

Accord between Israel and PLO papers over social contradictions

What road forward for Arab and Jewish workers in the Middle East?

Chris Marsden
29 October 1998

The accord reached at Wye Plantation, Maryland between Israel and the Palestinian Authority is an attempt to salvage the 1993 Oslo peace process. Brokered by US President Bill Clinton and endorsed by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat, it is a makeshift agreement to hold mounting social and political contradictions in abeyance, while addressing none of the fundamental historical issues in the Middle East.

Under the agreement, Israeli troops are to be withdrawn from another 13 percent of the West Bank, transferring control to the Palestinian Authority. There will be a withdrawal from another 14 percent where there is presently joint control. A safe passage is to be created for the free movement of Palestinians from the Gaza strip to parts of the West Bank. Israel is to begin the release of 700 of the 3,000 Palestinian prisoners it presently holds.

In return, the PLO-run Palestinian Authority has agreed to take action against militant anti-Israeli groups like the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas and to convene a special meeting of the Palestinian Central Council to cancel clauses in the PLO charter calling for the destruction of Israel. It will also clamp down on the possession of arms.

It is believed that the US will make \$500m available to Israel to finance the construction of a new Gaza-West Bank link and further bypass roads to ensure the continued viability of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. These roads, combined with security zones running north-south along the River Jordan and along the western frontier of the West Bank, cut up the Palestinian-controlled areas into a series of cantons under Israeli surveillance. Netanyahu indicated that Israel is also seeking \$1billion in US aid to compensate for the redeployment costs.

An extraordinary feature of the accord is the involvement of the CIA in monitoring its implementation. The CIA has been working with the Palestinian Authority for the past two years. It maintains offices in the West Bank towns of Hebron, Ramallah and Nablus as well as one in the Gaza Strip. In a plan drawn up by CIA Director George Tenet during the talks, these efforts will be extended. The CIA is charged with monitoring the arrest and punishment of anti-Israeli groups and individuals in a three-party mediation system between themselves, Palestinian and Israeli security officials. US officials said that the CIA will train Palestinian security forces in intelligence gathering, interrogation and tracking money destined for anti-Israeli groups.

It is the first time that the CIA, notorious for its covert operations, has played such an open role. Netanyahu himself came under attack from his right-wing critics for bowing to pressure from Clinton and ceding an element of national sovereignty to the US. This development has also raised concerns in the US over its implications for national security. The Senate intelligence committee is to hold hearings on the issue. Republican Senator Richard Shelby, the committee's chairman, said he was worried at

the CIA's 'visible role'. 'We want to know how it is going to work, how long the CIA will be involved, how much it's going to cost and what are the dangers to the American lives here.'

Agreeing to work under the direct supervision of the CIA confirms Arafat's transformation into little more than a chief of police working to suppress opposition to the policies of the Israeli regime, US imperialism and the Arab bourgeois leaderships. This makes a mockery of the PLO's stated goal of establishing an 'independent' Palestinian homeland on the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza. What possible progressive significance could a state that emerges on such foundations have?

Arafat has vowed that, 'We will not allow anyone, no matter who, to endanger this peace.' This will inevitably bring the PLO into violent conflict with the Palestinian working class and peasantry, whose conditions of poverty and deprivation have worsened since the Palestinian Authority was established. The most graphic expression of what is to come was Sunday's killing of a teenager by the Palestinian Authority police. This took place during a weapons search of the local headquarters of Arafat's own movement, Al Fatah, in line with his promise to disarm the Palestinian people. The next day hundreds of youth marched through Ramallah in protest, denouncing Palestinian security chiefs as agents of the CIA.

Arafat has also begun a clampdown against his organised political opponents, detaining almost a dozen journalists and Hamas supporters, as well as clerics and the Islamic Jihad group leader Sheikh Nafez Azzam. Journalists in Gaza struck when they were told that, effective immediately, they needed permission from the Palestinian Authority before they could cover events dealing with politics or security.

Netanyahu initially expressed hostility to the Oslo peace process, negotiated by the previous Labour government. His governing party, Likud, is politically beholden to extreme right-wing layers of settlers and religious zealots. These forces have been cultivated over several decades as a result of Israel's role as a military bastion of US and world imperialist interests in the Middle East. This narrow layer exercises an extraordinary influence on official policy.

But Netanyahu was forced to shift his position due to the fundamental economic concerns of the Israeli bourgeoisie and the pressure exerted by the US. Israel is desperate to break out of its economic isolation within the Middle East and attract international investment. GDP has fallen from 4.5 percent in 1996 to 1.9 percent last year. Netanyahu's new budget predicts another decline. This month the shekel was devalued by 10 percent against the dollar, boosting inflation.

The Israeli bourgeoisie is seeking to overcome its strategic difficulties by refashioning Israel as the economic hub of the Middle East. This requires the establishment of a new *modus vivendi* with the Arab states.

Even the powerful military industrial complex supports a settlement of the 'Palestinian question'.

Open trade has been established with Egypt and Jordan, and foreign investment increased in Israel from \$400 million in 1993 to \$2.4 billion in 1996. At a recent business meeting celebrating Israel's 50th anniversary attended by Netanyahu, plans were discussed for 'privatising peace'. On the table were several joint ventures with Arab business partners, including the establishment of an industrial park in Gaza.

