

Thousands protest in Australia against Israel's war on Palestinians

Our reporters
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Tens of thousands of people joined protests around Australia over the weekend to oppose the Israeli onslaught on the people of Gaza. Rallies or marches were held in the main cities, including Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and Canberra, defying threats by Labor state governments and police commanders to ban or shut down demonstrations.

Among the largest demonstrations, up to 10,000 people rallied and marched through Melbourne on Sunday, at least 8,000 gathered in Sydney's Hyde Park on the same day, and about 5,000 marched through Brisbane on Friday night.

Those participating included members of the Palestinian community and immigrant families from the Middle East, as well as broad layers of working-class and young people. Chants included "Occupation is a crime, free, free, Palestine free," "end the siege on Gaza" and "In our thousands, in our millions, we are all Palestinians."

Many held placards denouncing the Zionist assault and condemning the Albanese Labor government's unconditional support for it. Some home-made banners made comparisons between the Netanyahu government's operations and those of the Nazi regime in Germany in World War II—"Leningrad = Gaza" (referencing the murderous siege of the Soviet city between 1941 and 1944), "Gaza = Warsaw Ghetto," and "One Holocaust does not justify another."

There was intense hostility toward the Albanese government. At the rallies, cries of "shame" rose when speakers mentioned its blanket defence of the Israeli military bombardment of Gaza. In interviews with the WSWs, people denounced the government's hypocrisy in backing the mass killing of Palestinians, while claiming to address the appalling conditions of indigenous people in Australia by holding a referendum to entrench an advisory body called the Voice in the country's constitution.

In Sydney, there was anger toward the state Labor government of Premier Chris Minns, which had urged people not to join the protest and backed the police in refusing to authorise a march. The police threatened to use special powers to conduct searches and identity checks on participants. A heavy police presence extended to very visible deployments at train stations to and from the protest, and a police helicopter circled low over the event in an intimidating display. However, no arrests were reported.

In Sydney, Zizi, a community activist, told the WSWs: "My heritage is Palestinian but I'm actually here as a human opposed to the absolute injustice that is happening in Palestine. And it hasn't

been happening since 1948 when people think it has, it is 100 years of the British-backed Zionist project which is what we call Israel today. I'm here because I can't be silent and I can't be at home just accepting that my government is basically complicit because they are showing their support for Israel, but also look how we treat own indigenous people here in Australia. Shame! Shame on them! So I am here to speak up and to be in solidarity with my brothers and sisters in Palestine.

"The government talks about self-determination and indigenous rights but in the same breath it is supporting the genocide of Palestinians. How do they justify that? How do they reconcile that? It is pure hypocrisy and I believe we should not be silent. We need to speak up against our government to withdraw their unequivocal support. It is not a war; it is the longest occupation in history. It is unfathomable that one million humans are kicked out of their homes, carrying mattresses and whatever clothing they have on their backs.

"People say to me 'aren't you upset about Israeli lives lost?' My response is that no Israeli lives should be lost but unfortunately under occupation this is going to happen. It is a natural response to a people suffocating and denied human rights. What did they think? That they would just sit back and accept it? My question is to people out there, 'What is the natural response to a brutal occupation?'"

Zizi commented that "governments around the world are giving the Israeli state carte blanche to go in and collectively punish people whose only crime was to be born in Palestine. My question is 'has a Palestinian invaded anywhere?' They lived there. Hamas and the groups that are being criticised are a byproduct of a brutal occupation. There was no such thing as Hamas before the colonisation of Palestine. It was a secular society. Jews, Muslims and Christians lived side by side. There was no such thing as sectarianism. This is a byproduct of a brutal occupation and people must connect the dots."

Sam said what is happening in Gaza is genocide. "The genocide's been going on for 75 years," he said. "This is just another chapter in the book." He commented:

"World leaders are just toeing the line and accepting what Benjamin Netanyahu is saying. There are a lot of serious accusations he's making, with no proper evidence. I know the UN's been on the ground in Palestine for years. They have a group that can verify all those claims that Netanyahu is making, but he just won't allow them to actually go in and verify... From what I

can see, he probably wants the war to expand across the Middle East. That is going to have ramifications all around the world, and nobody's putting him in check.

