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www.afgazad.com

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By Jean Shaoul
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Labour-controlled Tower Hamlets council refused to host Palestinian charity event, citing “anti-Semitism” fears

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets refused to host a charity event marking the end of the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign’s (PSC) London Big Ride 4 Palestine on July 27.

The Labour-run local authority did not explain to the charity at the time why it had refused to host the closing rally, simply saying that there was a risk that speakers might express views that contradicted the council’s policies on community cohesion and equality. But emails written by the council’s staff, following a Freedom of Information request, reported in the *Guardian*, show that the council took the decision because the event was deemed to conflict with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism.

The Labour-run council had passed a motion accepting the IHRA’s definition, and its accompanying examples that equate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism, last year at the behest of Conservatives on the council. It rejected the PSC’s request to insert a sentence clarifying that campaigning for the rights and basic needs of the Palestinian people would not be banned by its policy.

The decision is a blatant attack on free speech and confirms that the IHRA’s definition provides a mechanism for censoring, silencing and even criminalising individuals and organisations that oppose Israel’s brutal suppression of the Palestinians, while slandering the entire left as “anti-Semitic.”

The Big Ride 4 Palestine focuses on helping 300,000 children in Gaza suffering from severe psychological distress. It began in 2015 as a protest against Israel's 51-day-long military assault on Gaza in 2014, which killed around 2,250 Palestinians and wounded some 10,000 more. Some 30 percent of the casualties were children. The horrific bombardment destroyed 7,000 homes and damaged at least 89,000 more, at an estimated cost to rebuild or repair of \$4-6 billion.

This year's annual sponsored bike ride in London, Big Ride 4 Palestine's fifth such event, along a 36-mile route equal in length to Gaza's military perimeter, was in aid of the Middle East Children's Alliance (MECA), a charity specialising in working with children traumatised by living under Israel's illegal and inhumane occupation.

Some 200 people took part in the ride and met an enthusiastic response from pedestrians and bus and car drivers, with passers-by recording the ride on their phones. In Maida Vale, shopworkers offered the cyclists bottles of water. In Clissold Park, Stoke Newington, the local Palestinian Solidarity Campaign provided a Middle Eastern meal. The ride ended with a rally at Saint John's Church in Bethnal Green, Tower Hamlets.

Mike Cushman, from Jewish Voice for Labour, spoke at the rally. He said he had been accused of being a fake Jew by those who support Israel's actions against the Palestinians. But he believed that justice for everyone is a basic Jewish value and one lesson "we should take from the Holocaust is never again. Never again for everyone."

The council's emails reveal that its staff thought there was a "real risk" that the event and its organisers could be seen as breaching the IHRA's working definition of anti-Semitism.

Crucially, the IHRA's 11 "examples" equate opposition to Israel's policy towards the Palestinians with anti-Semitism, including any description of the establishment of Israel as a "racist endeavour."

Yet the racist nature of the Zionist State is evidenced by Israel's passage last year of the "nation-state" law that makes explicit what has long been implicit: that Israel is a nation-state for Jews alone. It declared, "The right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people." It also demotes Arabic as an official language, while sanctioning the construction of yet more Jews-only communities and proclaiming "Jewish settlement" on Palestinian land "a national value."

At the same time, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is happy to associate with the most rabid and genuine anti-Semites, including Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor

Orban, who praised Miklós Horthy, Hungary's ruler during World War II, who collaborated with the Nazis.

Council officials thought the request to host the Big Ride's closing rally should be rejected in particular because of the ongoing campaign led by the Blairite right and various Zionist groups to brand Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters as anti-Semitic. They noted that the Big Ride's website describes Israel's treatment of Palestinians as ethnic cleansing and draws parallels between Israeli policies and apartheid-era South Africa.

One staffer referred expressly to "the recent furore within the Labour party over anti-Semitism" as a reason for rejecting the request. Steve Murray, the head of parks, in a discussion about how best to present its refusal, said it would be best to "avoid the anti-Semitism aspect ref their website as this could open a can of worms and come back to bite us."

Within months of the council rejecting the PSC's petition calling for a caveat to be included in its code which "safeguards our right to campaign for Palestine in Tower Hamlets," it was actively working against a charitable campaign in support of traumatised children.

Tower Hamlets Council's cowardly decision sets a precedent for councils all over the country to deny left-wing and progressive groups access to their premises for meetings and events and to silence opponents of Israeli repression. Such censorship can be extended to cover opposition to imperialist wars in the Middle East, under conditions where Britain, in alliance with US President Donald Trump, is sending a second warship to the Persian Gulf amid rising tensions with Iran.

This is the direct result of Corbyn's capitulation to the Labour right wing's bogus charges of anti-Semitism—the main feature of their vicious campaign to remove him as party leader ever since he was swept to leadership in 2015 by an influx of new members into the party who thought he would fight austerity and militarism.

Corbyn will do whatever it takes to maintain unity with the Blairites and prove he can be trusted to form a government that will loyally serve the interests of British imperialism—even if this means repressing and expelling his own supporters. He has accepted the suspension or expulsion of Ken Livingstone, Marc Wadsworth, Jackie Walker and Chris Williamson, along with dozens of ordinary members who supported him, based on their criticisms of Israel online or on social media.

He agreed to adopt the IHRA's definition of anti-Semitism in Labour's code of practice, albeit without the supplementary examples equating criticism of Israel and the establishment of Israel as a "racist endeavour" with anti-Semitism. When all hell broke loose, with Britain's three main Jewish newspapers jointly calling a possible Corbyn-led government an "existential threat to Jewish life" in Britain because of his refusal to accept the supplementary examples, he duly fell in line. Tower Hamlets proves that what began within the Labour Party will now be extended nationally through the aegis of Labour councils that dominate most metropolitan areas.

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