

Socialist Equality Party protests obstruction of public meeting by London Metropolitan Police

Socialist Equality Party (UK)
17 November 2023

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) National Secretary Chris Marsden has written to Police Commissioner Mark Rowley protesting unlawful obstruction by the London Metropolitan Police of the party's public meeting, "Stop Israel's genocide against Gaza!" held at the London Resource Centre Thursday, November 9.

The meeting had been widely publicised at mass demonstrations held over the preceding two weekends in London, with leaflets distributed in both English and Arabic.

On the day of the event, London Resource Centre informed SEP representatives that revised police guidance had been provided to the venue and that unless the party registered its meeting with the London Metropolitan Police our event would be cancelled.

The SEP was directed to an online submission form on the Met's website where SEP Assistant National Secretary Tom Scripps was required to provide personal contact details and information about the meeting, including start and finish times, projected attendance figures and a description of the event.

The venue was unable to explain the legal basis for their instruction, or why the SEP would need to register a lawful public meeting with the London Metropolitan Police. Indeed, the police registration form the SEP was compelled to submit following police guidance to the venue stated, "although you don't legally have to tell us, we'd like you to let us know about your event".

London Resource Centre confirmed they had been contacted by the Met. Their directives to the venue ensured that the requirement to register with the police was compulsory. The only "choice" was between registering or accepting the cancellation of our event just hours before its start time.

On Tuesday, the SEP contacted human rights group Liberty to inform them of the police measures against our party, to establish whether the same invasive procedures are being used against other left-wing, socialist or anti-war meetings and to request advice and assistance.

Liberty advised that under Section 11 of the Public Order Act (1986) protest marches must be registered with the police, but there is no requirement to register a public meeting in a privately hired venue. After conferring with colleagues, a Liberty staff member said the police guidance applied against the SEP appeared to be the first such incident reported to them and was "very concerning".

In his letter to Police Commissioner Rowley, Marsden wrote,

"We regard the actions taken by your officers as a draconian infringement on our party's democratic rights to freedom of speech and political expression." He insisted, "We strongly protest the anti-democratic measures taken and will contest this vigorously."

The British government has responded to mass protests over Israel's genocide in Gaza with a crack-down on freedom of speech and the right to demonstrate. This includes threats to ban mass protests in defence of the Palestinian people and the arrest of protestors for holding placards condemning Israel's genocidal military campaign backed by Britain and the United States.

On Thursday, the SEP contacted the Socialist Workers Party to ask whether its own public meeting at the London Resource Centre on October 26—with listed speakers Tariq Ali and historian Ilan Pappé—had faced similar police obstruction. A spokesperson for the SWP confirmed they had not been required to register that meeting or other public meetings with the police.

In Britain during World War II, the mass round-up of "enemy aliens"—including the internment of thousands of Jews—was preceded by the requirement that they register with the police.

Marsden's letter to Rowley stated, "We will not allow the actions taken against our party to establish a precedent for a wider attack on left-wing, socialist and anti-war meetings."

He concluded: "I request urgent clarification of where this decision was taken, by whom, and on what legal authority, and for you to personally provide written assurances that such an incident will not happen in future."

The SEP calls on its supporters and all those concerned with the defence of democratic rights to register your protest over the actions of the London Metropolitan Police.

Letters of protest should be sent to Police Commissioner Mark Rowley mark.rowley@met.police.uk cc your e-mail to: sep@socialistequalityparty.uk

Attention:

Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Mark Rowley

Dear Sir,

I am writing on behalf of the Socialist Equality Party to protest the actions taken by your officers in response to our public meeting in London on Thursday November 9 against Israel's genocide in Gaza.

On the day of the meeting, the venue holder, London Resource Centre in Holloway, phoned to advise that in line with recent police guidance we must register our event with the London Metropolitan Police. The venue said that failure to do so would result in our event being cancelled.

London Resource Centre stated they had been contacted by the Met about our event. But the venue holder was unable to confirm the legal basis for their request that we must register our meeting with the police.

A letter emailed to us by the London Resource Centre shortly afterwards, at 11:50 a.m., made clear the venue was nevertheless enforcing police guidance. The letter stated:

In response to recent Police guidance, we are required to implement some additional measures to ensure the safety of all building users during your event.

We will be required to engage with a security company and this cost will need to borne by you. The cost of this will be £340.35 + VAT.

The event will also need to be registered with the Metropolitan Police. Below is a link to website where you will be able to do this. Please can you reply with a screenshot and confirmation that you have registered your event?

<https://www.met.police.uk/tua/tell-us-about/ea/af/events-processions/static-event-public-place/?tid=16596&lid=&cid=&rid=731288&stepid=1>

We will need to receive payment for the event in full, inclusive of security.

I am afraid that without consideration of these points we will not be able to proceed with your event.

We remain unaware of any such revised police guidance being made public and know of no legal basis for insisting that political meetings in a private space must be registered with the Metropolitan Police.

However, faced with the cancellation of our meeting, we had no choice but to comply, registering our meeting with the Metropolitan Police and paying for private security. This latter requirement is also invasive. It caused disruption to our own security arrangements for the event. We had no control over the security guards who were stationed inside the venue.

The Metropolitan Police's online registration form confirms there is no legal basis for the demands made on us to register our event. Under the heading: "I'm planning a static event in a public place" it states, "although you don't legally have to tell us, we'd like you to let us know about your event."

Our event was not even a static event in a public place, but a ticketed meeting held in a private venue. Yet the requirement to register our meeting on Gaza assumed *de facto* the force of law due to the Met's guidance to the venue.

At 12.39 p.m., the SEP received a reply from PC Alexander Stevens 2572CN of C Team Islington. The email stated:

We already had some notice from elsewhere so created a CAD1590/09NOV23 in case you have any issues or concerns.

Due to the current Israeli/Palestinian tensions we currently have dedicated resources to patrol and monitor sensitive areas or events and have made them aware of your event. I have asked them not to physically attend (unless you would prefer them to?) but to pass by and pay casual attention for some time in their schedule this evening.

The letter admits to police surveillance of "sensitive events", but still does not explain the legal basis for the demands made on us earlier that day.

We regard the actions taken by your officers as a draconian infringement on our party's democratic rights to freedom of speech and political expression. While the Metropolitan Police state publicly that they have no right to enforce the registration of static public events, in practice its guidance to venues ensures precisely this outcome, with failure to comply resulting in the cancellation of a prominently advertised anti-war meeting in the capital.

We strongly protest the anti-democratic measures taken by the Met and will contest this vigorously. We will not allow the actions taken against our party to establish a precedent for a wider attack on left-wing, socialist and anti-war meetings.

I request urgent clarification of where this decision was taken, by whom, and on what legal authority, and for you to personally provide written assurances that such an incident will not happen in future.

Sincerely,
Chris Marsden
National Secretary
Socialist Equality Party



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact