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<http://socialistworker.org/2009/01/06/anger-over-israels-war>

Anger in the streets over Israel's war

Lichi D'Amelio reports from New York City's 25,000-strong protest against Israel's campaign of terror in Gaza.

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JANUARY 3 saw the third and largest in a string of demonstrations to take place in New York City since Israel's assault on the people of Gaza began a week ago.

Between 20,000 and 25,000 marchers stretched out over 10 New York City blocks as the news spread through the crowd that Israel had made good on its threat to launch a ground invasion into the already devastated Gaza Strip. This served only to deepen the anger and strengthen the resolve of marchers.

Entire families with young children in strollers, groups of teenaged friends, members of Palestine solidarity groups, antiwar activists and many others all marched together in a sea of Palestinian flags, chanting, "You can't bomb the truth away, Palestine is here to stay!"

Sameha, a 17-year-old Yemeni woman, explained that she came "to say to all the world, you say Muslims are terrorists, but when I turn on my TV, I see over 500 Muslims dead from the Israeli bombings, so I say we are not the terrorists. Israel is the terrorist!"

A young Palestinian man standing next to her agreed, adding, "Killing children is not self-defense. We want our country back and we want peace."

Aisha Masri of the U.S. Palestine Community Network took the stage and described what was happening as "the most despicable and tragic massacres to ever take place in Palestine. We call on all Palestinian people in the U.S. to join forces to stop the Israeli regime and demand that the U.S. stop all aid to Israel. The people of Gaza will not be broken if they know that we are here supporting them."

The New York protest was the largest of many demonstrations taking place around the country, with growing numbers turning out. In Chicago, after days of emergency protests attended by hundreds of people, some 5,000 protesters demonstrated January 2 in a rally organized by area mosques. San Francisco was among several cities that mobilized for a day of action on December 30, with 2,000 people turning out. Los Angeles turned out 1,000 the same day.

AS ELSEWHERE, the complicity of the U.S. government in Israel's war on the Palestinian people was lost on no one at the New York demonstration. Marcher Michael

Torrent said that he wanted to see someone in the government call for an immediate, unconditional truce. "Now that we have a new president," Torrent said, "we will need to push him to move forward with the agenda of peace that he has promised us."

Barack Obama was on the minds of many at the march, and the sentiment was reflected on stage by a speaker who asked the incoming president, "Why haven't you spoken out?"

Michael Letwin of New York City Labor Against War explained to the crowd that if nothing changes over the next decade, the U.S. will give Israel \$30 billion to continue its war on the Palestinian people.

"It is U.S. cluster bombs and bullets that kill and maim," said Letwin. "It is a bipartisan agenda. It is supported by Bush; it is supported by Obama. Much of the leadership of the labor organizations gives support to Israel, without the awareness of its rank and file. There is another way to go...We can say like Martin Luther King about the Vietnam War: I cannot be silent."

The demonstration, endorsed by Al-Awda: Palestine Right to Return Coalition-NY, the Arab Muslim American Federation, the General Union of Palestinian Students, Bayan-USA, the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge, the International Action Center, New York City Labor Against War and many other organizations, marched down Third Avenue, stopped at the Egyptian Mission and went on to the Israeli Consulate. Though one rabid supporter of Israel's assault threw an egg at protesters, the pro-Palestine marchers, for their part, remained peaceful.

The atmosphere was one of confidence and defiance mixed with a palpable anger, sorrow and hope. Many, if not most, of the marchers were Arab and Muslim--a community that has been vilified by the mainstream press as "terrorists," held in detention centers all over the U.S. on bogus charges, and victimized in terrible hate crimes.

Yet this community has not been fully represented in the antiwar movement--at times, it has been entirely shut out--because the question of Palestine is considered by some forces in the movement to be a "sticky" issue.

This has to change. Hopefully, Saturday's demonstration signals the beginning of the end of this unfortunate trend, and a revival of the antiwar movement as a whole. There was plenty of optimism about a reinvigorated struggle among marchers, as talk spread about more demonstrations--and the urgency couldn't be more clear.

