

Why Does the Socialist Party Boycott Its Own Politics? Gaza, and "Socialism" as Evasion and Placebo

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Among those who criticise AWL for openly proclaiming our policy on the Middle East — Israel out of the Occupied Territories; two states, i.e. a Palestinian state alongside Israel; hostility to political Islam and Islamic clerical fascism — on the Gaza demonstrations have been members of the Socialist Party.

This is of interest because the Socialist Party agrees with Israel's right to exist, or used to anyway; and because the SP's own behaviour on the Gaza demonstrations offers an object lesson in how socialists should not behave.

On both the 3 January and the 10 January marches SP members gave out the same leaflet — a printed broadsheet distributed at demonstrations all over Britain.

For muddled thinking, moral and political cowardice, irresponsible demagoguery, and attempted mimicry of the dominant political forces on the demonstrations, it would be hard to find anything worse.

I will first describe it (it is [on the AWL website](#) [1]) and then analyse its politics.

One side of the A4 leaflet is given over to slogans and a picture of a Palestinian carrying a boy, limp and bloody, in his arms. The main slogan, covering half the page, is "Stop The Slaughter in Gaza".

Below that, printed in gold letters, much smaller but still very large type, is: "Mass struggle needed for liberation". Under that again, in smaller but bold type, are five slogans:

- Stop the military onslaught now! End the blockade and occupation
- Escalate the anti-war demonstrations and initiate workers' actions
- No trust in the world's capitalist governments or the United Nations
- For independent workers' organisations in Israel and Palestine
- For a struggle for democratic socialism throughout the Middle East

This is the "face" of the SP. The other side of the broadsheet is a rumination on the politics stated in the slogans.

The main slogan — "Stop The Slaughter in Gaza" — is a commendable humanitarian protest against Israel's onslaught. It doesn't go very far; it is scarcely political; it subsumes Hamas, including its military wing, into the people of Gaza — but it is all right, as far as it goes.

But what about Hamas's rocket war on Israel? It is a very great deal less lethal than the Israeli onslaught on Gaza, but not because Hamas wouldn't like it to be as lethal and more so. A central political fact during the war was that Hamas continued to explode rockets in Israel, aimed at civilians: if Hamas had stopped doing that and declared an end to such rockets, it would at least have increased the moral and political pressure on Israel to "stop the slaughter" and the "onslaught".

The leaflet contains implicit criticism of Hamas dressed up as tactical advice to it — the rockets have been ineffective — but nowhere is there any explicit political condemnation of Hamas's rockets against Israeli civilians, or of Hamas's politics that underly its militarism against a state whose right to exist it denies.

As a whole, the political message is an uncritical siding with Hamas. The second main slogan — "mass struggle needed for liberation" — is advice to Hamas, and the demonstrators, on how to achieve their objectives, which the leaflet seemingly accepts. This strange "socialist" leaflet is couched as advice from "socialist" friends — to clerical-fascists!

There are two striking things about the "mass struggle" slogan. The first is the use of "liberation". Straightforwardly, this would mean liberation of the West Bank and Gaza. In fact, a main political feature of the Gaza demonstrations — and of all the "anti-war" demonstrations for the last seven years — has been the use of the term "liberation of Palestine", or "free Palestine", to blur and hide a massive political divide.

The most politicised element, the organisers, and the main placard-providers of the Gaza demonstrations — understand by “free Palestine” the “liberation” (Arab or Islamic conquest) of all of pre-1948 Palestine, including Israel. Islamist groups and the kitsch-left (SWP, ISG, etc.) chanted it: “From the river to the sea/ Palestine will be free”.

Interpret it as you like, and “explain it away” as you will, the slogan “mass struggle for liberation” was, and certainly would be taken as being, endorsement of Arab-chauvinist, Islamic-chauvinist, Islamist, or Hamas objectives in the Middle East, specifically in relation to Israel. It allowed the SP to blend in on the demonstrations.

Does the SP agree with those objectives? No! To repeat: like AWL, it thinks Israel has a right to exist.

