The “Stand with Gaza” workplace protests: token “solidarity” blocks action to paralyse Israel’s war machine

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The “Stand with Gaza” protests organised around the UK on Wednesday drew support from school and university students as well as teachers, lecturers, civil servants, National Health Service (NHS), media and postal workers—among others—demonstrating their opposition to the four-month-long genocide by Israel against the Palestinians.

The Stop the War Coalition (STWC) played the lead role in organising “Stand with Gaza” and billed this as “a day of workplace action”.

On social media, STWC reported that “hundreds of workplaces” took part. But while thousands of students and workers joined rallies and marches across the UK, not a single trade union called industrial action. Workers were instead invited to attend lunchtime rallies or “walkouts” on their own time, or to join evening vigils and protests that caused zero disruption to the government or the corporations profiteering from the bloodshed.

Such “workplace action” was largely restricted to education settings and the civil service. STWC could cite official backing for their day of action from just three unions out of the forty-eight affiliated to the Trades Union Congress covering 5.5 million workers: the National Education Union (NEU), University and College Union (UCU) and Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union.

Token protests organised by the education and public sector unions, along with PR stunts held by Unite and Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) officials, were aimed at deflecting workers’ anger over the unions’ refusal to heed the urgent call by the Palestinian trade union federation last October for industrial action to paralyse Israel’s war machine and stop the slaughter.

Wednesday’s limited outcome stands in stark contrast to the ongoing mass opposition to genocide by workers and youth in Britain and around the world. Last Saturday saw the eighth national demonstration in London, with a quarter of a million turning out to demand an immediate ceasefire, protesting the British government and the Labour Party’s unconditional backing for Israel’s war crimes.

For more than four months, the leadership of the STWC has invited Labour MPs and trade union officials onto the platform at mass rallies to make holiday speeches about peace without lifting a finger to mobilise workers against the Tory-Labour warmongers.

What has been served up is precisely the type of empty “solidarity” criticised by the Palestinian unions when they appealed for concrete action to stop arms production and shipments to Israel by the imperialist powers. For months British union leaders have maintained a criminal silence over this appeal.

Schools and universities were chosen as the focus for Wednesday’s day of action because students have been at the forefront of civil disobedience since the beginning of the slaughter in Gaza, taking part in large scale walkouts and sit-ins. These have exposed the failure of the education unions to organise their hundreds of thousands of members in joint action with students.

Left isolated, students have faced a battery of repressive attacks, ranging from suspensions to dawn police raids under the Terrorism Act for defending the Palestinian people and their right to resist Israel’s military occupation. Students as young as eight have been smeared as “pro-terrorist” for wearing the colours of the Palestinian flag on Children in Need Day.

The leaders of the NEU and UCU—like their fellow TUC bureaucrats—justify their refusal to organise industrial action on the grounds that anti-strike laws prohibit strikes against the government. These anti-democratic laws should have been challenged long ago. Their rigorous policing by the unions at a time when genocide is being perpetrated in Gaza backed by Britain and the US is an act of fealty by the bureaucracy to imperialism which must be defeated by the working class.

STWC is led politically by Labour “lefts” such as Jeremy Corbyn, public schoolboy Stalinists from the Communist

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Party of Britain such as Andrew Murray, and pseudo-left outfits such as Counterfire and the Socialist Workers Party, many of whose members are also trade union officials. Their sponsorship of Wednesday's day of action has the character of a false flag operation, providing the illusion of a fight by trade union bureaucrats who are policing their members to prevent any action that would threaten the vital interests of British imperialism, and which might jeopardise the election of a Labour government led by war-monger Sir Keir Starmer.

The "lefts" in the trade union bureaucracy, led by the RMT's Mick Lynch and the Stalinist Alex Gordon are playing a pivotal role in this political pantomime. Posturing as opponents of Israel's genocide, they are blocking any action by their members on the rail and ports which could halt the supply of arms to Israel and challenge Britain's military build-up in the Middle East.

The RMT leadership has sought to conceal the role of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) where it has members, who have been dispatched to support Britain's armed forces, backing the siege of Gaza and helping to supply the vast military build-up in the region targeting Yemen, Lebanon and Iran. Stalinist official Eddie Dempsey has sought to portray the RFA as providing "humanitarian assistance"!

At Saturday's rally in London, Lynch was again on the speakers' platform, calling on "our Labour Party" to "stand with our people". This is the same Labour Party currently under investigation by Scotland Yard for war crimes based on evidence submitted by the International Centre of Justice for Palestinians (ICJP). The ICJP has served prosecution notices against Starmer, Shadow Attorney General Emily Thornberry and Shadow Foreign Secretary David Lammy following their statements supporting Israel's collective punishment of 2.3 million Palestinian civilians in Gaza.

The RMT's contribution to the "day of workplace action" was farcical. According to tweets by STWC this consisted of a charity bake sale outside Kings Cross station raising £1,000 for humanitarian aid, and a delegation of RMT full-timers, led by Gordon, standing outside RMT headquarters at lunch time with a "Ceasefire Now" banner alongside representatives of the GMB union. This was enough to win the STWC's accolade of "Solidarity", accompanied by a fist bump emoji and Palestinian flag.

A similar PR job was provided for Unite, with a tweet showing London and Eastern Officers gathered outside the union's regional headquarters stating they had "come out to support the Palestinian people", as if this was a major show of strength by the largest private and public sector union in Britain with over a million members. Led by General Secretary Sharon Graham, Unite has prevented any action by its members employed at UK arms manufacturer BAE Systems which supplies 15 percent of components to the F35 Lockheed Martin aircrafts used by the Israel Defence Forces to reduce Gaza to rubble.

While BAE Systems sites in Britain have been the focus of protests by members of Unite and other unions to oppose the export of weapons to Israel, industrial action has been prevented. Graham was quite prepared to stage unofficial action at the docks against Russian oil and gas tankers, portraying NATO's proxy war in Ukraine as a humanitarian cause, but in the face of the British government and Labour's support for Israel's genocide action to stop the trade in weapons used to kill and maim Palestinian men, women and children is ruled out.

A statement issued by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) for Wednesday's "day of action" outlined the type of political struggle that is needed, based on the mobilisation of the working class against the apologists for war in the Labour and trade union bureaucracy:

"The task before those involved in the protest movement over Gaza is to mobilise workers independently of these organisations, against their efforts to restrain action and drag their members into the political cesspit of the Labour Party."

It concluded: "Ending the mass murder and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians and opposing the expanding war waged by the NATO powers and their proxies demands a global, socialist anti-war movement. Students and young people must take the lead in turning out to factories and workplaces, arguing for working-class action, including strikes and boycotts of arms companies, docks and airports, and for a political struggle against the Tory government and the equally criminal Labour Party."

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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