

Glastonbury's defiant stand for Palestine and the radicalisation of the working class and youth

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There are events which burst through the crust of official politics and media-managed opinion and let popular sentiment erupt to the surface. Saturday afternoon at the UK's Glastonbury music festival was one of those.

The days leading up to it were filled with demands from columnists and politicians for Irish-language rap trio Kneecap to be struck from the lineup of the world's largest greenfield music and arts festival, with a 210,000 capacity.

This reached its peak with Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer telling *The Sun* they should not be allowed to perform. The caretakers of bourgeois public opinion were worried that the band's pro-Palestinian stand—for which member Liam Óg Ó hAnnaidh (stage name Mo Chara) has been hit with trumped-up terror charges—would find massive popular support.

In the end, it was even worse for them than they feared.

BBC producers made the cowardly decision not to show Kneecap's performance live. Instead, they cut to London punk duo Bob Vylan, who promptly led chants of "Free, free Palestine!" and "Death, death to the IDF!" An audience of mainly young people which has watched with disgust and fury as Israel's armed forces have waged a criminal war of occupation and genocide responded in their thousands.

Vylan dedicated the set to people "losing their platform to speak up for the Palestinian people and speak against the crimes that Israel and the UK and the US and much of the Western world are complicit in".

An hour later, Amy Taylor from Australian group Amyl and the Sniffers told the crowd, "I'm thinking about the people in Palestine" and denounced the Labour governments in Australia and the UK for "doing jack shit."

The day before, Irish pop singer CMAT concluded with

a chant of "Free, free Palestine!" Elijah Hewson of the Dublin band Inhaler dedicated a song to "the people of Palestine, to any innocent people being starved or bombed, or genocided for the sake of some lunatics." Jordan Stephens, of Rizzle Kicks, invited his mother on stage wearing a keffiyeh and waving a Palestinian flag.

In every case, the response from the crowd was enormous.

Kneecap's performance was watched by tens of thousands at Glastonbury—organisers had to close the area around the West Holts stage as the numbers swelled—and will be seen by millions more on BBC iPlayer.

What has won the trio a hearing is not only the principled stand they have taken in defence of the Palestinians, but their defiant manner: a refusal to give an inch or take a backward step.

Saturday's set was performed in that spirit. A chorus of boos rang out at the start as videos were played of various figures denouncing the band and demanding their censorship. The three members emerged to a huge ovation, with Mo Chara declaring, "Glastonbury I'm a free man!" and the crowd breaking out into chants of "Free Mo Chara!"

Naoise Ó Cairealláin (Mógláí Bap), to sustained applause, referred to British imperialism's brutal history of oppression: "It's not the first time there's been a miscarriage of justice for an Irish person in the British justice system."

He called for a protest outside the next hearing on August 20 "and more importantly support for Palestine because that's what it's all about."

Mo Chara told the crowd, "Israel are war criminals. It's a fucking genocide." The group thanked the audience for "Standing by Kneecap, standing for Palestine, standing for the fucking truth." All of which was said to a sea of

hundreds of Palestinian flags. “Some BBC editor is going to have some job,” Mo Chara joked.

The significance of this outpouring of support was summed up by Móglai: “They want to make us think that the Palestine movement is small, that the majority don’t support Palestine, but we are the majority.”

Not only that, but the chasm and the hostility between the working class majority and the ruling class, their media and their governments, is vast. The only chant to rival the strength of feeling of “Free Palestine!” was, repeatedly, “Fuck Keir Starmer!”

While everything is done by the media and politicians to present this social opposition as coming predominantly from the right—as an excuse for promoting nationalism and anti-migrant xenophobia—Glastonbury was another demonstration of the reality. Among the vast bulk of the population, especially young people, and expressed by the most thoughtful and principled artists, there is a sharp movement to the left.

As proved by Kneecap’s reception at America’s Coachella festival, which first prompted the witch-hunt against them, and the mass “No Kings” protest by millions against Trump, this is a global phenomenon.

Moreover, the working class and its younger generation are radicalising quickly. The last major political moment at Glastonbury were the chants of “Oh Jeremy Corbyn!” in 2017, expressing the initial phases of a leftward movement of workers and young people who expected him to lead a struggle against the Tories, Labour’s right wing and especially against colonial-style violence and war.

But the years that have passed since then have left their mark on mass consciousness: the ruling elite’s open backing of a genocide, the outbreak of war in Europe involving nuclear-armed powers, a pandemic policy of mass murder, and more. Corbynism has been substantially discredited—above all by its capitulation to the “left antisemitism” lies now being used to justify the criminalisation of millions.

The fierce, uncompromising anti-imperialist and anti-Labour sentiment on show at Glastonbury will not be satisfied by the reformist niceties, polite appeals and turn-the-other-cheek pacifism of Corbyn. There was another roar from the crowd when Mo Chara promised everyone would “remember” the people “who did fuck all, and so will history.”

Nor will that sentiment be cowed by Starmer. The Labour government is in crisis, lashing out with one police-state attack after another, and inviting a larger

popular counterblow each time. More cheers greeted DJ Próvai revealing a “We are all Palestine Action” shirt, ahead of government moves to make it a proscribed organisation, outlawing even expressions of support for its members as “terrorism”.

It is being made ever more obvious that the Starmer government and its international counterparts are intent on proscribing opinions held by the majority of the population and that it is they who are desperately isolated.

They feel it, too. Wes Streeting—the arch-Zionist frontbencher—cut an unusually reticent figure in an interview Sunday morning with Sky News.

A few months ago, a question on events at Glastonbury would have sparked a right-wing tirade against opponents of the Israeli state. But Streeting, knowing the balance of popular opinion, preferred not to “give too much indulgence” by spending time on the subject. He also felt compelled to “say to the Israeli embassy, get your own house in order.”

None of which changes anything about Streeting’s pro-genocide politics.

The biggest block on the opposition to the Gaza genocide and Israel’s imperialist backers is the current political leadership of the anti-war and Palestine movement, and the lack of a clear understanding in the working class of an alternative.

Popular political feeling is far to the left of Corbyn, Bernie Sanders, and similar political figures the world over. But to go beyond them it must, and will, develop a programme to match: a revolutionary socialist and internationalist movement against genocide and war that can mobilise the only social force powerful enough to defeat the imperialist criminals in Downing Street, the White House and all the capitals of Europe—the international working class.



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