The second striking thing in the slogan is the mystery of what it means. “Mass struggle”? Mass struggle has been absent, or very weak? The fact is that there have been mass mobilisations by Hamas in Gaza and the West Bank. There is mass support for Hamas’s military campaign, including its homicide bombing campaign inside Israel – just as there is mass Israeli support for Israel’s military onslaught on Hamas in Gaza.

What would the SP propose to add in the way of “mass mobilisation” to what Hamas is already doing?

Nothing! The phrase “mass struggle” is — or is chiefly — code for the SP and its politically tuned-in periphery expressing their private opposition to militarism and “terrorism”. It is the SP pretending that Hamas militarism can be classed as “individual terrorism”.

What most people on the demonstrations would get is vague and rather needless “advice” on how the political Islamists could achieve their goal.

In this vein, Hannah Sell, the main organiser of the SP, was on a loud-hailer telling people that Hamas’s rockets on Israel had “failed”. This could not but be understood by most of her audience as the SP accepting everything Hamas tries to do, and criticising the rockets on Israel only for their lack of success in achieving their desired level of politically effective murderousness!

The first of the leaflet’s five summary slogans is a rephrasing of its main headline: “Stop the military onslaught now. End the blockade and occupation”. The second of the five is: “Escalate the anti-war demonstrations and initiate workers’ actions”.

The first part, “Escalate the anti-war demonstrations”, is no more than saying to the demonstrators: “Good on you”!

The second, “initiate workers’ actions”, meant what? What sort of “workers’ actions”? With what politics?

The second question is easier to answer than the first: with the politics of the demonstrations, what else?

Here the SP elevates sociology above politics. It doesn’t matter about the political aims of “action”, so long as it is action by workers. The focus on “workers” sounds very left-wing, but in context, on the demonstrations, it is the opposite: an appeal to workers to merge in with reactionary Arab or Islamic chauvinist politics and aims.

And what “workers’ actions”? Strikes? Refusal to load and unload goods to and from Israel? Airport staff to refuse to deal with passengers to and from Israel? In real terms, over and above lip-service to “workers’ action”, the only possible meaning of the SP slogan on the demonstrations was a call on Muslim workers to strike, occupy, whatever; and backing for the appeal, placarded and sloganised heavily on the demonstrations, for a general boycott of Israel.

The third slogan, “No trust in the world’s capitalist governments or the United Nations”, is socialist ABC stuff. In what circumstances could it ever be redundant? So why is it worthy here of being one of only five slogans?

In terms of the demonstrations, the emphasis in the SP leaflet on what is seemingly socialist ABC worked to merge what the SP was saying with the political Islamist hostility to most existing governments, to the UN — and to western bourgeois-democratic society as a whole, including its democratic elements.

But more. While we never give our confidence or confer political credence in advance on bourgeois governments or the UN, the fact is that the only thing that exists now, and in the calculable future, which can win a Palestinian state, is large-scale international pressure on Israel — in the first place, US pressure on Israel.

The alternative? The leaflet suggests that it is some sort of “mass” movement on the politics common, in varying political degrees, to the main “resistance” movements in the region now.

That is not a progressive alternative to the USA, the UN, or Britain. To pretend otherwise on the grounds that revolutionaries do not look to existing governments is not working-class politics. It is to sink oneself into a reactionary right-wing populism.

The broadsheet talks vaguely of “mass struggle” as the positive flipside to its negative slogan: “No trust in governments”. In fact, in the existing situation, “mass struggle” most likely is, and would be, mobilisation on Islamist

politics and concerns and for Islamic goals — in many cases, for clerical-fascist goals. Mobilisation necessarily hostile to and repressive of independent working-class organisations.

Here the SP, under cover of pietistic “socialist” slogans, blends itself in with a reactionary populism and with the reactionary anti-imperialism of the SWP and others.

In the fourth slogan, “For independent workers organisations in Israel and Palestine”, there is debilitating vagueness. What exactly do they mean? Organisationally independent of existing states? Politically independent? There is question-begging: what are independent working-class politics, specifically, on the Israeli-Arab conflict. There is here too a downgrading of the Israeli trade union movement, the Histadrut, and a pandering to those on the demonstrations who would say that, being Israeli, it is no sort of trade union.

