

# Walkout to protest Gaza genocide at London universities UCL and SOAS

Our reporters

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Students and staff from University College London (UCL) and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) walked out Wednesday to protest the Israeli state's genocide in Gaza.

A rally was held in UCL's main quad before a short march around and through the university to President and Provost Dr Michael Spence's office, where a die-in/sit-in was staged and the names of some of those killed in Gaza read out. Spence was denounced for allowing a recent alumni event to go ahead with a representative of the arms-producing company Airbus, which supplies Israeli surveillance drones, present at the university's invitation.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) spoke with the protestors, all of whom asked to remain anonymous, referencing intimidation and the threat of sanction by the university authorities.

One student who had helped to organise the protest criticised UCL's "really shocking ties with arms companies. This is something we'd be campaigning against regardless of whether or not there was this ongoing bombardment of Gaza."

She explained the protest was "also about building solidarity and giving a voice. A lot of the students who are affected by this are international students and we've heard of instances where international students, especially from the Arab world who are involved in these types of events, are threatened with their visas being taken away."

A second student, a Palestinian who has lost over a hundred members of his extended family in Gaza, added, "Universities are supposed to be for discussion and freedom of speech and conversation where we can get to the truth."

Rejecting the antisemitism slanders levelled against

protestors, he said, "There are Israelis who support the Palestinians. It's Zionism that we are trying to combat. We're not racists, we don't hate Jews; there are Jews in our countries, a lot of our organisers are Jews. It's not a religious cause to us, it's not a racial cause to us. It's about occupation and ongoing oppression.

"We haven't seen the needle move on this issue for a long time but this time around I feel it's different; there's more energy, more momentum, more support globally."

Asked about the intimidation of staff and students opposed to Israel's war, the first student referred to the suspension of UCL's Marxist Society for using the word "intifada" on a poster, the censoring of the same word from a motion posted by the local University and College Union to a university webpage, and the suspension of SOAS students who had taken part in protests.

"On Friday we did a joint action with SOAS supporting them. I know from trying to work with our students' union-endorsed society, Students for Justice for Palestine, they haven't been able to do anything like a direct action because they're afraid of the repercussions. So that's why this action has been organised by just a bunch of students that don't have any funding or access to resources, or organisational ties."

As the discussion turned to the way forward for the protest movement, one student explained, "I am very focussed on what happens the day after a ceasefire. Are they going to do what they always do? Everyone turns their backs, goes back home. Gazans start rebuilding their houses so they can be destroyed again. Is that going to happen, or will we move beyond it?"

He raised the concern that "The Israel lobby is very strong." IYSSE members added that a key factor was

that no major party defends the Palestinians, including the Labour party.

“Its disgusting,” both replied, with one continuing, “We’re in Keir Starmer’s constituency here. We’ve called him out and showed the mass of UCL students who are appalled by his silence; and not just silence, his endorsement.”

She added, “I agree that this question of what comes after a ceasefire is so important. Because all of us who are organising, we didn’t just wake up and think ‘This is bad.’ We are taking it as an opportunity—as you said the needle is moving—to raise awareness about what the occupation really is.

“I think it’s up to the Palestinian people what solution they come up with. There has to be a right of return for refugees. I don’t see how a two-state solution can work with the continued annexation of the West Bank. There has to be an end to occupation; there has to be an end to apartheid. There has to be an end to surveillance. The Palestinian prisoners have to be freed.”

In response to the IYSSE’s perspective of a joint socialist fight of workers regardless of ethnicity and religion, the Palestinian student pointed out, “I think a lot of Israeli young people are sick of it. Sick of the war. Sick of the treatment of Palestinians. They want the conflict to end. There are Israeli soldiers crying to go home, who are hurt and traumatised by the acts they are being told to carry out by their government.”

In another conversation, a researcher explained, “I am against all forms of violence, particularly when it is exercised by a state. You have to understand that this conflict has to be addressed historically, with a historical lens.

“When we debate what is happening right now in Gaza, there is a tendency in the media to treat it as if the violence just began right now, out of the blue. It’s important to consider colonial histories and how territories have been managed and with what forms of inequality for whom over time, and that is what is missing in the presentation of this conflict.

“I am a scholar at the Institute of Education at UCL and I do research with inequalities and colonialism and capitalism. These are areas of interests for me, both intellectually but also from the standpoint of political engagement.”

Asked about the blanket support given to Israel by the

imperialist governments, the researcher responded, “Yes, thanks for saying that. One of the other reasons I am here is that I feel uncomfortable, to say the least, that my taxes, taxpayer money is being used to sponsor violence. I don’t feel comfortable with this blanket support and with the way discourses about antisemitism are organised to counter these protests.

“All of us here, we are not antisemitic. This is not about religious conflict. I am together with other colleagues, Jewish colleagues, who are also supporting these types of protest events, against Israel’s violence. And very much also against the support the UK is providing to this.

“We don’t want more people dying. This is about peace.”

Asked about the way forward, the researcher suggested a better implemented two-state solution “could be the way out. I think Palestinians need to have their own territory and access to resources. It needs to be addressed, what is it that the Palestinians are requesting, historically speaking?”

When IYSSE members countered that the violence of the last decades had been a product of the doomed two-state solution and that the ICFI called for a single state with equal rights for all, achieved through a joint socialist struggle of all workers in the Middle East, he replied, “It is desirable. One thing that is coming out of these protests is a change in public opinion, people are being mobilised, they are being pushed to address this issue. So it might be possible if there is continuous support towards the Palestinian cause.”



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