

Solidarity with the Palestinians — but don't line up behind Hamas!

ON 13 APRIL there was a big London march "for Palestine". What happened was shocking from a socialist standpoint, and harmful to the Palestinian cause.

The core organising group — "The Muslim Association" — has strong Islamic-fundamentalist links. For example, its web site links to the Pakistani fundamentalist party Jamaat-e-Islami.

The Trafalgar Square rally started with long readings from the Koran. Although speakers such as Labour left MP Jeremy Corbyn and Tony Benn were on the platform, their speeches were punctuated by chants — led by an Imam who used the stage microphone — of "Allah-o-Akhbar" ("God is great").

"Allah-o-Akhbar" was also one of the main chants on the march. Although the phrase "Allah-o-Akhbar" is used by many non-fundamentalist Muslims in other contexts, to promote it as a political slogan on this march was a mark of fundamentalist politics, not Muslim culture or religion.

The organisers, marshalling the crowd at the start of the march, attempted to segregate the march along male-female lines. If the march had not been so large, and consequently so difficult for those stewards to organise, the demonstration might well have set off with men at the front, and women at the back. A smaller Hyde Park march on 9 December 2001 did that — and the segregation was obeyed by the SWP and RCG, who marched that day.

Leafleters freely gave out Islamist literature which called for "Putting the Jews to the sword".

Other leaflets called for a boycott of "Israeli goods" while, in fact, demanding the boycott of businesses such as Marks and Spencers which have historically been owned by Jews.

Dominant on the march were banners equating Sharon to Hitler, Zionism to Nazism, and the Star of David to the swastika. Specific political demands such as "Israel out of the Occupied Territories" had no prominence. The tone was simply hostility to Israel: "Death to Israel" and "From the river to the sea" (fundamentalists); "No compromise with Zionism" and "Two states, no solution (from the SWP).

"Not antagonistic" to fundamentalists?

What did the left do? Despite not having been asked for their support or help, most of the left backed the march.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) were energetic in winning Socialist Alliance support for this demonstration. Rather than supporting slogans which would contrast with the general march themes, they won agreement from the SA to carry placards saying, "Victory to the intifada! Free

Palestine!". At the Socialist Alliance Executive, SWP leader John Rees argued, "It is most important that our slogans do not appear in any way antagonistic to this march".

On the march the SWP presented themselves as the most militant advocates of "smashing Israel": using megaphones to announce, "No compromise with Zionism" and "Two states is no solution!" After the march Socialist Worker hailed it as comparable to the great working-class march in Rome against Berlusconi around the same time.

The 18 May demonstration

The same experience, in essence, was repeated in London on 18 May, when the Palestine Solidarity Campaign marched under the slogans: "Justice for Palestine" and "End the Israeli occupation".

These slogans must have been deliberately chosen for their ambiguity. "Justice for Palestine"?

What is "Palestine"? The area of the pre-1948 British Mandate? What do the organisers want? A Palestinian state alongside Israel, or across the whole of pre-1948 Palestine?

What does "End the Israeli occupation" mean?

— Israel out of the West Bank and Gaza, or an end to Israeli "occupation" of any part of pre-1948 Palestine?

On the day the tone was set by Islamic fundamentalists ("Palestine must be free, from the river to the sea"; "Bomb, bomb Tel Aviv"; and, though only in Arabic, "Kill the Jews") and by groups such as the SWP ("Two states solution, no solution"; "No compromise with Zionism").

Much more than solidarity with the Palestinian cause, the demonstration was about *using* the plight of the Palestinians to boost hostility to Israel — with little or no distinction made between the Israeli government and the Israeli people.

At the final rally Tirza Waisel from Just Peace UK was one of the speakers.

"The occupation is terror", she said. "It breeds despair in the hearts of young Palestinian boys and girls. But suicide bombing is not helping the Palestinian struggle. Whoever is sending these kids, Hamas, Islamic Jihad or Tanzim, plays into the hands of Sharon".

At those words there was a roar of anger from the crowd. Tirza struggled to continue. Speaking as an Israeli Jew, she said that the suicide bombing "helps Sharon to put *our* future of peace even further away".

People threw bottles at Tirza and tried to climb on the stage to drag her off. Instead of defending Tirza, the platform organiser, from the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, took the microphone from her. "Well, not

all of us would agree with the last speaker", said Hunter, before continuing to the next one.

Israel, Palestine — equal rights!

We believe that the left has made a big mistake in blending itself into such politics.

Actually the left's blending into the 13 April march was a step backwards even from where the left stands formally.