The presence of King Hussein at the Wye Plantation talks reflects the desire of the Arab bourgeoisie for a normalisation of economic and political relations. Washington sees this as central to its own interests. At a meeting of the State Department on Monday, assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk told the ambassadors of Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates that it was time to end the 'hands off approach' they have adopted to the 'peace process' since Netanyahu came to power.

The majority of Israelis, anxious to see an end to conflict, have welcomed the accord, with polls showing three-quarters of the public in support. But it will do nothing to resolve the social and political problems faced by Jewish workers. Should a deal with the PLO succeed in attracting investment and open up trade with the Arab countries, there will be further demands that working people accept cuts in social provisions and wages in order to compete effectively for new markets.

This is under conditions of a growing polarisation between rich and poor that has brought with it a degree of social deprivation unseen since Israel's founding. Unemployment, once virtually unknown, will rise next year to as much as 9.3 percent. The real figure is likely to be much higher.

Since he came to power, Netanyahu has implemented major cuts in social provisions and launched a privatisation programme in the state-sector. This has sparked labor disputes and mass protests. A student strike is currently taking place against the rising cost of education.

The resentment of Sephardic Jews from the Arab world against the European Jewish establishment has grown more pronounced. Ethiopian Jews have rioted against their status as second-class citizens. Major demographic changes, such as the influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, have exacerbated the tensions produced by the growing economic crisis.

Israeli workers are confronted with the growth of extreme right-wing forces. Fanatically anti-Arab settler elements have carried out a series of terrorist acts against Palestinians, and were responsible for the 1995 assassination of Israeli Labour Prime Minister Yitzakh Rabin. Ultra-Orthodox political parties have successfully imposed religious law in areas previously deemed secular, including administrative control over births, marriages and burial arrangements. Communities are bitterly divided between Orthodox and secular Jews.

In an attempt to placate the far right, Netanyahu appointed former Minister of Defence Ariel Sharon to head the Israeli delegation. Sharon was implicated in the massacre of thousands of Palestinian refugees at the Sabra and Shatila camps in Lebanon in 1982. Netanyahu even made a last minute show of refusing to endorse the Maryland accord unless Jonathan Pollard--a US naval officer who spied for Israel and became a *cause célèbre* of the Israeli right--was released from jail.

These gestures notwithstanding, protests and violent clashes are being staged against the accord led by ultra-nationalist and fascistic forces.

Social contradictions in the Gaza and West Bank are no less explosive. Unemployment rates vary between 16 and 33 percent, depending on whether workers have access to jobs in Israel. Less than a third of those employed work in regular, well paid jobs. Most are self-employed or involved in unpaid family work, particularly women. Poverty is widespread, yet amidst all this a layer of businessmen and government officials, including leading representatives of the PLO, have grown rich.

The class content of the PLO's bourgeois nationalist programme has

become ever more apparent. The joint ventures planned with Israel, the Arab states and the US are the initial development of a free trade zone adjacent to the major markets of the Middle East, in which the Palestinian bourgeoisie is offering up workers under its control as a source of cheap labour.

Neither the Maryland agreement nor its Oslo predecessor addresses the desperate plight facing Arab workers and peasants or the worsening conditions of Israeli workers. What is being attempted is the establishment of a new order drawn up by, and for, the most privileged layers. The Wye Plantation Accord testifies to the political impasse facing the Arab and Jewish masses. All attempts to overcome the social and historical problems facing the region's people from a nationalist standpoint have failed.

The fundamental division in the Middle East is not between Arab and Jew, but between social classes. None of the problems facing working people can be resolved while a small minority monopolise the wealth and the means of its creation, and the region remains carved up into rival nations under the economic and political domination of the imperialist powers.

It is a historic irony with tragic overtones that Zionism has associated a people who have suffered terrible persecution with the suppression of the democratic rights of another, the Palestinians. Jewish workers have paid a heavy price for this, with the dominance of reactionary political and social forces and decades of hostility from their Arab neighbours.

The PLO's perspective of forming a new capitalist state through a redivision of the Middle East has proved incapable of realising the strivings of the Palestinian workers and oppressed masses for freedom and equality. Hamas offers no alternative, with its call for the creation of an Islamic state based on the same economic foundations.

An end to poverty and unemployment and their attendant social scourges requires a reorganisation of economic and social life based on the principle of social equality. Historical experience has demonstrated again and again--in the Balkans, Ireland, Africa and the Middle East itself--that ethnic, national and religious antagonisms cannot be overcome through agreements imposed from above. Such divisions can be overcome only by uniting all of the oppressed, Arab and Jewish, under the leadership of the working class, in a struggle against imperialist domination and the profit system.

Only a struggle for socialism--for a United Socialist States of the Middle East--can open the way for a genuine democratic development, based on a rational and humane mobilization of the vast natural and human resources of the region in the interests of the whole population. This means above all establishing the political independence of Arab and Jewish workers from the all of the representatives of bourgeois rule.

See Also:

Fifty years since Israel's founding

[29 May 1998]

After the PLO debacle: Arab and Jewish workers need a new program of struggle

[20 September 1993]



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact