



[Mick Bowman](#)

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My political pilgrimage to Palestine

Following his guest speech at the recent PCS Northern Annual General Meeting, Mick writes about his experience of walking 1,800 miles from Tyneside to Palestine to highlight the Palestine crisis and show solidarity with those affected.

The idea for the walk to Palestine came from a book called *Walking to Jerusalem* by Justin Butcher. I liked the idea of showing solidarity through long-distance walking, a political pilgrimage.

The opportunity and time to do the walk came after I retired at the end of 2022. I thought that it might be a way of bringing in people who weren't already committed to the cause because they would think: "What's this retired guy doing walking across Europe and the Balkans?"

I wanted to raise awareness about the Palestine issue, but also raise awareness of the struggle of refugees to reach a place of safety and security. In some ways, the journey I was doing traced the walk that many refugees have done in the opposite direction. And that's why I started the walk at Calais.

During the walk I met different trade unionists and solidarity groups, and received national media attention in Albania and Jordan. Al Jazeera also did a piece on me. Carrying my Palestine flag, I was welcomed almost everywhere I went and never met with hostility.

In the West Bank, I saw how free movement for Palestinians is impossible. There are permanent checkpoints everywhere and extra checkpoints can be set up at any moment, causing massive disruption. There are permanent military gates in every village, town and city - at all exits and entrances.

These restrictions don't apply to the illegal Israeli settlers in the West Bank. They have complete freedom of movement with their own road network and aren't subject to arbitrary stops or roadblocks. It is completely different from the Palestinians who, when they leave home to go to work, school or a medical appointment, can't guarantee that they will get to their destination. These restrictions - much worse since 7 October - are a very visible manifestation of apartheid.

Apartheid also manifests in terms of access to essential resources such as water. For example, in Area C, a territory in the West Bank that includes the South Hebron Hills and the Jordan Valley, the underground water supply is siphoned off for the use of settlers and is under Israeli military control. Restricting access to water is used as a means of collective punishment and a way of trying to force Palestinians off their land.

Land is constantly being seized to expand the illegal settlements. This land theft and forced displacement has really escalated since 7 October. Whole villages have been forced off their land; I saw it first-hand in a village near Ramallah.

When my walk reached the West Bank, it was 28 September - 10 days before the events of 7 October. At that time, the situation was already bad as there had been an intensification of settler violence in the West Bank ever since the current far-right Israeli government came into power. By that time, around 200 Palestinians - a quarter of them children - had already been killed by security forces.

On 7 October, we were on our way from Ramallah down to Hebron. The news was coming in about resistance groups having broken out from the Gaza strip and taking on the Israeli military. Local people were astounded: Palestinians in Gaza had been living in what was effectively an open-air prison that was subject to repeated attacks by Israel. There was a sense of amazement and jubilation.

Palestinians knew that Israel's pattern was to react to challenges to its occupation with overwhelming and disproportionate force, but no-one could have anticipated the level of brutality and barbarism that would result from 7 October.

Estimates of the Gaza death toll stand at around 40,000. However, according to British medical journal The Lancet, up to 186,000 or even more deaths could be attributable to the current conflict in Gaza. This campaign of collective punishment - which many experts and commentators have said amounts to genocide - led the International Court of Justice to rule that Israel must take all

measures to prevent genocidal acts in Gaza.

It is more important than ever to show solidarity with Palestinians because of these war crimes and atrocities, including the indiscriminate bombings of residential buildings, hospitals and refugee camps. We have a moral responsibility to take practical solidarity measures to do whatever we can to stop this.

As trade unionists, we are committed to social justice and solidarity with the oppressed, whether that's at home or abroad. This is part of the essence of who we are. But we should do more than just speak out. There are a number of things that everyone can do.

At the level of individual members, we can lobby our MPs demanding that they act. We can get guidance on this from the [Palestine Solidarity Campaign \(PSC\)](#) and [Amnesty International](#).

In our union branches we can make links with local PSC groups and invite speakers to meetings. Reps can also offer to speak at local rallies and ensure that there are PSC banners on display. This shows the public that support for Palestine is mainstream.

PSC has helped lead the way, but trade unions need to do more to show practical solidarity. The new Labour government should also be seen as an opportunity to lobby politically for a ceasefire and an end to the occupation, so we need to put pressure on them from day one.