

Roger Waters, Yusuf/Cat Stevens and Lowkey perform in London: “Tonight is for Palestine”

Chris Marsden
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Pink Floyd founder Roger Waters joined Yusuf/Cat Stevens and rapper Lowkey in a “Stand Up for Palestine” concert at London’s St Pancras New Church on Friday night. The concert was announced on Tuesday night and tickets sold out immediately.

These are important, socially committed artists, determined to take a stand against the mass murder and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians. All not only oppose the direct perpetrator of these atrocities, Israel, but the complicity of British imperialism and of the Labour Party led by Sir Keir Starmer.

It is for this reason that Waters has become a hate figure in ruling circles and the target of a vile slander campaign denouncing him as an antisemite. Outside the event, his car was attacked by around 20 Zionists who sought to block his entry to the venue until they were moved on by police. The thugs then joined a slightly larger protest waving Israeli flags and placards targeting Waters, with a main banner reading, “Hey Roger, Leave us Jews alone.”

Inside the church, hundreds packed into the pews and upper balconies for the more than two-hour concert.

Lowkey, accompanied by a pianist and two talented back-up singers, performed the most overtly political material of the evening. His song, “Free my people: Long live Palestine”, speaks of the “Encircling of the people of Gaza/ Killing of civilians/ the burning of Bones”. This was followed by “My Soul” and “Ghosts of Grenfell”, a moving tribute to the 72 victims of the 2017 Grenfell tower fire. He performed “Ahmed”, personalising the deaths of tens of thousands of refugees denied entrance to Fortress Europe, and “Dear England”, a song about the London riots in 2011.

Lowkey denounced Labour Party leader Starmer, saying that as Director of Public Prosecutions (2008-2013) he had opened 24-hour courts to send “children as young as 12 to jail for stealing bottled water, for crimes of poverty”. He denounced Starmer as “someone who calls themselves a human rights lawyer, but does not believe in the crime of genocide” and “backs Israel to the hilt.”

Yusuf (Cat Stevens) Islam sang his major hit, “Wild World”, before focusing on Gaza. His music is refracted through the prism of his faith but addresses contemporary society and the suffering inflicted on the oppressed honestly.

“Bad storms or clear skies/ Those politicians keep telling lies/ Daylight, deep dark/ They steal hope from the people’s hearts”, he sings in “All nights, All days”. A childhood friend is killed in “The boy who knew how to climb walls”: “Then the bombs came down on my small village town/As I looked around, it was gone/Mama called our names, father never came/Life was never the same from that day on.”

Waters performed two pieces, beginning with a moving guitar-accompanied “Wish You Were Here” that he introduced as being widely understood as “a lament for a dead childhood friend of mine, Syd Barrett,” but which “tonight is for Palestine.” He then sang his ballad, “The Bar”, a deeply humane and never recorded song, dealing with huge tragedies such as the Vietnam war and the dispossession of the Lakota Nation: “Here’s a message for the man/ Would you kindly get the fuck off our land?” The connection with Gaza does not need to be argued for. As well as defiance, Waters urges unity and solidarity, asking, “Does everybody in the bar feel pain? ... feel a little maimed? ... I guess we all feel pretty much the same.”

Waters hailed all those who stand up for Gaza, saying that he and many others “live on the brink of tears” because “we feel empathy for our brothers and sisters in Gaza and the other occupied territories in Palestine.”

Starmer, who Waters decried as a “genocide enabler”, “lives in a cage of his own choosing, where he does the bidding of the ruling class. For all of us to be here in this beautiful church is to play a walk on part in the war... We are all soldiers in the battle for human rights, including centrally for the people of Palestine.”

There was, however, a vast difference between the immense sincerity of the artists performing for Palestine and the calculated evasiveness of those political speakers utilising the concert as an election rally for Andrew Feinstein, who is opposing Starmer as an independent candidate in Holborn and St Pancras for the Collective electoral alliance.

Feinstein is a former African National Congress MP who later joined the Labour Party in Britain, becoming a prominent supporter of former leader Jeremy Corbyn based on the claim that his leadership offered the possibility of Labour’s left-wing transformation.