For the working class even to begin to be able to act as an independent force in Israel and Palestine, tremendous transformations in working-class political outlooks have to be made to happen. Independent working-class movements have to be built and, probably, a degree of political freedom for independent working-class organisation has to be won across the Middle East.

It is not a matter here of dogmatically postulating, Menshevik-style, the attainment of democratic rights as a necessary first step, but of recognising the tremendous difficulties which the present regimes in most Middle East countries put in the way of working-class politics.

The fifth slogan is a variant of asserting, but too abstractly, that “socialism is the answer”: “For a struggle for democratic socialism throughout the Middle East”. Yes, indeed. But for people who understand that only the working class can create socialism, “mass struggle” cannot be a struggle for socialism before the working class is organised and convincingly socialist.

These five slogans constitute the SP’s programme for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: stop the slaughter, independent “workers’ organisations” in Israel and Palestine, “struggle” for “democratic socialism”.

As a whole the programme is vague and startlingly sketchy and incomplete. What is missing is even more startling than what is present: other than “stop the slaughter”, and the call to organise independent working-class organisations to struggle for socialism throughout the Middle East, the SP has nothing explicit and spelled-out to say to the political issues that convulse the Middle East. It says nothing about the relationship between Israel and the Arab states and, very much to the point here, Hamas; and nothing about the national question in the Middle East. In the face of the Arab and Islamic chauvinism dominant on the demonstrations, in both direct versions and kitsch-left adaptations, it does not dare to argue for the SP’s own political positions on Israel, confining itself to a vague and ambivalent recognition that Israel exists now and for the immediate future.

The SP leaflet assumes, in passing, the continuing existence of Israel. The dominant political forces on the demonstrations deny Israel’s right to exist — vociferously and, in slogans, explicitly. The SP, addressing the demonstrators, does not argue for its political position on Israel’s right to exist!

Therefore the two passing references to “Israel” — “independent workers organisations in Israel and Palestine”, “The Israeli working class could potentially develop into a powerful and decisive force against the Israeli ruling class” — are ambivalent too. Acknowledging that Israel exists — and calling it Israel rather than some such term as “the Zionist entity”, as many demonstrators would — does not necessarily mean, and (to the point) for many or most demonstrators certainly did not amount to, an assertion that it has a right to continue existing.

To have any political meaning on the demonstrations, that assertion would have to be solid, underlined, and argued for.

The SP’s political tendency has a very long history of using “socialism now” — meaning nationalisation of the economy — as a platitude to substitute for specific policies. For the SWP “build the revolutionary party” (i.e. “build the SWP”) is frequently a substitute for specific revolutionary policies; for the SP, “socialism is the only answer” does the same job.

So much for the “front” of the leaflet. The small print on the other side tends heavily towards demagogic exploitation of and pandering to the raw feelings and political assumptions of the demonstrators. The poison is in the mixing of proper humanitarian outrage with political accommodation to the Islamic chauvinists.

The leaflet asks: “Why is Israel carrying out this slaughter?”. The writer rejects the idea that the Hamas rockets could be even a subordinate part of the causes of the war.

“The Israeli ruling class do not care about the Jewish working class inhabitants of the towns bordering Gaza...”

Of course the Israeli ruling class don’t mind Jewish workers being killed by, or living in fear of, Hamas rockets! What do you think they are — people very conscious of Jewish history in the 20th century and for whom a common national identity would lead them to defend Jews, including workers, against Hamas?

National consciousness is not a category the SP recognises! For them, anything nationalist is always a disguise or outlet for some direct economic motive or interest.

For the SP, the Israeli ruling class merely “uses their plight” of Jewish workers under Hamas rockets “to justify this vicious war, which in reality is taking place for very different reasons”.

Which are? “The Israeli government feels humiliated by the war on Lebanon in 2006, and is beset by failure and scandal. Now they are trying to save themselves from defeat in next month’s elections by means of a wholesale slaughter of Palestinians”.

Most analysts, including those in Solidarity, list the felt need of the Israeli military to show that it can do better than it did in Lebanon in 2006, and the political jockeying between the Israeli parties, as elements in the decision now to go to full-scale war with Hamas. But the SP’s clumsy, dumb denial that the rockets were any part of the cause of Israel’s onslaught served, yet again, only to help the SP blend in with the dominant Arab and Islamic chauvinists on the demonstration. The chauvinists support the rocket attacks; the SP proclaims that they do not matter.

