

Third week of protests in New Zealand over Gaza invasion

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Around 400 people protested in New Zealand's capital city Wellington on Saturday against the murderous invasion of Gaza by the Israeli armed forces. Protesters marched through the central city, chanting "Israel! USA! How many kids did you kill today?" and "Free! Free! Palestine." One placard charged Israel with carrying out war crimes. It was the third week of rallies and marches that have attracted thousands of people in Wellington, Auckland and regional centres.

Saturday's march was called by the Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) group, which has promised to continue the protests until the occupation ends. The ongoing slaughter and plight of the defenceless population, including many children, has brought a powerful response from broad layers of people. The protests have involved, in particular, students and youth of many nationalities.

The march ended at the Rabin memorial, gifted by the Israeli government to the then Wellington mayor, Mark Blumsky, in 2000. The stone memorial commemorates former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin who, as a commander of the armed forces in 1948, forcibly expelled thousands of Arab inhabitants from the towns of Ramle and Lydda. During Saturday's rally, young protesters placed the names of child victims of the current Israeli attacks on Gaza, written in Arabic and English, alongside the memorial.

The pseudo-left groups—Fightback, Socialist Aotearoa and the International Socialist Organisation (ISO)—which are involved in organising the protests, are working to channel the growing movement into support for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, with which they are closely associated. The BDS movement seeks to isolate Israel through boycotts of the Israeli government, businesses

and sporting and cultural activities, including bans on Israeli academics.

ISO leader Dougal McNeill last week released a press statement on behalf of SJP demanding the Wellington City Council "join the international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign" by removing the Rabin memorial. Speakers at all the rallies have called for the Israeli embassy in New Zealand to be expelled and for a campaign of boycotts against Israeli businesses. A representative of the Catholic charity organisation Caritas was given the platform on Saturday to call for an "academic and cultural boycott" of Israeli citizens.

These demands have been endorsed by the main opposition parties. Green Party spokesman Kennedy Graham said the government should consider expelling Israel's ambassador "to send the message that the world does not support its military actions in Gaza." The Maori nationalist Mana Party also demanded the removal of the Israeli embassy.

Labour's foreign affairs spokesman David Shearer, who last week claimed Israel was acting in "self-defence," is now calling for the government's superannuation scheme, the NZ Super Fund, to divest its shareholding in the company Israeli Chemicals, which manufactures white phosphorus used in munitions.

The posturing of all these parties is completely hypocritical. While nominally opposing the Israeli military's onslaught in Gaza, they have lined up with Washington's drum-beat to prepare a military intervention against Russia and are silent on the Ukrainian military's atrocities in the east of the country. The parliament has twice in recent months unanimously adopted resolutions supporting US propaganda over the Ukraine.

The BDS movement holds ordinary Israelis responsible for the crimes of the government. Earlier this year the Aotearoa BDS Network appealed to NZ's conservative National Party government to cancel the visas of the renowned Batsheva Dance Company, which was to perform at the International Festival of the Arts. Along with pseudo-lefts, the BDS then organised protests outside Batsheva's Wellington performances, denouncing it for "whitewashing Israeli apartheid."

The company's artistic director, Ohad Naharin, however, has consistently criticised the occupation of Palestine and has a history of working for artistic and cultural engagement across national divisions, including performing before Arab audiences. Interviewed on National Radio's "Morning Report" program on February 24, Naharin expressed genuine concern over Israel's policies and said he would boycott his own show if he thought it would help the Palestinian cause.

Opposition to the Israeli government and state apparatus is entirely justified and necessary. Underlying the "boycott" campaign, however, is a fatalistic and pessimistic conception that it is impossible to win Israeli working people, the great majority of the population, to oppose the government and Zionism itself. It serves to obstruct and undermine the effort to build a unified struggle of Jewish and Arab workers against their common oppressors.

Israel, like all societies, is sharply divided between a financial and corporate elite that controls the government, and the working class that is politically disenfranchised. The Israeli government can sustain its militarist outrages and unrelenting repression of Palestinians only because of the absence of a working class leadership armed with an internationalist and socialist program opposed to Zionism.

Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to some of those attending the Wellington rally, and distributed the WSWS statement, "Gaza, Ukraine and the fraud of 'human rights' imperialism."

Mahmoud, a Palestinian living in New Zealand, said he was at the protest to stand up for "justice and to support the Palestinian people in their struggle." Mahmoud said the situation in Gaza is "not about Hamas, not about jihad, but about people being slaughtered in the Israeli occupation." The root of the

problem, he said was the occupation. "These people [in Gaza] have been occupied for a long time, and have been under siege for over eight years." Mahmoud denounced the Israeli "pretext of self-defence" to justify a massacre. "It is about time," he declared, that "the international community realised the people cannot live like this for much longer." He wants the New Zealand government to "speak out against injustice and stop hiding behind the lies and propaganda about Israeli 'self-defence'."

Anne, a retiree, came to the protest because she wanted to do something about the "horrific situation" in Gaza. She had been particularly moved by the reports of "children being bombed and killed every day." "People are losing their homes, and have nowhere to go. The whole situation is appalling," she said. "How the Israelis can treat their neighbours like that is beyond comprehension." Anne emphasised that the outrage was "all supported by the US." Anne described New Zealand Prime Minister Key's recent criticism of the bombing of the UN school in Gaza as "very mild," adding that he had blamed both sides "because he doesn't want to fall out with the US."



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