

Thousands Mobilize for Palestinians in U.S.

by Michele Steinberg

On April 20, a rally for justice in Palestine swept Washington, D.C., with a crowd that official police estimates put at more than 75,000 people, calling for President George Bush to stop Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon from carrying out his murderous policies in the West Bank. Moved by the heroic resistance of Palestinians in Jenin, where humanitarian rescue teams are reporting massacres of civilians, the rally dwarfed the pro-Sharon “hate rally” of April 15, organized for Israeli war-monger Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu was in the United States at Sharon’s behest to silence U.S. demands that Israel withdraw from the Palestinian territories, and to get full support to exterminate and expel all Palestinians from Israel and the Occupied and Palestinian Territories. Netanyahu cynically calls this a “war on terrorism.”

While the Netanyahu rally has been used as a political club to force the U.S. Congress to attack Arafat and the Palestinian Authority, that multimillion-dollar-funded demonstration was officially counted at 42,000.

The Palestinian turnout eclipsed all the other issues that were being pushed by a gaggle of anti-globalization protesters, and the pro-Palestinian demonstration included many Jewish activists, who are pro-Israel, but anguished by the fascist actions taken by the Sharon government.

Also on April 20, a rally was organized in San Francisco, where “at least 20,000 people marched” in what the San Francisco newspapers reported as one of the largest Bay Area protests in recent years, in defense of a Palestinian state. And, like the Washington rally, the march was ecumenical.

One Jewish activist told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “Twenty years ago, I was with a group of Jews protesting at the Israeli Embassy and it was lonely. I am happy that Jews especially . . . are no longer blind to oppression by the Israelis.” In Washington, D.C., busloads of Jewish activists from Illinois, Michigan, and New York came to rally for peace with Palestinians. Among them were several dozen Orthodox rabbis who oppose the Israeli occupation, and support a free Palestine. Rabbi Yisroel Weiss of New York told the *Washington Post* that initially, Palestinians in the crowd “look at us mistrustfully at first. But then they speak a few words with us, and they show us respect and friendship.”

Thousands of the Palestinian protesters in Washington have relatives in Jenin, Nablus, and among the nearly 200 people who have sought sanctuary in Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity—historically identified as the location where

Jesus was born—which has been surrounded by Israeli commandos for weeks, and where occupants have died from lack of medical care.

‘Peace of the Brave’

The Palestinian rally in Washington stood in stark contrast to the venomous speeches that opened the April 21-23 conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in Washington—where even the Jewish-American attendees privately confided that Netanyahu “scares the hell” of them. The rally embodied the best ideas of the Oslo Accords that the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had called “the peace of the brave,” i.e., for those, like himself and Arafat, who had the courage to lead their populations away from war and bloodshed.

D.C. Police Chief Charles Ramsey praised the demonstration as one of “the best we’ve every had.” At one point, when the Palestinian marchers were apprehensive about marching through a tunnel, Ramsey and Executive Assistant Police Chief Terrance W. Gainer marched at the head of the group as part of the security detail.

The Palestinian rally, led by groups such as the American Muslims for Jerusalem, and the Muslim Public Affairs Council, was followed by a successful lobbying day on Capitol Hill, where citizen activists from ten states met with 75 members of the House and Senate to get support for House Resolution 394, introduced by Rep. Peter Fazio (D-Ore.) on April 18. It is co-sponsored by Reps. Maurice Hinchey (D-N.Y.), Fortney Stark (D-Calif.), Nick J. Rahall (D-W.V.), Sam Farr (D-Calif.), John Dingell (D-Mich.), Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), Darryl Issa (R-Calif.), Vic Snyder (D-Ariz.), Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), Lynn Woolsey (D-Calif.), and Gregory Meeks (D-N.Y.). The resolution calls for Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian cities, urges both sides to end the violence, and cites the proposals of various parties (Bush, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, the Arab League, and the Mitchell Commission) for potential pathways to peace, including recognition of Israel’s right to exist, guaranteeing Israeli security within its 1967 borders, creation of a Palestinian state, halting construction of settlements, and negotiations on the final status of Jerusalem and refugees. H. Res. 394 “strongly supports” UN Security Council Resolution 1402.

At the same time, the Israeli peace movement is escalating its organizing of American Jews to counter the war-mongers. Groups such as “Not in Our Name,” and “The Courage To Refuse,” based in Illinois, are organizing U.S. tours for Israeli reservists who are refusing to serve in occupied Palestine. Several of the refusers, including a lieutenant in the paratroopers, and another from the artillery who was jailed last Summer, are visiting campuses, synagogues, and political organizations to spread the message that the occupation of Palestine is destroying “all the values we had absorbed while growing up” in Israel. The number of refusers has grown from 111 in February to 420, and thousands more sympathize.