

# Palestine: huge demos must be followed up by mass action

Jeremy Dewar, redflagonline Fri, 28/05/2021 - 10:27

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Hundreds of thousands have flooded the streets of Britain over the course of 10 days in May, outraged at Israel's onslaught on Palestinians first in East Jerusalem, then in Gaza, and then inside the borders of Israel itself.

Several thousands gathered in Whitehall, London, on the evening of 11 May after worshippers at the al-Aqsa Mosque had been CS gassed, pepper sprayed and beaten. Using walls, statues and lampposts as makeshift platforms, Palestinian and Muslim youth urged protesters to stand up for their sisters and brothers for as long as it would take.

While the holy month of Ramadan, which was reaching its climax, certainly stiffened the resolve of many, 90 per cent of the slogans and speeches were secular-democratic. They included the right to return for the millions of refugees and their descendants and the corresponding call, 'From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free!'

As the crowd grew, young people started shinning up lampposts, clambering up bus shelters and climbing on top of a double decker bus. Eventually, an hour later, police managed to 'liberate' the bus only to set in motion a procession of youth in the direction of the Israeli Embassy.

Over the remainder of the week, the mood grew stronger and the annual commemoration of the Nakba, so often a time of Israeli aggression and heightened resistance, drew out a monster response. Over 100,000 came out on 15 May in London and, a week later, organisers claimed between 180,000-200,0000 marched to Hyde Park. Many thousands more congregated in Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle, Bristol and beyond.

Most people arrived in small groups of friends, family, neighbours and workmates. While overwhelmingly Middle Eastern, north African and south Asian in heritage or origin, there were also significant numbers of Latin Americans and Black and white working class people there, too, enraged that civilians and children could be targeted by a colonising power with such ferocity.

The atmosphere on the first demo was a mixture of raw emotion at the bombing of Gaza and excitement that the resistance might merge into a global intifada, which Palestinian youth, their cousins, had started. Flag burning, scaffold mounting and spontaneous hollering brought smiles to faces united in solidarity, but it was the ranks of small megaphones, chanting continuous encouragement from the crowd that kept the marchers so upbeat.

The left were there and, to a lesser extent, the wider Labour movement, who raised demands on the union and Labour Party leaders to act and made the point that anti-Zionism is not antisemitism and that Zionism

is inherently racist. Both ultra-orthodox and socialist Jewish groups were there in solidarity and well received.

So, it would be ironic, if it were not so predictable, that the media should downplay coverage of the mass demonstrations and focus instead on a repulsive drive by two carloads of antisemites through a Jewish area of north London. It is right that the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign and others have condemned this and made it clear they do not want antisemites on Pro-Palestine demonstrations, while pointing out that the actions of Israel are also racist, but on a far bigger scale.

Labour leader Keir Starmer, who has said he is proud to call himself a Zionist, found time to tweet about the 'Utterly disgusting antisemitism, misogyny and hate' in the North London incident but had nothing to say about Israel's killing of 248 men women and children in Gaza. Nor did he mention the hundreds of thousands on the streets of London. It was left to left wingers like Jeremy Corbyn, John McDonnell and Diane Abbot to represent Labour and speak at the mass demonstrations.

Writing in Jacobin, Corbyn spelt out key demands: 'The huge outpouring of support for Palestine over the last two weeks, needs to go toward pushing for recognition of the state of Palestine, ending the settlements, ending the occupation, and ending the siege of Gaza. And there has to be justice for the refugees. There are tens of thousands of refugees who know nothing other than life in camps in Jordan and Lebanon and beyond.'

The ceasefire will undoubtedly now take mass pressure off the streets. The question is how to develop the movement for the next stage. Israeli police and ultra-right settlers are still trying to ethnically cleanse Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem and they have attacked people in the al-Aqsa mosque again, ceasefire or no ceasefire. On the West Bank and across Israel the struggle goes on.

So, too, must action for the issues Corbyn mentions, including against the lack of full and equal civil rights for the Palestinian Israeli citizens.

How to resist?

Red Flag put out three leaflets to the three separate demos, arguing that only a one-state solution can guarantee peace and dignity for the Palestinians with equal rights for Israelis and Palestinians and privileges for none. This must include the right of refugees to return to their homeland. The third leaflet, in particular, called for workers' sanctions against Israel and the illegal settlements.

We need to break the support of the present Labour leadership for Israel and force the party to act on the pro-Palestine policies adopted by Labour Conference. While unions, like Unison, have put out strong statements in support of boycott, divestment and sanctions, BDS, we need to block production and exports from the factories which supplied equipment and munitions for the onslaught on Gaza.

We need to combat and expose, as the Jewish Voice for Labour (<https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk><sup>[1]</sup>) do, the false accusations of antisemitism used to smear anti-Zionists. But not for one minute should we tolerate real antisemitic slogans or threats to Jewish people. In short, we need the spirit of the new generations of Palestinian youth and the direct action militants to become widespread throughout the labour movement.

South African dockers have shown the way, blocking export of cargo bound for Israel. The Italian Cobas union, too, tried to block an arms shipment in the port of Livorno. Palestine Action occupied the Leicester factory of drone maker Elbit-Thales' UAV Tactical Systems for 6 days. Despite the ceasefire, Israel continues to spy on and terrorise the population with its overflights by armed drones.

Direct action and workers' strikes here can keep the pressure on Israel to desist and boost the internationalist youth of Palestine in their struggle for freedom. But for that to happen, we need BDS to be a weapon in the hands of the rank and file and the youth.

Victory to the Intifada - down with the Zionist Settler State!

International Solidarity with the Palestinian struggle!

For a workers' boycott of Israel

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**Links:**

[1] <https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk>