

Jewish, Arab Workers and Youth Protest Against Social Conditions in Israel

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An estimated 150,000 mostly young people in Israel, both Jewish and Arab, protested Saturday over spiralling living costs and the economic and social policies of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The demonstrations—held in eleven cities, with the largest in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa—mark a significant development in the “tent city” movement against high housing costs launched by students nearly three weeks ago. With a total population of about 7 million, 150,000 people represents a large percentage of the country.

While still in its early stages, a movement within the Israeli working class is being driven by worsening social inequality, economic hardship, and enormous anger with the Netanyahu government and the existing political setup in the country.

Yediot Aharonot columnist Nahum Barnea described the protests as unprecedented. “Whether the crowds numbered 100,000 or 200,000, never have such numbers descended into the streets over social issues,” he wrote. “Who would have believed that 150,000 Israelis would take the trouble to go out into the street in the name of social change... the alienation and cynicism that typified the public in the past number of years has now been replaced by involvement and protest.”

The largest protest was in Tel Aviv, where up to 100,000 people marched through the city centre. According to media reports, another 10,000 rallied in Jerusalem outside the prime minister’s residence and 8,000 marched in Haifa. A smaller demonstration in central Nazareth involved both Jews and Arabs, the first such joint rally since the housing protests began.

Slogans included: “The people demand social justice”, “We want justice, not charity”, and “When the government is against the people, the people are against the government”. Protestors also made banners pointing to the influence of the recent uprisings in Egypt and other Arab countries. One read: “This is the Israeli spring”, and another, “Mubarak, Assad, Netanyahu!”

One young person was asked by the RT news network whether the protests had been inspired by events in Arab countries. He replied, “There is a lot of influence of what happened in Tahrir Square... There’s a lot of influence of course. That’s when people understand that they have the power, that they can organise by themselves, they don’t need any more the government to tell them what to do, they can start telling the government what they want.”

These developments presage a major shift within the Zionist state. Amid a worsening global economic breakdown, the social crisis in Israel is laying bare the objective potential for unifying Jewish workers with their Arab brothers and sisters both within Israel and throughout the Middle East. Opening up is a new path of political and social struggle, in opposition to the Zionist ruling elite, the Arab bourgeoisie and their imperialist backers—on the basis of common class interest, not nationality, race or religious identity.

Wider layers of the Israeli population are being drawn into the protest movement. Prominent musicians and writers have joined the demonstrations. Yesterday about 1,000 parents and their young children participated in a “strollers’ march” in Jerusalem and Haifa to protest against excessive day care centre costs and inadequate parental leave provisions.

A strike of public hospital medical professionals is in its fifth month. On Sunday, hundreds of doctors, medical residents and hospital interns protested near the Knesset (parliament) demanding adequate funding for the public health system.

Today, local authority workers are set to strike in support of the antigovernment protests, shutting down public offices and leaving rubbish uncollected.

The Netanyahu government has been plunged into crisis. A comment published by Ynet News columnist Attila Somfalvi noted: “Some 150,000 people who left their homes yesterday directed their fury at the man who they view as the culprit behind the State’s privatisation and burial of concern for the regular folk. These are not a bunch of ‘spoiled brats’ who can be dismissed with a disparaging hand gesture or by rolling one’s eyes; these are working people; angry people facing collapse... This protest is making its way to the top of the government, shakes up Likud, rocks the leather chairs in the Knesset and makes the prime minister and finance minister sweat and seek an escape route from the fury pouring into the street.”

The Shas party, which represents ultra-orthodox Jews and has 11 of the 120 seats in the Knesset, has warned it may withdraw from Netanyahu’s coalition government, potentially triggering new elections.

The prime minister has rushed to try to defuse the protest movement. Immediately after Saturday’s demonstrations Netanyahu called a cabinet meeting and announced that a “special team” of ministers and experts would listen to the protest leaders and submit a plan to “alleviate Israelis’ economic burden”. He declared: “We are all aware of the genuine hardship of the cost of living in Israel... we must deal with the genuine distress, seriously and responsibly. This, without a doubt, compels us to change our list of priorities.”

This hollow rhetoric has been accompanied by various sops in response to the protestors’ demands. Last Tuesday, Netanyahu promised to build 50,000 units of housing within 18 months. The government yesterday announced that the excise tax on petrol is to be lowered for one month, during August, and that some elderly people will have their home heating grant doubled. The prime minister has also suggested that he hopes to cut taxes and water charges.

At the same time, Netanyahu has made clear that there will be no serious concessions to the social demands of the protesting workers and youth. “We must avoid irresponsible, hasty and populist steps that are liable to cause the country to deteriorate into the situation of certain European countries, which are on the verge of bankruptcy and large-scale

unemployment," he declared.

Finance minister and senior Likud member Yuval Steinitz raised the spectre of state bankruptcy even more sharply. "We see the talk about the debt crisis in Europe," he said. "We are even hearing talk of a possible default in the United States. My supreme duty is to ensure we do not reach this situation in the State of Israel... we will not turn the rich and the business people and the investors and the industrialists into the enemies of the people, because they are part of a healthy economy."

The financial markets are clearly bringing enormous pressure to bear on the Netanyahu government, urging a continuation of pro-business policies irrespective of mass opposition. The value of Israeli government bonds declined after the weekend's rallies. "Growing protests over rising prices increase pressure on the government to act," Tel Aviv bond trader Ehud Itzhakov told Bloomberg. "There is concern in the market the government may need to raise more debt, which is creating uncertainty about the deficit."

The Israeli Treasury Department is reportedly outraged over the government's limited spending announcements in response to the protests. The director general of Israel's finance ministry, Haim Shani, resigned yesterday. He cited "differences of opinion in fundamental issues" with the finance minister, adding that "events of the past few days have exacerbated the problems."

It remains to be seen how the Netanyahu government responds to the crisis in the next days and weeks, but there is a real danger that a provocation will be launched against the Palestinian people or neighbouring Arab states as a diversion. Education Minister Gideon Sa'ar reportedly advised his Likud faction colleagues last week that every election in Israel that has "revolved around a socio-economic issue, Likud lost", whereas when the main issues were "security related, Likud won."

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