

150,000 protest in London against Israel's siege of Gaza

Paul Bond
11 August 2014

Saturday saw the largest British demonstration to date against the Israeli military siege of Gaza. People from all over Britain joined the march from the BBC's headquarters to Hyde Park. The media talked of "tens of thousands" of protestors, but the organisers' estimate of 150,000 was closer to the mark.

The demonstration, called by eight organisations, including Stop the War Coalition and the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC), was part of a day of protests internationally against Israeli military attacks on Gaza. At least 50,000 protested in Cape Town, South Africa, while thousands marched in Paris, despite another ban imposed by the French authorities. Demonstrations were also held in Spain and Greece, across Australia, and in Bangalore, India. Protests were also held in the cities of Edinburgh, Manchester and the Irish capital Dublin.

The size of the London protest demonstrated the outrage felt by broad sections of the population at the horrific violence unleashed on Gaza. Protesters chanted, "Free Free Palestine," and "Brick by brick, Wall by wall, Israeli apartheid has to fall." There was widespread support for the protest along the route as well, with café staff providing protesters with glasses of water in the heat.

An Israeli embassy spokesman told the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) they "don't have a problem" with the protest, but then identified the march as supporting terrorism. The spokesman stated they opposed "people expressing support for a terror organisation which is designated in the UK [Hamas] and which today is the key obstacle to the prosperity of Gaza."

Despite a number of Jewish speakers at the rally, the media still tried to whip up fears of "anti-Semitism" in order to divide Arab and Jewish workers.

The speeches before and after the march revealed the bankrupt perspective of those leading the protests, who seek to corral the growing anger behind attempts to

change UK governmental foreign policy through the dead-end of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign. While there was acknowledgement of the scale of war crimes committed by Israeli troops, and calls for an end to the selling of military equipment to Israel, much of the final rally was given to political manoeuvring by the major parties ahead of next year's general election.

The protest assembled outside the BBC's headquarters in Portland Place in order to draw attention to the broadcaster's biased coverage in support of Israel and its discrediting of international protests.

Several speakers, predominantly trade union officials, addressed the crowd before the march, clearly setting out the agenda of the organisers. Speakers from the train drivers' union ASLEF and Unite called for support for BDS.

Chris Nineham of Stop the War, a former leading member of the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP), and Jean Butcher of Unison both pointed to the organisers' main ambition. In their call for the protest Stop the War had said one of their main aims was the recall of parliament from its holiday. As Stop the War indicated last year in relation to the proposed bombardment of Syria, their intention is increasingly to act as advisers to the British ruling class on questions of foreign policy. Butcher insisted: "our own government" needs to "step up to the mark."

For his part, Nineham said the developing crisis within the British government over support for Israel, including the resignation of one of the government's leading figures, Baroness Warzi, would not have happened without the protest movement. Nineham made clear that pursuing this line required the exclusion of any mobilisation of the working class against war. This was a broad movement, he said; "the whole of civil society" demonstrating "people power."

Lindsey German, convenor of the Stop the War

Coalition and another former leading figure in the SWP, said, “We are calling for an end to the massacre and the recall of the UK parliament. Our government must be forced to end its support for Israel’s siege of Gaza.”

Her comments were echoed at the closing rally by Sarah Colbourne of the Public and Commercial Services Union, who spoke of the need to “send a message to our government that we’re disgusted.” They had received support, she said, from “people from every party,” citing support from Liberal Democrats and “even Conservative MPs.” The line was echoed by Labour MP Diane Abbott, who said the protest showed “British people of all colours and all political parties” standing in solidarity.

In the speeches there was only the occasional mention of the imperialist-backed war by the Ukraine government against the population in the east of that country, and the recent US bombing of Iraq. Israel’s onslaught against Gaza was treated by the speakers chiefly as a moral question. Liberal Democrats David Ward MP and life peer Baroness Jenny Tonge spoke, with Ward promoting BDS. Sinn Féin’s Gerry Adams sent a statement in which he called on the Irish government to end its “shameful silence” on Palestine.

Leader of the Green Party Natalie Bennett called for ending arms exports to Israel and ending further military cooperation. “That,” she said “is achievable,” saying that Green MP Caroline Lucas had already called for it in Parliament. Bennett summed up the position of the organisers when she called simply for “pressure” on Prime Minister David Cameron.

In their call for the protest Stop the War had written enthusiastically of Labour Party leader Ed Miliband having come out “strongly critical” of Cameron, and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg “calling for a ceasefire.” The rally was attended by a number of Labour Party MPs—Abbott, Rushanara Ali, Yasmin Qureshi—who were given a platform to call for “pressure” on Cameron. Abbott spelled it out most clearly. Referring to Baroness Warsi’s resignation from Cameron’s cabinet last week, Abbott said the task was to “keep up the pressure until David Cameron takes a position that is morally defensible.”

This call for pressure on the British government as the solution was made under conditions, as the speakers themselves noted, of the hypocrisy of Cameron’s boast of having sent NHS medical teams to tend those wounded by arms exported under British government licence.

Many speakers drew parallels between the situation in Palestine and that under apartheid in South Africa. All of

them treated the end of apartheid as a revolutionary victory rather than a tactical manoeuvre by a bourgeoisie trying to maintain its position within global capitalism. Labour supporter Owen Jones said that apartheid had seemed strong and asked “But did it fall?”

Apartheid was removed because it provided an obstacle to the South African ruling class, and threatened a social explosion that might lead towards moves to overthrow capitalism. Today the African National Congress itself is responsible for the policing and brutalisation of the South African working class. The mineworkers union, which collaborated in shooting dead striking miners at Marikana in 2012, belongs to the ANC-affiliated trade union body COSATU, which has been at the forefront of the BDS boycott campaign.

The boycott campaign is based on opposition to winning the Israeli working class to a struggle against the government and war. It obstructs and prevents efforts to build a unified struggle of Jewish and Arab workers against their common oppressors. 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.

The aim of those promoting the BDS campaign is to further the “two-state solution” via the creation of an unviable mini-state that could serve only as a prison for the Palestinians.

The unity of the working class, both Arab and Jewish, was at the centre of the campaign by members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party, who distributed thousands of copies of the *World Socialist Web Site* statement, *The Slaughter in Gaza: A Warning to the International Working Class*. SEP campaigners won a warm response for our call to build an international socialist movement to put an end to capitalism and war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact