

Australian demonstrations show solidarity with Palestinian people

By our correspondents
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Just hours after the first media reports of the launch of the Israeli ground assault on the Gaza Strip, protests in Australia's major cities of Melbourne and Sydney drew thousands into the streets to condemn the Zionist state and show solidarity with the besieged Palestinian people.

The demonstration in central Melbourne was at least 6,000-strong, twice as large as an earlier demonstration held last week. In addition to large contingents of Palestinian and Middle Eastern people, a wide range of people of different backgrounds were at the protest, including workers, retirees, and students.

About 1,000 also attended a peace vigil on Saturday evening which had been called by several imams. The vigil was staged in the northern suburb of Broadmeadows, which is home to many Arab and Muslim Australians.

At the main protest yesterday, many people carried banners and placards they had made themselves, including, "Stop mass killing in Palestine now", "Palestine you are not forgotten", "Dispossession, bombings, a planned genocide?", "Gaza: the world's biggest concentration camp", "As world sleeps, Gaza bleeds", "Rudd and Gillard, nothing new, US lackeys through and through".

Many protestors expressed their anger towards the Labor government's support for Israel's offensive and the media for their biased coverage. But protest organisers from the Justice for Palestine group offered no viable political perspective. They told the rally that by writing letters to both Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and the Murdoch press they could make their voices heard and force policy changes. One person, undoubtedly reflecting the mood of the protestors, responded by shouting at the platform: "They'd just shred the letters!"

In Sydney, over 6,000 demonstrators wove their way through the city from the Town Hall, past the Egyptian consulate and to Belmore Park near the Central railway station. The majority were from the city's large Arab community, many of whom still have family in Gaza, the West Bank, or in the south of Lebanon, which was attacked by Israel in 2006. They were joined by hundreds of workers

and students from other backgrounds.

Many carried the Palestinian flag or wore the traditional *keffiyeh* Palestinian scarf. Some wore green, white and black-banded bandanas—the colours of the Palestinian national movement. Groups of men and teenagers marched carrying mock coffins, some under the green flag of Hamas, others under the black flag of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad group. Some groups marched under the banner of Lebanon's Hezbollah movement.

Several families carried moving hand-made montages made up of images of the death and destruction that has been inflicted over the past week. Others carried impassioned hand-written placards denouncing the US Bush administration, the silence of world governments, and comparing the Zionist actions with the Nazi holocaust against the Jewish people.

The demonstration was highly emotional. Chants of "Free Palestine" and "Down, down Israel" echoed through the city. The concluding rally in Belmore Park began with young boys speaking of their sorrow over the suffering being endured by the children of Gaza. Speakers highlighted the number of deaths and injuries that had already been inflicted. A protestor managed to phone his relative in Gaza and the man's words of defiance were broadcast over the sound system.

As in Melbourne, however, the protest organisers advanced no alternative perspective for the Palestinian people. Their political demands consisted only of appeals for governments around the world, and the Labor government in Australia, to pressure Israel to withdraw from Gaza.

Sentiments of protestors

In interviews with *World Socialist Web Site* correspondents, participants in the demonstration openly expressed their view that appeals to the Labor government would have no impact on the Zionist aggression. They also voiced hostility toward the Arab governments and skepticism that a new Obama administration would bring

about any change in US policy toward Israel.

Nadia Haman attended the Melbourne protest with her mother Siham, who was born in Lebanon and migrated to Australia in 1967. Nadia has just completed Year 12 at Pascoe Vale Girls Secondary College in Melbourne.

"We are from Lebanon, near Beirut, and we have been through the same thing as the Palestinians," Nadia said. "What is happening in Gaza is exactly what has happened in Lebanon. That is why we have come today. The Palestinians should be free just like anyone else. I think that the Israelis want to take over the Palestinians' land and do whatever they want.

"It is not right what the Australian government here is saying—killing innocent people is not right. Little children are dying. This is really wrong. The media is not showing what is going on. They only show something for about two seconds and then go on to something else. We are not getting the real story."

Basil Kaser, who migrated from southern Lebanon and remembers living as a young boy under the threat of Israeli air strikes and incursions, spoke with the WSWS in Sydney. He carried a placard accusing the political leaders of Israel, the US and Egypt of being terrorists.

"Innocent people are being killed without any justification. They use the excuses of rockets, but at the end of the day it is genocide. They [the Israeli government] have sanctions on Gaza and the whole world knows about it. Shame on every leader around the world that medicines and food can't get in to these people and shame on everybody for letting this happen. If you back someone into a corner, they're going to fight back. If that is all the Gaza people are guilty of, then I don't think they're guilty of anything at all.

Basil rejected the "self-defence" claims made by Israel: "They are destroying homes, facilities, police stations, infrastructure and thousands have been killed and wounded. Gaza is a poor, densely-populated area. This isn't self-defence, it is genocide. What the Jewish people were running away from Hitler they are now doing against other people."

Asked about his placard, Basil said: "Everyone who is in a position of power and does nothing about this is a terrorist. The most I can do is raise my voice in protest. But these people—Mubarak, Bush—they have the power to stop this and they're not doing it."

Basil agreed when asked whether he thought there was a relationship between Israel's aggression and the US occupation of Iraq.

"Absolutely," he said. "Those in power have plans that we don't know about. It is not the people in America who are to blame. It's the government. If the people knew what was going on they wouldn't support it. The same goes for a lot of

the people in Israel. It is the governments that are doing this. They are blinding the people and not letting them see the truth, because if they could, they would end this immediately."

Mohammed Selah, a student at University of Technology Sydney, said he was protesting against "the massacre of the Palestinian people, my people, in Gaza".

He condemned the position of the governments in the Middle East: "The Arab League is talking about a proposed summit taking place after one or two weeks of killing has gone on. That is not a solution. They must get together and do something. Are they going to wait for 1,000 or 2,000 people to die? Are those being killed not human beings?"

"Obama is talking about the centrality of the Israeli state for him so I don't think he will change things. But maybe I am wrong? He is the president-elect and might have something to say later, but at the moment, he is washing his hands of it."

Ali, who migrated to Australia 40 years ago from Lebanon, also spoke with WSWS in Sydney.

"For sixty years, Israel has been killing in the name of self-defence. This has been happening since the 1940s. How can you compare some home-made rockets with jets and tanks and so-called 'smart-bombs'? We know what happened in 2006 in Lebanon and the things we saw then we are seeing now. Israel's history is massacres and more massacres.

"The Arab regimes are connected to Israel. Where Israel goes, they go. There is no difference between Ariel Sharon [former Israeli prime minister] and Hosni Mubarak, no difference between Ehud Barak [Israeli foreign minister] and Egypt's foreign minister. They all discuss what they are going to do together. It's a pact with America."

The American establishment, he said, "has had the same policy for the Middle East for the last 50 to 100 years. They want the resources. They want the people to live like dogs with no trade, no freedom and no independence."

Asked about the position of the Labor government, Ali said: "All governments have no feeling toward the people. I am disappointed though that Labor, who I have kept voting for, is what it is. I'll never vote Labor again."

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