A volatile crowd gathers outside Birmingham Council House. Inset: Kamel Hawwash of the West Midlands Palestinian Association speaks at the meeting.

A huge crowd gathered outside Birmingham’s Council House to voice their protests over the invasion of Gaza as they called on the local city council to boycott all Israeli goods.

The call, which is to be backed up by a mass petition, was made during a public meeting attended by around a thousand people last night at the Council House in Victoria Square.

The crowd was so big that some climbed to vantage points on the building for a better view.

The emergency meeting, which followed a short march from Waterstones in High Street, was organised by the Stop the War Coalition in response to Israel’s escalating of the recent week-long bombing of Gaza which has killed more than 500 Palestinians.

A cross-party selection of speakers saw Coun Salma Yaqoob from Respect, Coun Ayoub Khan (Liberal Democrat), Coun Tahir Ali (Labour) and Coun Alan Rudge (Conservative), who is Cabinet member for equalities and human resources, share the same platform. Other speakers included Kamel Hawwash, of West Midlands Palestinian Community Association.

A boycott for Israeli goods

By Tony Collins

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Hundreds voice protests in city at Gaza invasion

Call for boycott of Israeli goods in bid to end the conflict

Tony Collins

Hundreds of people gathered in Birmingham to voice their protests over the invasion of Gaza as they called on the local city council to boycott all Israeli goods.

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The emergency meeting, which followed a short march from Waterstones, in High Street, was organised by the Stop the War Coalition in response to Israel’s escalation of the recent week-long bombing of Gaza which has killed more than 500 Palestinians.

A cross-party selection of speakers saw Coun Salma Yaqoob from Respect, Coun Ayesha Khan (Liberal Democrats), Coun Tahira Ali (Labour) and Coun Alan Rudge (Conservative), who is Cabinet member for equality and human sources, share the same platform.

Other speakers included Kamel Hawwash, of West Midlands Palestinian Community Association, and John Rose, a Jew, who is author of The Myths of Zionsism.

Around 30 West Midlands Police officers accompanied the march and remained on duty at the Council House as hundreds of people crammed into the Council Chamber, public gallery and two committee rooms inside, with hundreds more having to be addressed outside.

Coun Yaqoob said: “This is a brilliant turnout and shows how important this issue is to the people of Birmingham.”

“We are calling for an embargo by the city council on all Israeli goods until Israel complies with UN resolutions not to occupy Gaza or the West Bank. We do not want just words of condemnation but action by the city council.

“Birmingham is the second largest city in the UK and the largest authority in the West Midlands. We must not look parochially at this, there will be benefits for Birmingham International Airport.”

The rail interchange could work to the advantage of BIA, if the government decides against a third runway at Heathrow.

Mr Hughes said: “This would enable passengers from Birmingham to get to Heathrow much more quickly. But obviously people will say what does this mean for BIA?”

Mr Hughes believes BIA and Heathrow must work together.

He added: “This is positive news. If you think about how Heathrow and Gatwick work, an awful lot of people travel by bus between the two. We must not look parochially at this, there will be benefits for Birmingham International Airport.”

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Coun Rudge said Birmingham has been fortunate in that people in the city have always worked together. “We cannot tolerate this non-stop battling going on and I hope this meeting is a step towards getting that message across to everyone in government,” he said.

Birmingham can get a 35-minute high speed rail link to Heathrow under plans backed by the government.

Transport minister Lord Adonis wants to build the country’s largest passenger interchange at Heathrow as part of a 250mph express line linking St Pancras to Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow.

And he expects businesses to help meet the estimated £20 billion cost of the London to Manchester extension.

Lord Adonis said the “bullet train” line could mirror London’s Crossrail project, which attracted £700 million from private companies.

His support for the biggest railway project for more than 100 years was welcomed by Birmingham City Council chief executive Stephen Hughes, who revealed how faster journey times to London might lure customers away from Birmingham International Airport.

It takes two hours to travel by train from Birmingham to Heathrow.

Passengers can go to Euston or Marylebone and take the London Underground to Heathrow, or change at Reading and use a coach. If Lord Adonis gets his way, it would be possible to travel between Birmingham and Heathrow in little over an hour.

Mr Hughes insisted both airports could benefit: “This would enable passengers from Birmingham to get to Heathrow much more quickly. But obviously people will say what does this mean for BIA?”

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The rail interchange could work to the advantage of BIA, if the government decides against a third runway at Heathrow.

Mr Hughes said the 35-minute journey time between Birmingham and Heathrow would effectively make BIA Heathrow’s third runway.

Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief executive Jerry Blackett insisted BIA had “nothing to fear” from Heathrow.

125 jobs could be at risk as Wyre Forest council ponders cutbacks

A Midland council which invested £3 million in a failed Icelandic bank is set to make drastic cuts to its workforce with up to 125 jobs feared to be at risk.

Wyre Forest District Council, which employs more than 450 people in North Worcestershire, yesterday appealed for staff to apply for voluntary redundancy as deputy leader Marcus Hart admitted the authority was “in the grip of the global economic downturn”.

The council has so far refused to release any figures on the number of jobs at risk or the amount of money it is looking to save although opposition leader, Coun Howard Martin, believes it could be as many as a quarter of the workforce.

Coun Martin (Independent Health Concern) said: “The council needs to be much clearer otherwise more questions will be raised and people will become very worried.

“If you take into account the drop in interest rates and the amount of money lost from investment in Iceland then the council could be looking to make up to £1.3 million in savings.

“If that all came from staff cuts then we would be in a very difficult position.”

Wyre Forest District Council is currently trying to recover £3 million from Icelandic banks including £3 million in Landsbanki, £5 million in Kaupthing, Singer & Friedlander and £1 million in Heritage.

Workers at the council now have just one week before they must indicate whether they wish to leave or not.

The ruling Conservative Party blamed a slump in property prices, a drastic fall in interest rates and a small central government grant for the cuts.

But they would not be drawn on the amount needed to save, saying only that the number was “substantial”, despite claims they did not know the exact figures.

Coun Hart said: “The credit crunch means that we have to redouble our efforts to become more efficient and the cabinet is working closely with corporate management team to see where further savings can be made. This includes a review of divisional management structures.

“The budget proposals will be formally announced on January 22 at the cabinet meeting with the final decision being made at full council on February 25.”