

SEP (UK) candidate Chris Marsden speaks on Kashmir and Palestine at Sheffield mosque hustings

By our reporter
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Socialist Equality Party candidate for the Sheffield Central constituency Chris Marsden spoke at a general election meeting organised at the Madina Masjid, the first purpose-built mosque in Sheffield.

The event was particularly aimed at establishing the position of the various parties on the questions of Kashmir and Palestine. It was co-chaired by the Sheffield Palestine Solidarity Campaign and Sheffield Sisters4Kashmir.

As well as Marsden, only the Labour Party candidate Paul Blomfield and Natalie Bennett representing the Green Party, attended. Bennett was formerly the leader of the Greens who has been elevated to the House of Lords. She declared at the beginning of the meeting that she was now Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle, but “you can call me Natalie.”

In his introductory remarks Marsden explained that the Socialist Equality Party was the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the party founded by Leon Trotsky. “The SEP is an internationalist party, a socialist party, a party of, by and for the working class. We fight for the end of the profit system, the end of the division of the world into antagonistic states, for a system of planned production for need not profit, that benefits all the world’s peoples.”

Marsden continued, “Of course, I do not have to tell anyone here how appalling the situation is in Kashmir. The most extraordinary thing is that you have 12 million people living under a state of siege—in which thousands have been arrested disappeared, where they are building de facto concentration camps, and you have much of the Asian population in Britain with direct ties to Kashmir—yet you rarely see it on the news. It is a complete blackout.”

Far more was heard about Hong Kong than Kashmir. “It is like it is not happening. We know it is happening, we know why we are not hearing about it.”

Marsden noted that the Conservative Party candidate had not bothered to turn up, asking rhetorically, “Well, how could she, when Home Secretary Priti Patel is a close friend of Narendra Modi, a supporter of the BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party], who congratulated the Indian people on his election only months before he launched this brutal campaign against Kashmir.”

The situation was only going to get worse, Marsden warned. “It is not just Kashmir that is the prize here. Kashmir has been a terrible victim of the partition of India on religious and communal lines; it has never enjoyed any sustained period of peace.”

“But there is something else about Kashmir now. It is standing in the way of a conflict between India and China, with India working in alliance with the United States.”

“No one will condemn it, no one will raise a protest against the terrible treatment of the Kashmiris, because Kashmir is a victim of the most dangerous geopolitics, the kind that could end in a world war.”

“It is the same issue in Palestine,” Marsden said, “the history of which was one of terrible suffering since the *Nakba* (catastrophe).

“Since 1948—and the formation of the state of Israel—so many terrible things have happened. But we are entering a new period in which the terrible danger is that something is going to happen to the Palestinians which will make their previous sufferings in all those decades pale into insignificance.”

Addressing the role of US imperialism, Marsden said that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had declared there was “no judicial solution to the Palestinian question. He has declared that as far as Washington is concerned, international laws no longer apply.”

The policy of creating facts on the ground, the constant division of Palestinian territory, is now legal as far as the United States is concerned.

“The United States is the most powerful imperialist state and it has declared war on the Palestinians as part of a general struggle to take control of the Middle East,” Marsden said to considerable agreement from the audience.

“We are on the cusp of the most dangerous period the world has ever seen. The working class must mobilise against that. The struggles in Kashmir must be united with the struggles of the Palestinians. They must be united with the struggles of suffering humanity all over the world, for a system based on production for need not profit.”

Marsden called for the building of “a mass socialist anti-war movement.”

Turning to the position of the Labour Party, Marsden said that many people hoped it would bring a change, including on issues such as Kashmir. The Labour Party conference had passed a motion in defence of Kashmir and opposing what was taking place.

“Yet within a matter of weeks, Labour Party chairman Ian Lavery issued a letter repeating the same words as the Conservative government: the issue of Kashmir was a bilateral question between India and Pakistan.”

As long as the situation continued that this was a bilateral conflict between India and Pakistan, “the inevitable outcome will be further degradation of Kashmir and the very real danger of war,” Marsden said. “There are no bilateral questions. There are international questions and they have to be answered by the international working class. That is what we stand for.”

In his next remarks, Labour candidate Blomfield sought to refute what Marsden had said about Ian Lavery’s letter. The position of the Labour Party was “very clear. It was passed at our conference.”

When he next spoke, Marsden refuted Blomfield. “If what I say is not true, then I hope there will be a very serious complaint made by the Labour Party to the *Guardian*.” He quoted directly from the newspaper’s report of Lavery’s letter that “Labour has responded to a backlash among

voters of Indian heritage in the UK by shifting its stance on the Kashmir dispute and insisting it is a bilateral matter between India and Pakistan in which Labour will not interfere.”

So long as Modi runs the government in India “there is no bilateral solution that is going to protect anybody’s rights,” Marsden stated.

In answer to a question on the campaign to denigrate the Labour Party as anti-Semitic, which has dominated the election campaign, Marsden said this was “one of the biggest frauds in British and international political life.” It was an attempt to portray “those who defend the right of the Palestinians as anti-Semites, as opposed to anti-Zionists.”

There was a clear political distinction between the two. “Anti-Semitism comes overwhelmingly from the far right ... The danger of anti-Semitism comes from fascism and a terrible, terrible confusion is being deliberately generated to try and associate the left with anti-Semitism.”