He spoke from the stage after Lowkey's performance, accompanied by two other independent candidates, Leanne Mohamad in Ilford North and Tanushka Marah in Brighton and Hove. All are members of "Collective", an alliance backed by Corbyn's Peace and Justice Project. Its five demands are: a pay rise for all, green new deal with public ownership, housing for all, tax the rich to save the NHS and welcome refugees in a world free from war. These are advanced as a utopian reformist wish list totally detached from the real class struggle and the building of a mass working class movement for socialism.

There was, therefore, no mention of how the reformist yearnings of the Collective are to be achieved, beyond electing figures like Feinstein to Parliament. Nor was there a single proposal made as to how the millions in the UK and internationally demanding an end to genocide can take forward a struggle not just against Israel but the imperialist powers backing it. Time after time, the appeal was to what the concert's emcee, referencing the church in which the event was held, called the "sacred values of peace, love, compassion, kindness and empathy."

In other words, not a single lesson has been, or is to be, drawn from the disastrous reign of Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party, let alone that of Syriza in Greece.

Ironically, Cat Stevens' warning in "Wild World" — "a lot of nice things turn bad out there" — expressed a far greater appreciation of political reality than was to be found in the speeches of the representatives of the Collective, whose members "hope to get by just upon a smile."

Particularly striking was the absence of any reference to NATO's de facto war against Russia, which is rapidly escalating toward a nuclear conflict. The decision to avoid raising the issue of Ukraine reflects political differences on the war among the Corbynites, and it separates opposition to the Gaza genocide from the broader global struggle against imperialism.

Feinstein spoke only of changing "our politics", "our world, and not by looking to any leaders but by looking in the mirror, at ourselves, and by joining arms with our neighbours."

Marah, a theatre director and actress, spoke of a "new politics" that was not socialist but "the gathering of all peoples, all races, all classes".

Invoking the unity of all classes is a time-worn mechanism for opposing the independent political mobilisation of the working class against capitalism. In the context of Gaza, where the ruling class in every country, backed by every one of their major parties, has either explicitly backed and armed Israel, made only token calls for a ceasefire, or both, such an appeal is unforgivable.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing Tom Scripps in Holborn and St Pancras, challenging Starmer, as part of the fight to build a socialist anti-war movement in the working class across Europe and internationally.

Our manifesto explains that US and British support for

Israel's mass murder and ethnic cleansing in Gaza is part of plans by the imperialist powers for a new military carve-up of the world and its resources, centred on advanced preparations for war with Russia, Iran, and China.

We insist that building a new anti-war movement demands an irrevocable break with the Labour Party, and the building of a mass revolutionary party of the working class. Crucially, the manifesto addresses the central lessons of Corbyn's five years as leader of the Labour Party:

"The only reason Starmer is poised to enter 10 Downing Street is that Corbyn and his backers, elected by a landslide to lead the Labour Party in 2015, faced down demands from workers and youth to drive out the Blairites. Corbyn capitulated on all fundamental issues, including NATO membership and nuclear weapons, and then politely handed the party over to Starmer. The refusal to fight the lie of 'left antisemitism' laid the basis for mass expulsions and now the grotesque depiction of Gaza protests, also attended by hundreds of Jews, as 'hate marches'... The Socialist Equality Party states plainly to workers, especially the young generation: The building of a new and genuinely socialist leadership must begin now. We advance the socialist and internationalist programme on which this new leadership must be built."

SEP members and supporters campaigning outside the concert were denounced by some Feinstein supporters for "splitting the left" or the "Gaza vote." This is only a variant of the old attack on our party for standing against Labour on a socialist programme.

The SEP will not sink our political differences with Corbyn and his backers, who bear political responsibility for Starmer's leadership, and who, elected or not, will continue to support Labour while registering their protests—just as they now call for a Labour vote where they are not standing. Those urging us to do so are allowing Corbyn to again police oppositional sentiment among workers and youth, which is a recipe for defeat.



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