

Israel Social Justice March: 450,000 Protesters. “Arabs and Jews march together calling for social justice and peace”

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Over 450,000 protesters attended rallies across the country last night calling for social justice in what was the largest demonstration in Israeli history.

The main protest took place in Tel Aviv's Kikar Hamedina, where some 300,000 people gathered after marching from Habima Square about two kilometers away. Protest leader Yonatan Levy said the atmosphere was like “a second Independence Day.”

Protest leaders Daphni Leef and National Student Union Chairman Itzik Shmuli both addressed the Tel Aviv crowd. “Mr. Prime Minister, the new Israelis have a dream and it is simple: to weave the story of our lives into Israel. We expect you to let us live in this country. The new Israelis will not give up. They demand change and will not stop until real solutions come,” Shmuli said.

“My generation always felt as though we were alone in this world, but now we feel the solidarity,” said Leef. “They tried to dismiss us as stupid children, and as extreme leftists,” but last night's countrywide protest proved otherwise, she said.

Dr. Shiri Tannenbaum, a medical resident leading the young doctors' protest against the recent collective wage agreement signed between the government and the Israel Medical Association, also spoke at the Tel Aviv rally.

In Jerusalem, an unprecedented 50,000 people filled Paris Square and the surrounding streets, almost twice the number that attended previous protests this summer.

Actress and comedienne Orna Banai told the crowd in the capital: “I am not amused that there are hungry children here; that we have a soldier rotting in captivity for five years; that Israel is one of the poorest examples there are of human rights.”

The chairman of the Hebrew University Student Union, Itai Gotler, said: “We changed this summer. The voice of the mother, the teacher, the student, have been heard...The fire of protest was lit in Tel Aviv, but the tent city in Jerusalem shows that the protest belongs to all of us.”

Gotler said the Jerusalem tent city was closing down, but pledged to continue the struggle.

Yehuda Alush, 52, from Be'er Sheva, among a group of protesters from the Negev who marched to the capital, said: "This protest must not stop or we'll lose." In Haifa, the protest drew 40,000 people, many of whom waved red flags.

The Haifa protest focused on the issue of discrimination against Arabs. Shahin Nasser, representative of the Wadi Nisnas protest tent in Haifa said: "Today we are changing the rules of the game. No more coexistence based on hummus and fava beans. What is happening here is true coexistence, when Arabs and Jews march together shoulder to shoulder calling for social justice and peace. We've had it. Bibi, go home. Steinitz, go and don't come back, Atias, good-bye and good riddance," he said, referring to the prime minister, the finance minister and the housing minister, respectively.

The chairman of the University of Haifa's student union, Yossi Shalom, told the crowd, gathered at the foot of the Bahai Gardens in the city's German Colony, "There is no more beautiful sight than social solidarity. As a student, this is the most important lesson I have learned in recent months." At the protest in Afula the numbers reached 12,000; in Rosh Pina, 7,000 and in Kiryat Shemona, 7,000.

Meanwhile, in the south, a total of more than 1,000 people took part in rallies in Mitzpe Ramon and Arad. Ya'akov Laksi, an organizer of the protest in Arad, told the crowd: "Social justice means Arad will no longer be called an outlying town. We need to bring people work."

Laksi said organizers had expected only 100 protesters.

"We want the government to increase funding, not take from someone else," Eyal Adler, an organizer of the protest in Mitzpe Ramon said.

A protester who gave her name as Ruthie, said: "We are far from the eye of the media, but we deserve no less funding and a change in the funding map of Israel."

Concerns over possible rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip led the Home Front Command to issue a directive prohibiting demonstrations in Be'er Sheva, Ashdod and Ashkelon.

Eli Ashkenazi and Yanir Yagna contributed to this report.

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