

125,000 march in London in 18th national protest against the Gaza genocide

Our reporters
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125,000 people marched through London Saturday in the 18th national demonstration against the Gaza genocide organised by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Palestinian Forum in Britain, Friends of Al-Aqsa, Stop the War Coalition, Muslim Association of Britain and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Their action was called under the slogans: “End the genocide! Stop arming Israel! No Middle East war! No to Islamophobia!”

The next national demonstration will be held in Liverpool, rather than London, on September 21, to protest the Labour Party conference. On October 12, a one-year anniversary protest will be held in London, with organisers calling for the biggest march in British history.

Saturday’s protest began in Regent Street St James’s, marching down Piccadilly and along the length of Hyde Park to near the Israeli embassy. In the week before the event, London’s Metropolitan Police went back on prior arrangements by seeking to place restrictions on the start time of the march. A statement from the organisers explained:

“Since notifying the police of our intentions on 8 August, we have faced a series of delays, obstacles, and uncooperative behaviour. Meetings have been cancelled without notice, and our reasonable proposal for an alternative route to the Israeli Embassy was dismissed outright. Now, with just four days’ notice, the police have imposed these new conditions without explanation, creating unnecessary obstacles for a demonstration expected to draw over one hundred thousand people.”

With less than 24 hours to go, the Met withdrew its restrictions.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party leafleted the demonstration with the article “Protests and general

strike in Israel pose the need to break with Zionism” and set up a literature stall. Interviews with protesters can be found here.

The speakers from the platform again put forward a perspective of marching until Prime Minister Keir Starmer “feels the weight of his inaction” over the genocide, with trade union leaders in particular studiously avoiding any suggestion of strike activity.

Foreign Secretary David Lammy’s suspension of less than 10 percent of UK arms contracts with Israel was generally presented as a “step forward”, rather than the calculated cynicism it was, but “not far enough”. The answer was “ramping up the pressure” on the streets.

Leading member of the Stop the War Coalition Andrew Murray told the crowd, “There is nothing, no force, in this country that will stop us marching for justice for Palestine... As long as there is no justice for the Palestinian people, we will be here on the streets marching, protesting, standing up for Palestine.”

Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament Vice-Chair Sophie Bolt urged, “Let’s keep up the pressure to make this government end its complicity in genocide... We refuse to stop marching.”

From the Labour Party, national executive member Jess Barnard appealed, “To my Labour colleagues, councillors and MPs, who are told not to show up to these demonstrations, told not to speak against the government, now is the time to show up, speak up, hold our own party to account... Starmer, don’t get comfortable, because we will hold you to account.”

They will not. Only two MPs elected for the Labour Party at the last election spoke from the platform, though both have been suspended from representing the party for six months—Apsana Begum and John McDonnell.

Begum stated that “What is happening in Gaza

challenges the very notion of the commitment of Western powers to human rights and dignity.” She described Lammy’s arms suspensions as a “step forward” which had come “too late” and was “simply not enough,” before concluding “we will continue to hold power accountable.”

Former shadow chancellor John McDonnell proposed to offer “a few sentences of calm sadness,” largely focussed on the killing of Turkish-American political activist Ay?enur Ezgi Eygi in the West Bank on Friday.

He claimed, “You have shifted this government. Not far enough but you’ve shifted it with your determination.” It was “one of the proudest moments” of his life “just to walk alongside you,” which is, in fact, the most he has done.

Neither so much as mentioned Starmer, or any of the cabinet, by name.

Independent MP Iqbal Mohamed was given a platform to say, “Despite Labour’s missteps and the condoning of the collective punishment in opposition, there was hope that it would follow through on its stated commitment to enforce international law and the rules-based order... There was hope that they would take meaningful action to immediately help stop the killing and achieve a permanent ceasefire. We are still waiting for that to happen.”

Mohamed continued for several minutes to list increasingly ludicrous “hopes” in front of what was by this stage an audibly restless audience. He served as the spokesperson for the day for the new Independent Alliance of MPs containing Jeremy Corbyn, Mohamed and three other independents elected to parliament on a Gaza ticket. Corbyn was abroad at an international conference and sent perfunctory greetings.

As for the trade unions, Fran Heathcote, General Secretary of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union, declared herself “immensely proud that, for many years, PCS has led the calls in the trade union movement in demanding peace and justice for the people of Palestine,” adding, “We will continue marching, we will continue to protest and we will continue to back the campaign of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions.”

The deliberate exclusion of industrial action from that list was underscored by Heathcote noting later, “PCS members work in government departments that grant

weapons licenses.” What did the union bureaucracy propose to do about this? “If the government doesn’t respect international law, we will continue to explore the possibility of taking legal action in defence of our members.”

In the most glaring contrast between words and actions, Assistant General Secretary of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union Eddie Dempsey warned in his speech, “The situation is getting so tense it risks spilling over into major regional conflict, potentially drawing in the great powers of the world in a confrontation that could potentially lead to a nuclear conflict.”

He continued, “This is a trade union issue, and this is why the RMT supports the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and the marches and the protests that have been going on.” And yet at the same time the RMT has limited industrial action among its 500 members in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary which provides essential logistical support to the Royal Navy, and opposed any suggestion of action against the war.

Dempsey’s words in any case showed up the bankruptcy of Palestine Solidarity Campaign director Ben Jamal’s closing speech, announcing that “we at the Palestine Solidarity Campaign are ramping up our campaigns calling for... local councils to divest [from Israel].” Next Thursday, they would hold their “next action, calling on people to close their accounts with Barclays bank.” But “most of all,” people had to “keep ramping up the pressure on Keir Starmer.”

As SEP members argued among the protesters, no amount of moral pressure will force Starmer and his imperialist co-conspirators to withdraw their support from Israel, and their plans for a war against Iran. They will have to be stopped in their tracks, which requires the intervention of the working class, paralysing states supportive of the Israeli regime and bringing down their governments.

The fight to stop the genocide in Gaza is the struggle to build a mass socialist party of the working class and a global anti-war movement.



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