

Sarah Cotte acquitted: Jury rejects British state frame-up

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A jury at the Old Bailey on September 18 unanimously acquitted Sarah Cotte, the 22-year-old SOAS graduate prosecuted under Section 12(1A) of the Terrorism Act 2000 for allegedly supporting the proscribed organisation Hamas. Her “crime” was a speech defending the Palestinian people’s right to resist occupation and genocide.

Cotte had already endured an eight-day trial, ending on July 1, in which jurors acquitted her on one charge but failed to reach a verdict on another. Instead of accepting that failure, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) demanded a retrial.

The CPS gambled that a second jury would give it the conviction the first had refused to deliver. Instead, it collapsed. After only two hours, the new jury returned a unanimous not-guilty verdict.

The verdict is a humiliating defeat for the prosecution and for the wider campaign led by successive Conservative and Labour governments to criminalise solidarity with Palestine. It demonstrates the lengths to which the state is prepared to go to police political speech and suppress opposition to Israel’s assault on Gaza.

For three years, Cotte faced the threat of 14 years in prison for expressing solidarity with an oppressed people. Now, 12 jurors have rejected the state’s case. They did not need to share Cotte’s politics, or her background, to recognise a frame-up when they saw one.

The absurdity at the heart of the prosecution’s case was that Cotte never mentioned Hamas at all. The organisation is proscribed in Britain, yet the speech used to justify the charge—delivered at a rally at SOAS on October 9, 2023—contained no reference to Hamas whatsoever. The prosecution’s response was to insist that she should have begun her remarks by declaring,

unprompted, that she did not support a proscribed organisation. This would require any ordinary person speaking in public to pre-emptively denounce whoever the state objects to.

At every turn, the prosecution sought to erase the distinction between support for the Palestinian people’s right to armed resistance—recognised under international law and reaffirmed by the UN General Assembly in affirming the legitimacy of the struggle of peoples under colonial and foreign occupation—and support for a specific proscribed organisation.

The police raid on Cotte’s home on January 31, 2024—nearly four months after her speech—exposed the emptiness of the prosecution’s case. They found nothing linking her to Hamas: no books or pamphlets, no financial records showing donations, no evidence she had met its leaders, members or supporters.

The prosecution’s entire case rested on an extraordinary supposition: that a young woman supposedly supporting Hamas had left no trace of that support. No documents, messages, transactions, associations—not even the words of the speech itself—established the allegation.

Prosecutor Rupert Kent asked the jury to believe Cotte was a secret sympathiser who concealed her politics so completely that she never once expressed them, even in the speech for which she was prosecuted.

What she expressed was support for the Palestinian people and their right to resist occupation. That is what the British state spent three years and two trials trying to criminalise.

The police never sought to have the video of her speech, so dangerous that it warranted a dawn raid and 14 years’ imprisonment, removed from the anonymous social media account @gnasherjew—a far-right Zionist troll operation notorious for doxxing, harassing and

inciting against Palestine solidarity activists. It remains visible to this day: left online for anyone to watch.

During the trial Cotte never retreated, never minimised her politics, and never accepted the prosecution's framing. Her family, friends and college professors testified to her quest for truth and understanding and to her empathy.

The forces arrayed against Cotte were also exposed in the public gallery, where friends and supporters attended throughout the trial. On the penultimate day, an observer sat taking down the names of defence witnesses who had testified to her honesty and integrity. Afterwards, he identified himself as being from the Campaign Against Antisemitism (CAA) and declared that police should drive Cotte's supporters from outside the court and arrest them. Asked what he stood for and confronted with the proposition that Palestinians should be expelled from Israel and Israel seize the "Biblical lands," he replied: "That's something I would go along."

The CAA is a Zionist lobby group operating under the banner of "combating antisemitism", while targeting opposition to Israel. Alongside UK Lawyers for Israel, who brought the video to the attention of the police, it refuses to disclose its funding sources and aggressively promotes the conflation of criticism of Israel and anti-Zionism with antisemitism.

The man in the gallery's words exposed the political reality behind the campaign: using false accusations of antisemitism as a weapon to intimidate, monitor and silence critics, threaten activists with prosecution, and criminalise solidarity with the Palestinian people.

The decision to find Cotte not guilty is part of a broader pattern. In recent months, juries have repeatedly refused to convict those prosecuted under the Terrorism Act for solidarity with Palestine. This includes the acquittal of Tony Greenstein and the second Filton trial in which a jury refused to convict. The case against Kwabena Devonish also collapsed. Like Cotte, she was accused of supporting Hamas because she defended the right of the Palestinian people to resist genocide. Broad sections of the population are drawing the conclusion that the British state's "anti-terror" apparatus is an instrument for the suppression of opposition to imperialist war, and they are refusing to serve as its stooges.

Cotte's acquittal is a victory—but the struggle from

which it emerged is far from over. The state is fast-tracking new legislation to criminalise ever broader forms of political opposition. Its defeat in this case will not end its campaign to criminalise solidarity with Palestine. It will intensify its efforts, as it has done following every previous acquittal.

The defence of democratic rights requires the building of an independent political movement of the working class, internationally united against war, genocide and capitalism. The acquittal of Sarah Cotte demonstrates what is possible when people refuse to be intimidated and take a principled stand.



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