As a result of this campaign, people who had spent their entire lives opposing racism “have been driven out of the Labour party. They’ve not been defended by Jeremy Corbyn. I think it’s a disgrace that he hasn’t defended them.”

For the Socialist Equality Party, this was a matter of principle to defend those who have been slandered. “We don’t have any political sympathy with Chris Williamson, we don’t have any political sympathy with Marc Wadsworth. But everything they have ever stood for is being deliberately misrepresented.”

If this were not challenged, Marsden warned, “the working class will play a terrible price. There should be no apology in the face of the intervention by the chief rabbi because he is acting as part of a political campaign to continue the domination of the Conservative Party” and supporting the Netanyahu government in Israel. He opposes “any struggle that cuts across the interests of Israel in pursuit of this vicious and brutal war against the Palestinian people.”

In her remarks, Bennett sought to maintain the lie that the Labour Party had been flooded with anti-Semites after Jeremy Corbyn had become leader. Marsden said it was not the fact that “a few anti-Semites had crawled into the Labour Party” when hundreds of thousands joined to support Corbyn. A smear campaign was “being used against the left.”

“The people that have been expelled from the Labour Party are not anti-Semites. Marc Wadsworth was expelled from the Labour Party because he called out Ruth Smeeth. Ruth Smeeth is a CIA asset, as identified by WikiLeaks, and it is she who should have been expelled from the Labour Party, not Marc Wadsworth.”

A supporter of the SEP asked the platform their stance on Julian Assange. He noted that the reason why anyone in the world knew about the war crimes and injustices perpetuated in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and elsewhere, was because of the role of WikiLeaks and Julian Assange.

Assange is currently languishing in Belmarsh prison, a maximum-security prison, in which he faces extradition to the United States and a sentence of 175 years. “What are you doing about reversing that injustice?” he asked the panel.

The chair responded that Assange’s fate was not a topic for discussion and instead another question was asked about the role of the UK regarding Kashmir.

Neither the Labour representative nor the Greens addressed the issue of Assange in their contributions.

Marsden said he wanted to distance himself from remarks made by Bennett that Britain could be a “force for good” in the world. The Socialist Equality Party did not want Britain to be a force for good in the world, “Our party wants Britain to stop interfering in other people’s countries,” Marsden said to applause.

“Britain is an imperialist power. It has worked in collusion with the United States in launching some of the bloodiest and dangerous wars the world has ever seen, and it will continue to do so.” He explained, “They will maintain the Trident nuclear weapons programme. Corbyn has

already said that is the case, even if Labour comes to power.”

Turning to the issue of Assange, Marsden said he wanted to reject the notion that Julian Assange’s fate was not bound up with the issues of the Palestinians or Kashmir.

“Julian Assange was runner-up as *Time* magazine person of the year. This was because he was held in high regard by people all over the world, because he exposed war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

Marsden then detailed the smear campaign launched against Assange, his fitting up on bogus allegations in Sweden, driving him to seek political asylum in the Ecuadorian Embassy to avoid extradition to the United States. Assange had been “kept under arbitrary detention for nearly nine years. Then he was seized from the embassy and thrown in jail. Now he is facing 175 years in prison, which is a death sentence.”

“If they can do that to Julian Assange, in Britain, in London, not very far from Parliament, what will they do to anyone else who opposes the crimes of British and world imperialism?” Marsden asked. “Julian Assange must be defended for his own sake, but he must also be defended for every single one of us. And anyone who stays silent on this question, including so-called left-wing parties and the Labour Party, is committing a crime against the working class and they will be culpable if Julian Assange is sent to the United States and silenced forever.”

Another questioner asked what the parties would do to resolve the situation facing Kashmir. In his reply, Marsden said “We are not a party of state, we are not a party of government. But what we do have is the *World Socialist Web Site*, our international online publication that publishes six days a week.”

The site received 2 million hits a month and was by far the most widely read socialist publication in the world. “We report regularly on all events in Palestine. We report on the terrible situation in Kashmir. We break the media embargo on the truth of what is taking place and we make our appeal to the most thoughtful workers and intellectuals, who are opposed to the existing order and want to see a just and equitable world for everyone.”

“That international public opinion,” Marsden said, “is the most powerful thing in the world, provided it is given a leadership.”

In his concluding remarks, Marsden addressed the general election.

“In a week’s time, we are going to find out whether the Labour Party is going to form a government or whether it has thrown away the greatest chance of forming a government in many, many years because of Corbyn’s refusal to kick out the Blairites and his retreats on policy.”

Even if Labour came to power, he said, some 100–140 of its MPs remained determined supporters of every imperialist war. Together with the Conservatives, this meant “the party that dominates in Parliament will be the party of war and it won’t matter a damn whether Corbyn registers his protest or not. The only answer is to build a genuine party of the working class.

“The future is not going to be decided on December 12, it is going to be decided in struggle. Millions of people all over the world are entering into struggle. A class struggle perspective is the way forward and that means building the Socialist Equality Party, not the Labour Party.”

After the event finished, several audience members came and shook Marsden’s hand and thanked him for what he had said. He was also interviewed by a reporter for Pakistani news channel *Geo News*.

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