“The war also temporarily diverts attention away from the impact of the worldwide economic crisis as none of the main parties, which all support capitalism, have a solution that can guarantee jobs and living standards”. Again, the Hamas rockets were only the pretext. This is the “socialism”-as-placebo school of social medicine!

Under the crosshead, “World powers complicit”, the SP tells us that Bush backs Israel “to the hilt”. “Brown belatedly called for a ceasefire, but why trust this call when he leads a government involved in slaughter in Afghanistan?” As ever, the chief tool of SP analysis is the non-sequitur!

In fact, most of the governments deplored the Israeli onslaught; and one of Obama’s first acts as president has been to declare that there should be US negotiations with Iran, Hamas’s chief sponsor.

Again, the SP falsifies the real picture. Why? Because a crude, primary-colours comic-book picture of the world best matches their own crude comic-book-level version of politics in general and socialism in particular.

The SP’s concern with “slaughter in Afghanistan” comes strangely from people who for a decade, through the 1980s, avidly backed the Russian Stalinist colonial war in Afghanistan, which killed one in twelve of the people of Afghanistan and drove six million of its estimated 18 million population over the borders as refugees.

The next crosshead is “Arab league leaders”; the SP dismisses those leaders’ condemnation of “the massacre” because “they were complicit in Israel’s starving of Gaza’s inhabitants by Israel’s three year [in fact 18 months] siege”.

The SP makes the following statement of “socialist” principle: “Socialists fully defend the Palestinians’ right to armed resistance against the brutal occupation”. (If it were less “brutal”, it would be acceptable? And socialists would not defend the right of resistance?)

Yes, any Palestinians, whatever their politics, have a right to resist the occupation. But that right of resistance, and socialists’ automatic support for it, is here complicated by the fact that for Hamas the “occupied territories” include all of post-1948 Israel. Its objective is to destroy Israel; the rockets and the homicide bombings express that; and Hamas militarism cannot be disentangled from that fact. Moreover, the Hamas sub-state in Gaza ceased to be occupied in 2005.

Despite the statement of principle about supporting armed resistance, the SP does not actually support Hamas’s rockets. It rejects them. Why? “These attacks cannot defeat the Israeli state. On the contrary, they will make it easier for the Israeli government to win the support of the Israeli population for the war”.

The future tense is, I guess, designed to square this recognition of the rockets as a factor in winning Israeli popular support for the war with the leaflet’s earlier denial that the rockets were any part of the cause for the Israeli onslaught. Which means that their effect of winning mass Israeli support for the war is rendered mysterious.

While implicitly endorsing, or seeming to endorse, Hamas’s politics on Israel, the SP does not entirely neglect to criticise Hamas. What is wrong with Hamas politically?

“Hamas doesn’t have any viable strategy for defeating the occupation or for providing decent living standards for the Palestinian population, basing itself — as it does — on the continuation of capitalism with all the horrors that this system brings”.

The power of the SP leaders to pack vast quantities of political confusion, evasion, and muddle into one sentence is here, as always, impressive.

The SP does have a “viable strategy for ending the occupation”? Of course it has — “mass struggle”. What about the fact that the “mass struggle” of the second Intifada, after 2000, quickly led to the homicide bombing campaign in Israel, which had mass Palestinian support? Facts never banish belief in a cherished panacea for those who need it.

Alternatively, the trouble with Hamas is that they are not socialist, not anti-capitalist, and socialism and anti-capitalism would provide “a viable strategy”? In fact, the pauper’s-broth economic-reductionist “socialism” of the SP wouldn’t.

Unless the socialists, Palestinian or Israeli or Egyptian or whatever, have a “viable” democratic programme for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, their mere commitment to a collectivised democratic economic policy will be irrelevant to the burning issues of Middle East politics.

The Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution talked of socialism — and did more than talk — but they did not and could not dispense with the democratic programme on the national questions in the Russian empire. The SP broadsheet might usefully have tried to explain that to people on the demonstrations — as AWL did — but for that the SP leaders would have to understand it and have the nerve to proclaim it to a very hostile audience.

