Jewish Voice for Labour, a new organisation for Labour Party Jews who don’t want to buy into the Jewish Labour Movement’s pro-Zionist agenda, launched with a flourish at the Labour Party Annual Conference on Monday night 25th September. Or perhaps with a fanfare.

JVL had booked the palatial ballroom at Brighton’s Mercure hotel (there is a story behind this that I will come to later). But by the time the meeting started all the seats were full, and people were standing packed at the back, bulging out of the rear doors, and sitting on the floor both at the front and down the central aisle. No one could count, but over 300. No one was checking religious identities at the door either, but it was clear that the event had attracted both Jews and non-Jews in very substantial numbers.
At first the microphones wouldn’t work. And when they did the sound system was prone to random deafening crackles. This is a new organisation, with cadres learning on the job, as it were. But amazingly the blips and crackles added to the palpable buzz. It was as if the badly behaving electricity was escaping from its channels and charging up the whole room.

JVL was formed at a meeting of members in London in July. But the meeting at the Mercure was its public launch. The heading for its distinguished all-Jewish panel was Jewish Socialism Past and Present: Antisemitism, Israel, and the Labour Party. But its subtitle might have been “how to understand the manufactured moral panic about antisemitism in the Labour Party, and what we can do about it”.

First David Rosenberg of Jewish Socialists Group (and student of the social history of the Jewish East End) described the politico-cultural milieu of turn of the century European Jewish communities, in which Zionism was just one fragment. (Read his speech: To be a Jew means always being with the oppressed, never with the oppressors.

The much larger Bund movement led off towards a socialism with no nationalist agenda. Taken within that context it is clear that Zionism is not an intrinsic part of Jewish identity but rather an optional accretion, perhaps filling the vacuum left by the hollowing out of religious belief. He ended his contribution with the words of Marek Edelman, the last surviving commander of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising: ‘To be a Jew means always being with the oppressed, never with the oppressors.’ Never with the oppressors.

The next two speakers built on this foundation to dissect the invention in the period since 2003 of a ‘left antisemitism’, a campaign that moved into a higher gear over the past two years. Oxford Professor Avi Shlaim’s title, ‘The Myth of Antisemitism in the Labour Party’, speaks for itself. No, he wasn’t saying that there is no antisemitism in the British Labour Party; it can unfortunately still be found anywhere and everywhere – but in the UK thank goodness only in small doses, and almost certainly still less in the Labour Party.

That two-year inflation of antisemitism, especially on the Left, into an alleged social crisis coincides exactly with the period since Jeremy Corbyn became leader of the Labour Party, much to the dismay of right wing Labour and friends of Israel everywhere. The allegations of antisemitism against Corbyn supporters predominantly focussed not on expressed hatred of Jews but on expressed criticisms of Israel. Avi Shlaim’s talk concluded with a list of some of the very many ways in which criticism
of Israel could and indeed should be made that had no element of antisemitism in them.

He was followed by Sir Stephen Sedley, a former Lord Justice of Appeal. Stephen, like all of the speakers at the meeting, is Jewish.

His topic was ‘Free Speech, Antisemitism and criticism of Israel’. He presented an analysis of the legal protections for freedom of expression in Britain, a highly relevant consideration both within the Party and in the country as a whole. Antisemitism, understood as it always has been (until the recent campaign described by Avi Shlaim) is hatred of Jews as Jews. When manifesting as itself in discriminatory acts or inflammatory speech it is generally illegal, lying beyond the legal limits of free speech or action. By contrast criticism (and equally defence) of Israel is not only generally lawful – it is affirmatively protected by law.

The day after the JVL meeting the Labour Party congress was due to debate and vote on a proposal to revise its rules on conduct which could lead to members’ suspension or expulsion. (That change was duly voted through, but see the conference speech by Leah Levane, JVL vice chair.) This new regime was to include a code of conduct specifically covering antisemitism – and there was widespread concern in the room that the same pressure groups that had pushed for (and achieved) this rule change would try to attach to it a definition of antisemitism wide enough to catch much criticism of Israel. Stephen Sedley explained that private associations (and that is what the Labour Party is) do have some latitude in how they set their internal rules, but are by no means immune to legal scrutiny. This could be relevant if the Labour Party were to establish a code of conduct which significantly infringed members’ freedom of expression.

The formal part of the meeting, presided over by JLV chair Jenny Manson, ended with an account by Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi of why the organisation had been formed, and what it hoped to achieve. But the informal dimension was perhaps equally significant. It is hard to describe the high-energy atmosphere in the room. The next day a delegate with no previous connection to or awareness of JVL described it as the high point of the Conference for her. Others said it was one of the most memorable meetings they had ever been at.

There was drama when Len McCluskey made a large personal donation and announced that he would be asking UNITE to affiliate to JVL. And then Tosh McDonald of ASLEF made the same promise, and gave an even larger donation! The collection raised over £1400, enabling JVL to cover all its meeting expenses. Then Ken Loach was discovered in the ruck at the back of the hall, and came forward to make a strong speech in support of the new organisation. After the meeting the buzzing audience had to be prized out of the hall, to make room for Jackie Walker’s stunning one woman show, The Lynching. (Catch it if it comes on near you.)
The rocket-propelled launch of JVL was not an isolated, contained event. JVL committee members (and CLP delegates to Conference) Leah Levane and Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi (twice!) evoked roars of agreement and prolonged standing ovations for their speeches on the oppression of Palestine, and the false allegations of antisemitism levelled at those who campaign against it. Conference members were letting each other, and the world, know that they had seen through the campaign to label anti-Zionism as antisemitism.

There was the same emphatic almost visceral response when in his Leader’s Speech two days after the JVL launch Jeremy Corbyn said “let’s give real support to end the oppression of the Palestinian people, the 50-year occupation and illegal settlement expansion and move to a genuine two-state solution of the Israel-Palestine conflict”. Not everyone who cheered will agree with his solution, but they were all delighted at the end of equivocation about who is the oppressor.

And how did JVL come to launch in a vast ballroom? A smaller room with about half the number of seats had been booked in a different hotel, and the Committee debated anxiously about whether this might be too big a venue to fill respectfully. That venue was printed in the Conference Fringe Programme, and shortly afterwards the hotel informed us that our booking would not be honoured. Allegations had been made that the JVL event was likely to be an antisemitic snake pit. Actually JVL never saw the exact words used – but a twitter exchange was located discussing how to pressure the hotel: threats of reviews alleging, for example, that a rat had been seen was one of the bright ideas. Such down and dirty tactics are increasingly common in what seems to be an organised attempt to deny public space to critics of Israel.

But thank you, whoever you are. JVL had to move to a much larger room (at many times the price) – and without that its launch meeting could not have been quite the rip-roaring success that it was.

David Rosenberg’s speech http://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/jvl/jew-means-always-oppressed-never-oppressors/