Abdel Fatah from Gaza City has an elderly father who remains there alone, and he hasn't been able to reach him for several days. As he explained:

I want to tell the U.S. people to stop supporting Israel and to be fair to the Palestinian people. All we want is our own state, which was guaranteed us by the UN. We want to live in peace with the Israeli people. They must stop saying we are attacking them. We don't have the power to attack them. We don't have an army. We only defend ourselves.

AS SOON as news of Israel's assault on Gaza began, activists around the country snapped into action in emergency response demonstrations in the days that followed. As Israel's murderous military campaign escalated, the protests continued.

-- In **Chicago**, a January 2 protest brought together the city's Arab and Muslim organizations and mosques. Buses from all over the Chicago area converged at the Tribune Plaza downtown, where 5,000 people--young and old alike--crowded into the square to listen to speakers.

The rally then marched across the Chicago River--with chants of "End the occupation now!" ringing out--to the Israeli consulate, where the enormous crowd took over the street in front and easily displaced the pro-Israel demonstration of less than 100.

-- In **Boston**, a large turnout of the Arab and Muslim community, along with hundreds of others showing their solidarity, made for an 800-strong protest on January 3 against Israel's war on Gaza.

A contingent of protesters raised the chant "Barack Obama, now's the time. Justice for Palestine!" By the final rally, protesters had learned of the ground invasion, news that broke during the march. When a longtime Palestinian activist shouted from the stage, "Who supports the resistance!" most everyone raised their fists and voices in solidarity.

-- In **San Diego**, after a week of almost daily protests of several hundred, some 300 protesters turned out January 4 in San Diego's Balboa Park. For the first time, pro-Zionist counterprotesters came out, about 50 of them waving Israeli and American flags to support the invasion of Gaza.

The Gaza solidarity demonstration consisted largely of Palestinians, including several families with young children. In addition, a number of left groups were present, including a contingent from Union del Barrio. Their banner said simply "La Raza con Gaza." Another protest is planned for January 10.

-- In **Rochester**, over 200 people came out in blizzard-like conditions on January 2 for the second time in a week to protest the assault on Gaza. Sponsored by local Islamic community groups, the rally was intended to be a silent vigil outside the Federal Building, but the anger and energy soon broke out into chanting and marching.

Over half the crowd was under 25 years old, showing a growing section of Arab and Muslim youth confident to protest. UPS drivers, postal workers, city buses and others honked in support along the march route.

"The blockade of Gaza has been going on for almost a year, much like the one endured by Iraqis under the sanctions, but the media ignores it," said a protester who recently arrived in the U.S. from Egypt. "It's shameful. The people of Gaza need our support. The Palestinians need the support of people here in the U.S. to stop the bombing."

-- In **Denver**, 70 people assembled in front of the state capitol building on January 3 to add their voices and their solidarity to the wave of worldwide protest. Najah, a woman of Palestinian birth, who attended the rally with her husband and two children, was representative of much of the crowd. Not an "activist," she said, she heard about the demonstration by word of mouth.

"I believe the U.S. has the power to stop this," her husband Hassan added.

"Unfortunately, the American actions so far have been to support Israel, and to justify war crimes...It's a one-sided, immoral, inhuman war. Even if we accept retaliation it should be in equitable amounts.

"So far, Palestinian rockets have killed four Israelis. Israel retaliates by dropping bunker buster, 2,000-pound bombs on a mosque and an orphanage. If this is the land of the free--all Palestinians have been supporting for years is their freedom. I wonder if Americans are truthful to their own principles, to their own moral imperatives. "

-- In **Northampton, Mass.**, over 60 people protested on January 3.

Tom Arabia, Tristan Brosnan, Rick Greenblatt, Lucy Herschel, Brian Lenzo, Michele Showman, Angela Stoutenburgh and Christian Wright contributed to this article.

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