Instead, they demagogically merge as much as possible into the chauvinism of the demonstrations, and use the assertion that abstract “socialism” is the answer to evade the issues.

They preach “socialism” as a magic all-transforming blueprint. It is not that, but a programme for workers to fight for, including its democratic elements on the national question.

Finally, under the crosshead, “Israeli working class”, the broadsheet says: “The Israeli working class could potentially develop into a powerful and decisive force against the Israeli ruling class, which must be defeated to solve both Israeli workers’ own aspirations and those of the Palestinians”.

Class divisions in Israel are widening. “There is tremendous anger towards the government, on economic issues and over deteriorating security. Israeli Jews will never be free of the constant cycles of violence as long as they are led by capitalist politicians who regularly have an interest in resorting to national conflict”.

So for the SP, the national conflict between Israel and the Arabs — where only two Middle-East Arab states recognise Israel’s right to exist, and political Islam, including Hamas, proclaims and acts on the goal of destroying Israel — is nothing but a cheap political ploy by Israeli politicians. The national question is not real. Socialists do not need to have answers to it. Only bread-and-butter day-to-day economic questions provide the reality and dynamic of politics.

The SP’s barebones economic-reductionist version is — so to speak — the only real reality. The rest is only ruling class machinations.

In general, the politics of the SP are blighted by what Lenin, combatting it during World War One against such as the then ultra-left Nikolai Bukharin, called “imperialist economism” — the idea that issues like national rights are irrelevant in a world of giant capitalist powers.

How would the broadsheet’s sudden invocation of the Israeli working class go down with the Arab and Islamic chauvinists whom the SP panders to in the rest of the leaflet? Even here the SP rats on its own politics! It talks of Israel and the Israeli working class, but it does not proclaim and argue for Israel’s right to go on existing.

Many of the Arab chauvinist and Islamic chauvinist demonstrators — to go by talking to some of them — say that they would allow Jewish workers and others to carry on living in a Palestinian state encompassing what is now Israel. They present themselves as inclusive, and Israel as exclusive and “racist”.

What makes this nonsense even if sincerely believed in is that the conquest of Israel necessary to the state’s destruction would have to kill large parts of the Jewish population and subdue the rest. A state of equal Jewish and Arab citizens cannot be created by conquering the Jewish nation and depriving it of self-determination.

The SP’s talk in this leaflet of the Israeli working class, in the absence of any argument that Israel has a right to go on existing, does not necessarily contradict those benign-seeming delusions with which some Arab or Islamic chauvinists and some kitsch-leftists comfort themselves.

If what the SP — accepting as it does Israel’s right to exist — did on the demonstrations is the alternative to what AWL did, then there is no alternative to what did that would allow us to remain loyal to our basic revolutionary working class socialist politics.

In our situation it is necessary to spell out and emphasise your own politics and analysis, irrespective of the hostility you face, and no matter how “provocative” it seems to those who reject your ideas.

The socialist who is afraid to be unpopular, who cannot stand against the tide, or even the stream, is a poor little specimen indeed. When, for lack of political courage — and, at root, lack of sufficiently hard political conviction — the socialist trims, skilfully or as with the SP clumsily and stupidly, and tries to ingratiate himself with alien forces by, chameleon-like, adapting their colours, the result is self-effacement and political self-corruption. It has more than a little in it of political suicide.

For decades the SP predecessor, the Militant Tendency, adapted itself to the vague socialism that used to permeate the mass labour movement in Britain — for instance, divorcing the question of socialising (“nationalising”) the economy from the question of working-class state power, and so reducing socialism to mere “nationalisation”.

After a period of spectacular growth in the early 1980s, it eventually suffered a spectacular political collapse. The SP is part of the wreckage of that collapse. What the broadsheet shows is that its leaders have not learned from the experience.

The tendency has never been other than muddled, but long ago, before the collapse of European Stalinism and before the Blairite coup in the Labour Party, it was internally coherent muddle. Now Ted Grant’s patricidal orphans are only muddled — and shamefully unprincipled.

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