

Protests continue in Britain against Israel's destruction of Gaza

Our reporters
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With no national protest in London this weekend against Israel's genocide in Gaza—the next is set for February 17—local demonstrations were held in dozens of towns and cities around the UK.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party and International Youth and Students for Social Equality distributed thousands of copies of the statement, "How can the genocide in Gaza be stopped?", advertising a series of public meetings on the subject to be held in the coming weeks.

Leicester

Around 2,000 workers and young people attended one of the largest demonstrations Leicester had seen since Israel launched its war against the Palestinians.

A rally was organised at the end of the march around the city centre. Several trade union figures spoke, including from the University and College Union (UCU) and the GMB. All they could offer to support their claims that the union bureaucracy is "fully" opposed to the war was a reference to the "day of action" held on February 7, during which no strikes were called, only lunchtime rallies or vigils out of work hours.

One of the loudest cheers from the was for Stephen Harper, from Football Lads and Lasses Against Fascism (FLAF), when he said, "We have trade union leaders who are saying nothing and doing nothing about genocide. We have trade union leaders who are directly involved in the weapons industry. However, Harper concluded with an appeal to the union leaders to "show some bottle when it comes to genocide. Get off your knees and fight for us".

There were also loud cheers when a speaker told the rally that they should not vote for Labour in the upcoming elections. The call was made for a vote for "independents".

This amounted to support for local MP Claudia Webbe, a Corbynite member of the Socialist Campaign Group. Webbe now sits as the Independent MP for Leicester East after having been expelled from the Labour Party in 2021.

Webbe received cheers for calling out Labour's "colluding with genocide" and demanding that Starmer and Labour MPs who are facilitating Israel's war should be taken to the Hague and charged

for war crimes. But all she proposed was for workers and young people to back only the small number of MPs calling for a ceasefire in the general election and put pressure on the pro-war majority to switch positions.

She concluded, "We take our fight from our streets, to our Town Halls, to parliament and straight to the ballot box."

WSWS reporters spoke to some of those in attendance.

Hartham, a customer services bank worker, said, "I have been to a few protests, but the genocide has continued in Palestine for months now. Innocent lives have been taken, tens of thousands have been killed, including children. I have three little ones. Everyone should be able to live their lives.

"I don't work weekends and felt very uncomfortable having a day off and out with my family, in the knowledge that children in Palestine are denied basic things like being with their families.

"I don't know if protest will make this government wake up and do something to stop the genocide. I brought my whole family today to add my voice of opposition.

"[Prime Minister Rishi] Sunak is trying to criminalise protests; they have their own agendas. There is nothing threatening about our protests, they have been peaceful, unlike the right-wing EDL [English Defence League] protests. We are expressing our freedom of speech.

"I think there is a wide agenda. Why are they bombing Yemen? It is one of the poorest countries in the world. The Houthis are just acting to stop the shipping of arms for genocide. They do not pose a threat to anyone.

"We have to stop the killing and bombing. What we see in Palestine is a recurring story. Every few years, there is war in the Middle East. They use the same old chestnuts of 'terrorism' but look at what they did in Iraq. One million dead but can't find weapons of mass destruction. It is all an excuse for taking the oil and resources of other countries."

Jelena travelled from Northamptonshire. She said, "I am angry and disgusted with the destruction of lives, homes, and the ruin of a country. The Gaza war by Israel is based on hatred. Innocent children are being slaughtered and killed. I think we must fight for peace. To do this we need to stop funding bombs and ammunition. Preservation of life is the most important thing.

"The government and the [Labour Party] opposition have rejected calls for peace. If they don't listen we need millions more out fighting for a ceasefire and peace and not to be intimidated by the threats we are seeing about protesting. Criminalising protests

like Sunak is doing goes against democracy and freedom and restricts our beliefs and freedoms. Britain is supposed to be based on democracy so stop criminalising dissent.

“I see the war escalating in the Middle East. This is about broader financial interests, selling oil, making ammunition and this needs to stop.”

National Health Service worker **Kiran** said, “I think people are becoming more aware of what’s actually happening there [in Gaza]. It’s 75 years the Palestinians have been living under occupation, but there are people like me who are only just becoming aware of it now. It’s horrific what’s happening in our name, with our taxpayers’ money being used, because a lot of the weapons used in Palestine are made here in the UK.

“I think the war in Gaza has revealed how little democracy there is, as well, because there’s been national protests, there were a million people in London, and the government hasn’t listened to the people. That’s been an eye opener, that there’s no democracy.

“It’s really frightening how people might be feeling too cautious to speak out against what’s happening in Israel, because of what we see in the media, that people are losing their jobs, and students are being kicked out of colleges, just for being at a protest. That’s really scary, where is our freedom of speech?

“We were really shocked at our local [Labour] MP, Liz Kendall, who didn’t even vote for a ceasefire. She just abstained. And then when you look into it, you see that she’s got a long-standing relationship with the Labour Friends of Israel. And the more you look into these things, it’s shocking, the corruption has really been exposed.

“I think people coming out on the streets is all the Palestinians have got now, because our politicians are not listening to the people, so who else is there?

“It just seems to be like an unstoppable war machine, from the UK, the USA, other European nations. From a lay person’s point of view, you wonder why aren’t they trying diplomatic methods. It seems to be that war is the answer every time, and we are the taxpayers who are paying for it, and we haven’t voted for that. The vast majority of people, not just in this country but worldwide, are opposed to war. It’s a movement that needs to build.”

Bournemouth

Around 150 people attended the protest in Bournemouth.

Sheffield

In Sheffield, a protest was held outside a branch of Barclays bank. The bank finances arms companies that supply weapons to the armed forces of the US and Israel.

Leeds

Zein, a student, was at the demonstration and rally in Leeds attended by around 600 people.

He said, “This is the first demonstration I have been on. I keep educated online. I see all the protests. I am Lebanese and the issue of the Palestinians has always been in our hearts. I have been following events since being in high school, when I was 14.

“Realising that it was so hidden in the news here, I had to look for it. There wasn’t much news on it. There was a big thing in 2012, when they [Israel Defences Forces] went in and ‘mowed the lawn’ in Gaza, that struck me to my core. As a fellow Arab, I see my brothers and sisters dying in the most horrible way, with no one to protect them.”

Asked his view on the government slandering anti-genocide protesters as “extremists,” Zein replied, “Killing innocent people is not something that should be normalised. Calling people terrorists or extremists who stand against it and are fighting to make their voices heard, that’s just going against all ethics. They are muffling our voices by claiming we are antisemitic. Anti-Zionism is not antisemitism. I have many Jewish friends who support the Palestinians and they had to go against what they were taught as children as well; they were told a lot of things that aren’t true and they had to break it down themselves.

On the Israeli government, he said, “They are fighting amongst each other over how right-wing they can be. They attack Netanyahu, not because of what he’s doing in Palestine, but because of what he’s not doing. They want him to do more. I see the Israeli media on my social media: it makes it clear the gulf between what the Palestinians stand for and what the Zionists stand for. I don’t think we are the ones who should be called extremists.

“In Italy, when fascism took over, people had to take up arms to bring it down. It’s a similar thing today, there’s no other way of protesting and getting your voice heard.”

Asked about the SEP’s call for the mobilisation of the working class to overthrow the governments that are supporting the genocide, Zein said, “I think that is correct. They aren’t going to listen to us if we don’t speak up. As you can see here today, people are angry about the situation. One Holocaust was enough; we can’t allow it to happen again.”

Make plans to attend a Socialist Equality Party/International Youth and Students for Social Equality meeting near you.



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