Groups like the SWP stand for "smashing Israel" but say in the small print that it matters how it is smashed. It should be absorbed into a single, Arab, state covering all pre-1948 British Mandate Palestine, but that state must be "democratic and secular".

The Israeli Jews are surrounded by hostile Arab states. They will not freely allow themselves to become an unarmed minority in an Arab state just on the promise that it will be "democratic and secular". A merging of different nations into multinational states is very desirable, but can be democratic only if done on the basis of free consent.

The reasonable-sounding democratic secular state programme could only be completed against the wishes of the Israeli Jewish people. This "solution" is, in fact, not democratic. Such an outcome — if it were practically possible, which it is not — would replace the oppression of the Palestinians with the oppression (the murder or expulsion) of the Israeli Jews.

The left's programme is — in reality, and against the intentions of some of its advocates — for a war to conquer the Jews of Israel. Given Israel's military strength, this programme is unrealistic as well as reactionary. It is no help for the Palestinians for the British left to foist this programme on them in place of the PLO's "two states" policy.

But against the Islamists' demand for an Islamic theocracy in Palestine, even calling "for a democratic secular state" would be positive! Yet even that slogan was not raised on the marches by those on the left who support in their small print of their papers. Nothing like it. Their priority was not to be "antagonistic".

One of the odd assumptions behind this opportunism is the idea that the "Muslim" marchers all broadly agree with the fundamentalists. They don't! Across the world, those who suffer worst from Islamic-fundamentalist politics are Muslim workers, trade unionists, socialists and democrats.

We found almost no hostility from Muslims to the demand for "Two states for the two peoples", almost no hostility to "Against Sharon! Against Hamas and the suicide bombers!". A number of marchers took our placards. Some helped us argue against the organisers' attempt to segregate the 13 April march. Some threw leaflets back at Hizb-ut Tahrir. Far from giving a lead to such people — the central ideological political role of the Marxists! — most of the left tailed after obscurantist bigots.

Why has the left disgraced itself in such a way?

For two reasons: first the left, to its shame, shares some of the politics and ideas of the Islamists; second were opportunistic reasons — wanting to go with the flow, wanting to recruit a few Arab and Asian people without confronting prejudice.

Anti-Sharon — or anti-Jewish?

Sharon is a murdering right-winger, but he is not Hitler. The comparison is absurd.

Hitler was a fascist who abolished democracy in Germany, smashed the left and the unions, began an attempt at world domination and attempted the systematic extermination of Jewry, killing six million in factory-organised death camps. Sharon is a right-wing chauvinist in a democratic state which has a 20% Arab minority (discriminated against, but with voting rights, Knesset members etc), unions, and a peace movement. Sharon is not attempting Palestinian genocide. The scale and political intention of Israeli repression on the West Bank is utterly different. 1,500 Palestinians have died during the second intifada. That is a terrible, awful toll, but it is a war atrocity. It is not the equivalent of the six million Jews who died in the Holocaust.

The left's use of such language is calculated to offend every Jewish person — even those many Jews who hate Sharon and who are sympathetic to the Palestinians. Very many will have lost family in the Holocaust. All know very well the difference between the Nazis and Likud.

This type of equation — of Sharon to Hitler — is hardly used in other contexts when the left condemns war atrocities. People rarely say, for instance, Bush = Hitler. The word "holocaust" is rarely used elsewhere. The parallels with the Nazis are more or less reserved for Israel. The implication is that there is something special about Jews which makes them parallel to Nazis. This is both deliberately offensive and aimed to obliterate the fact that the Holocaust is unique in history.

It is not true that "Zionists" are all, or mostly, like "Nazis". On 12 May, 100,000 Israelis, Jewish and Arab, marched in Tel Aviv to demand that their government withdraw its troops from the Occupied Territories and recognise the Palestinians' right to a state of their own. Over a thousand Israeli soldiers are refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories, despite the fact that the refusal will bring them a jail sentence. Most of those Tel Aviv marchers, and most of the soldier "refuseniks", would call themselves "Zionists"; for sure, virtually every one of them would defend Israel's right to exist.

Those Jewish workers, socialists and democrats are our allies in the battle for justice for the Palestinians. Most of the Palestinians can recognise that. We should recognise it, too. We should place ourselves firmly in solidarity with the Tel Aviv demonstrators and the "refuseniks".

For Arab and Jewish workers unity!

For reconciliation and democracy, not chauvinism and revenge!

For two states for the two peoples!

Marxism 2002 • the fringe

Israel-Palestine: the case for two states

Speakers include Deborah Maccoby (Just Peace UK)

Wednesday 10 July, 7.30pm, The Plough, Museum St.

Organised by AWL, CPGB, and RDG