"They are a band around the world, the capitalists, and they do protect each other and their interests. And unfortunately, it comes at the cost of innocent human beings, whether it's in Ukraine, in Gaza, in Russia, in Afghanistan, it could be anywhere around the world."

Sam added: "The Israeli people, I feel like they are victims in this too. Mr Netanyahu has called up 360,000 Israelis. They are taken away from their families, from their jobs, to go fight a war that's really not going to achieve anything. I think this is a Palestinian-Arab issue, an Israeli issue, but it's also an issue of injustice.

"I'm glad that it's a big turnout. I've seen other protests around the world over the weekend. And it puts your faith back into humanity. There's people that actually care out there."

In Melbourne, Kafa explained: "I came today because I'm a Palestinian. I'm Palestinian, born and raised in Australia. My husband is Greek, I have a four-year-old daughter and it just makes my heart bleed because if we lived in Palestine, in Gaza right now, there's no difference between us and them. My daughter could be killed. Just for being Palestinian. Myself as well.

"Our family was kicked out decades ago. We still have the key to our home and we have family friends who are in Palestine. We just heard from them on the phone, and the mother was saying to her daughter, 'If I don't talk to you again, goodbye, and please forgive me.' It's horrible."

Asked about the attempted suppression of demonstrations against the Israeli government crimes, Kafa replied: "In every rally there is always a push to try and ban things, shut them up. We've been silenced for decades, but we won't be silenced now. I don't want the message to be lost—the message is to free Palestine. I think we can all agree that killing children, innocent people is wrong. Our country needs to put an end to it and put pressure on the Israeli government to stop their siege on Gaza."

Tahsin, Kafa's father, stated: "All I can say is that the oppression after 75 years, the oppression and humiliation of Palestinians, led to what has happened. I blame that as the reason for creating Hamas. The reason for Hamas's creation is occupation, oppression, discrimination, you name it, it is there. If I want to talk about Zionism, it is equal to Nazism. They are the Nazis of this world and unfortunately protected by the Western world, led by America."

David, a tradesman, said: "I want to stand in solidarity with the Palestinians who have been living under Israeli occupation for the last 75 years. I think the media hasn't really explained the full story. I think the Palestinians have been living under human rights abuses for a number of years, for decades now, and that has been shown by Amnesty International.

"They reported early last year the constant human rights abuses that the Palestinians are facing. Prior to the weekend, which was abhorrent and disgusting, 288 Palestinians had died at the hand of the Israeli military, 40 of them were children. From 2008, 6,400 Palestinian civilians have died at the hands of the Israeli government."

He continued: "I'm not Muslim, I'm not Palestinian, I'm just a human being who sees injustice in the world. This is a small way for me to show my support for the Palestinian people. I've never been to a protest before in my life, never—but this has just compelled me because it is so wrong what is happening. I'll never again vote for any of those parties now supporting the Israeli government."

In Brisbane, Sadra, a student and tutor, said he came to the demonstration to "support the Palestinian case, and the right to resist and the right to self-determination."

He said what occurred the previous weekend was an uprising of the Palestinian population. "There are people born in Gaza who have never seen anything outside of Gaza. And their grandparents were living in the areas surrounding Gaza. They were forced out as refugees and now this is the first time they ever got to see those lands.

"While a lot of violence was very ugly, it's the Israeli government's fault for killing every other opportunity for Palestinians to resist. They have been peaceful in the West Bank for ever, but they have got nothing for it. There are just ghettos of Palestinians and they look nothing like a country. They have a right to resist, and it wasn't just Hamas involved. There were other organisations that took part in this and you can't blame them because they have no other choice."

Asked about a struggle by Jewish and Palestinian workers together for a unified socialist state, Sadra commented:

"I couldn't agree more. Even now I feel like a lot of people propose a two-state solution but the two-state solution has been dead. And the one-state solution cannot be imposed because of basic demographics. The Israelis don't want to allow two million in Gaza, two million in the West Bank and five million refugees to come back and vote. So basically, they have an ethno-state that's being supported.

"Now they are cutting off water and electricity and it's a war crime. And every Western state is saying that's like, OK, they can do whatever they want. They're not even trying to call for calm or for peace. They are saying Israeli can go and bomb as many people as they want."



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