

“It needs to change but it feels like it won’t unless we, the working class, do something!”: UK students discuss how to end genocide during “Stand with Gaza” protests

Our correspondents
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World Socialist Web Site reporting teams spoke with students taking part in Wednesday’s “Stand With Gaza” protests across the UK, distributing the International Youth and Students for Social Equality statement, “The trade unions, the working class and the UK’s day of action for Gaza”.

At protests in London and Sheffield, students taking part in the walkouts and rallies expressed their concern over the integration of universities into the war machine through the funding accepted from leading firms in the arms industry, including BAE Systems and Rolls Royce. They were alarmed that their institutions of learning are linked to companies directly profiting from the supply of missiles, bombs and other weapons to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) being used in a genocidal war against the Palestinians.

Sheffield

Around 50 students joined a protest on the main concourse at the University of Sheffield and were joined by students from Sheffield Hallam University. They marched around the campus drawing support as they led chants including: “Tory Party, Labour Party, Republican Party, Democratic Party, Sunak, Starmer—Blood on your hands!”

Zain explained, “We want to ensure that the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University are not complicit with the genocide against Palestinians. As we all know the University of Sheffield has ties with the arms trade to Israel. The money being made by the weapons manufacturers is coming from killing Palestinians. It is our most urgent duty to ensure no more innocent civilian lives in Palestine are lost because of this. There is also a student from the University

of Sheffield trapped in Gaza with his family since September and we want to ensure they receive urgent help so they get out alive.

“If anything is a powerful message it is workers getting together. If NHS [National Health Service] workers, government workers, those in the arms industry stand together they could overrule this government and get a ceasefire. We all know what Prime Minister Sunak is like, he has smeared protestors who chant ‘From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free’, saying we want to wipe Israel off the map. Correct me if I’m wrong but is that not what Israel is doing to the Palestinians? Since October 7, over 25,000 Palestinians have been killed probably many more than that, over half of them women and children. I was at a vigil the other week and they had a list of Palestinians killed and they started off with people aged zero reading the names and that lasted 30 minutes. I can’t find the words.

“[Labour leader] Starmer is not listening. He should be forced out. He is a war criminal. We must make sure we don’t have these leaders in our system. We must think about the future of our children if these lot are still in charge.”

Phoebe and her friends who are studying English said, “The situation in Gaza is awful where people are being treated less than human. The government are getting away with not calling it a genocide when it’s clear that’s what’s going on. They only speak out against things when they start losing money—it is all about the money for them.

“It needs to change but it feels like it won’t unless we the working class do something. There’s a lot of discussion among young people and it’s strange how it’s not spoken about on the news, you don’t hear about it unless you go searching for it. Things are brushed under the carpet like nothing’s going on.”

Kaydian, a politics student said, “I think what is happening in Gaza, which has been happening in Palestine

since the late 1940s, is a genocide and it's been a genocide since day one. We need to help these people. The whole system we live in, nation state capitalism, is complicit in genocide. It's a neo-colonial system that has genocided people in Congo, in Sudan and they will continue with this until the system comes down. I'm hoping this will be a turning point so people can finally see that's what our governments are carrying out."

London

A group of around 40 students and staff protested outside Imperial College London. They issued an open letter, "Imperial Research and Investments Fuel Genocide and Occupation" which criticised the university authority. It read, "While the administration has claimed to recognise the emotional impact of current events on staff and students, nothing has been said to recognise, or done to rectify, the direct and critical complicity of College research in ensuring the military capability required for Zionist occupation and aggression."

It notes that "the College has conducted millions of pounds worth of research for BAE Systems and Rolls Royce" and has granted access for Caterpillar to its Turbomachinery Lab for research "which enables the operation of ever heavier, armoured bulldozers currently and historically used to carry out policies of occupation, apartheid, and genocide."

A physics student told WSWS, "I'm here today to show my support for this campaign... Nearly 13,000 children are dead. And the fact you've got institutions like the government, like Imperial, still supporting this war, still giving them weapons, still giving them money to 'self-defend' against children, it's sickening to see.

"We have to do our bit; do what we can to stop Imperial, stop all institutions facilitating this genocide."

Describing how Imperial supports Caterpillar, Rolls Royce and Boeing, the student continued, "In our career events, plenty of defence companies come to Imperial. Research done here at Imperial is directly contributing to and directly responsible for bombing children.

"Imperial cutting ties with them would have a real material impact. It would save lives, it's very simple."

Speaking about the response of UK political parties to the genocide, the student replied, "I'm a Muslim who's been born and raised here. I was very strongly Labour Party. I think it is absolutely disgusting how Starmer refused to criticise Israel and claimed they were acting in self-defence.

"The Conservatives were one thing, but Labour is an even bigger disappointment. It's shocking they refuse to acknowledge any of the atrocities that are going on, and they refuse to stop it. They call for 'humanitarian pauses', not a ceasefire.

"With the election coming up, I won't be voting for the Conservatives, and I won't be supporting Labour either."

He described accusation of antisemitism levelled against protestors as "Shocking. To put all Jewish people under a single banner against a ceasefire with these false accusations of antisemitism, it only spreads antisemitism. It suggests all Jewish people should be blamed for Israel's actions when Israel as a state, Zionism as an ideology, does not represent Judaism or Jews.

"It's really upsetting, because Jewish people end up bearing some of the brunt of this when they don't deserve to. Antisemitism is a problem that should be addressed. But criticising the government of any country should not be off limits. If I criticise the government of Saudi Arabia, that doesn't mean I'm Islamophobic, that doesn't make any sense."

Asked about the way forward for the protest movement, he replied, "Boycotts have been working; McDonald's and Starbucks have been missing their targets. We're limited in what we can do, but we have to keep going. Strikes and protests have an impact."

A researcher explained, "I decided to come and raise my voice against the atrocities in Gaza and the West Bank. It's clear they are attacking civilians, kids and women. Killing and displacing them and harming them in any possible way they can.

"What they have done this time has really opened the eyes of people around the world. They really understand how bad it is now, how extreme it is." The complicity of the Conservative and Labour parties had "changed my perspective on UK politics."

Imperial's involvement with the arms companies providing services to the IDF "should be stopped. We should not help the government and armed forces carrying out these crimes."

The Socialist Equality Party/International Youth and Students for Social Equality (UK) are holding a series of public meetings this month titled, "How can the genocide in Gaza be stopped". Make plans to attend.



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