

Mass protest in London defies Sunak’s dictatorial threats against “extremists”

Our reporters
10 March 2024

As many as 450,000 people joined Saturday’s national protest for Gaza in London, demanding an end to Israel’s genocide against the Palestinian people.

Saturday’s march was the tenth national protest in the capital since October 7, demanding an immediate ceasefire and an end to Israel’s war of annihilation backed by the US, Britain and other major powers.

Marchers set off from Hyde Park to the American embassy shortly after 12:30pm. They were still crossing the Thames at 3pm, after the last of the rally’s speakers were finishing.

It was a massive popular rebuke to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s address to the nation on March 1, in which he denounced pro-Palestinian protesters as violent “extremists” who posed a threat to “our democracy”.

Opening the rally at Nine Elms near the American Embassy, an emcee told marchers to loud cheering, “We are not going anywhere”. Protesters chanted, “In our thousands, in our millions, we are all Palestinians” and “From the River to the Sea, Palestine will be free!” rejecting Sunak’s baseless branding of the slogan as “anti-Semitic” and an invitation to “violent jihad”.

Stop the War Coalition (STWC) convenor Lindsey German caught the mood of the crowd when she declared, “If an extremist is someone who cares about children dying, who cares about genocide, who wants a more equal world, who’s fed up with the money spent on weapons of war, then I am proud to be an extremist!”

However, she and march organisers, STWC and the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, used an all-female line up of speakers for International Women’s Day as a means of avoiding the central issue posed by the Gaza protests: how to fight for the besieged Palestinians under conditions where Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour

Party is united with Sunak in backing and arming the genocide.

Hostility to the Labour Party is overwhelming. It resulted in George Galloway’s crushing victory in the Rochdale by-election on February 29. Galloway has called on former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn—barred by Starmer from recontesting his own Islington North seat as a Labour candidate—to launch a socialist electoral bloc challenging Labour over Gaza.

Galloway used his appearance on “Not the Andrew Marr Show” last Sunday to issue a public appeal to Corbyn: “announce an alliance of the remaining socialists in the country. You lead it, I’ll support it, you be the leader, and let’s go... I don’t know why he [Corbyn] has procrastinated so long in making a final, total break with Labour and leading something himself.”

The speakers chosen to address the rally sought to blunt the issue of a left-wing challenge to Labour. They presented a cast of Labour MPs, carefully interspersed with those who have resigned from the party or are running as independents. In all cases, the message was the same: Labour and the Tories can be pressured for a ceasefire and to bring about a humanitarian solution that excludes any struggle based on the mobilisation of the working class against capitalism.

Labour MPs Apsana Begum, Zarah Sultana and Beth Winter were given pride of place, introduced as stalwart defenders of the Palestinians.

Begum said Israel’s war on Palestinian women was “supported and facilitated by the UK and the US”, including starvation as “collective punishment”. She did not condemn Starmer’s own support for collective punishment or his ongoing invocations of Israel’s “right to self-defence”—a right that does not exist for an illegal occupying force.

Sultana began by “reminding these Tories” that demands for an immediate ceasefire have the support of 71 percent of the British public. Opposing Sunak’s designation of marchers as extremists, she said they stood in “a long democratic British tradition of peaceful protest”. But the name “Keir Starmer” did not pass her lips. She was silent on his opposition to a ceasefire and his support for Sunak’s crackdown on the right to protest.

Several speakers challenged the hypocrisy of politicians, journalists and intellectuals for celebrating International Women’s Day while supporting Israel’s genocide. Leanne Mohamad, who is challenging Labour’s Wes Streeting in Ilford North, told the rally, “Over 9,000 women have been brutally murdered in cold blood in Gaza, a femicide of the 21st-century. Yet they do not count. There is not a single maternity unit operating across Gaza today. There has been a 300 percent increase in miscarriages.

“Women in Gaza have to endure Caesarean births without anaesthesia, and they are forced to give birth in tents and public bathrooms. Where are the feminists who talk of equality and human justice? Silent, because these are the wrong kinds of women who are being killed.”

But Mohamad and resigned Labour Party councillor Zoe Goodman advanced no perspective to mobilise the working class outside of a protest vote at the next election. They presented the war on Gaza as divorced from the escalating global war by the US, Britain and NATO powers against Russia, Lebanon, Yemen, Iran and ultimately China.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party distributed thousands of leaflets at the march, “Bring down Sunak’s pro-genocide police state! For a general election and an anti-war opposition to the Labour and Tory parties!” There was enormous interest, with hands reaching out to take leaflets and with many people stopping at the party’s stall to discuss with SEP members and buy literature.

Discussion centred on the political issues posed by the emerging conflict between the working class and the Labour Party, and the role of politicians such as Galloway and Corbyn in tying the working class to British capitalism. As Thomas Scripps explained in an article discussed with demonstrators: “Galloway still makes his pitch to Corbyn because, apart from a

willingness to break organisationally with the Labour Party, they are kindred political spirits who seek to prevent the working class from drawing revolutionary conclusions about British capitalism and imperialism.

“They stand for an exclusively parliamentary orientation, advising the ruling class to moderate its worst excesses.... Today the mass movement against the Gaza genocide is radicalising ever broader layers of workers, above all the younger generation. They will come to understand the urgent necessity for the building of a genuinely independent socialist party and the industrial and political mobilisation of the working class in Britain and around the world against the Tory government, its Labour accomplices and all their international counterparts.”

There was a large police presence at the protest, with thousands of officers mobilised across London. But Sunak’s effort to brand marchers as violent extremists was exposed by the reality of a peaceful multi-ethnic protest uniting Muslims, Jews and others. There were just five arrests, and these reflected the targeting of demonstrators for their political views.

Towards the start of the march, as it crossed Vauxhall Bridge, police swooped in to arrest a man for chanting “Yemen, Yemen make us proud”. Yemen has been subjected to repeated missile strikes by the US and Britain in retaliation for Houthi rebels seeking to block military supplies for Israel’s genocide in Gaza. Dozens of people went to his aid, challenging the right of police to arrest someone for exercising their right to free speech.



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