartheid—they did the same thing in South Africa. At the end of the day, it’s all about resources.”

Jamal supported the SEP’s stance that workers have the social right to water and a decent standard of living. “I believe that wherever you are, where you live—you should have the right to decent work and be able to dictate the terms of your own life. Some outside group of people should not be allowed to come in and tell you how they’re going to let you live.”

Jamal was particularly incensed about the situation in Detroit. “The water shutoffs are terrible. Don’t Ford Field and Joe Louis owe tens of thousands of dollars? And then to cut off water to regular people over these little bills is outrageous. Also, one thing they don’t talk about is that a lot of water has been left on in vacant houses over the years. That’s a lot of wasted water. Why don’t they fix that instead of shutting people off?”

Zehra, a student at Wayne State, attended the rally with her younger sister Fizza. She told campaigners, “The conflict is ridiculous. It’s all financed with American money. It is hypocritical for an American politician to denounce terrorism in Palestine, and then support terrorism in Syria.” Like many others, she stressed that it was “not a Muslim or Jewish question, but a humanitarian question.”

Hannah saw the attack on Gaza as part of a policy of ethnic cleansing. “I think it is absolutely horrific. Israel is trying to ethnically cleanse Palestine and using any

excuse they can concoct to escalate. They are ruthless and they have no care for international law or basic humanity. Not only are they killing civilians, but women, children, and disabled people.”

“Israel is concerned about power, but this is bigger than just Israel and Palestine. People need to make the connection between the attack on Gaza and the attack on Detroit. It’s imperialism, it’s capitalism. I think that both of those global systems needs to be abolished.”



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