

Israeli students mobilise against the ever-higher cost of education

Amitt Landau
11 November 1998

The following article was submitted to the WSWS by a reader in Israel.

On October 25 more than 200,000 students from Israel's universities and colleges began an unlimited strike. Students are not paying studying fees and have blocked the entrances to universities, allowing only workers past their picket lines. Large tents (in which students stay 24 hours a day) were set up near the universities and demonstrations have been held in all major cities. On November 9 dozens of students began a hunger strike.

The students' demands are for a 50 percent reduction in studying fees, and special loans for living expenses, up to \$9,300 a year, that will be returned a few years after graduation, according to each student's ability.

Student fees in Israel's universities are approximately \$2,300 per year. The average expenditure for students--including studying fees, living expenses, municipal taxes, etc.--is \$850 a month. The minimum wage for students is \$3.60 per hour. Most students are not financially supported by their parents and need to work about 220 hours a month in order to live, which leaves them little time for their studies or leisure activities.

Before 1984 higher education cost half of what it does today in real terms. At that time, when Israel was suffering from 400 percent annual inflation, the government started applying extreme neo-liberal 'stabilising measures' as recommended by the International Monetary Fund's Stanley Fisher. The measures succeeded in reducing inflation, but resulted in unemployment, the erosion of welfare services, social polarisation and higher education fees.

Since its foundation in 1948, Israel has been involved in constant wars with its neighbours. The outcome is a militaristic society, indifferent to social questions, in

which those on the 'left' and 'right' in politics are mainly defined according to their views on peace and national security questions. Since the Labour Party has embraced neo-liberal policies, the masses have become alienated from the so-called 'left'. Many students tend to follow the chauvinist demagoguery of the right, and view the 'left' as rich, patronising, self-interested, and, in national security matters, even treacherous.

One of the student leaders' main concerns is to ensure that their struggle is not seen as 'leftist' or left-wing. Up to now 91 percent of Israelis have registered support for the students' demands, and the strike leaders have stressed that nothing must be done to endanger this consensus. One of the popular slogans one can hear in the demonstrations is 'No Politics!' While making vague references to 'social justice', they refrain from mentioning the increasing 9.5 percent unemployment, the huge polarisation in wage levels, the government's responsibility for the collapse of the national health system, the gross discrimination against Israeli-Arabs, and the degrading exploitation of the 200,000 non-Israeli workers in Israel.

A victory for the students could trigger a more general social struggle by the working class. But the first cracks have started to appear in the strike. Some, especially amongst post-graduate students, have called for an end to the action, since it has not achieved its goals. In the coming negotiations with the treasury, the deputy minister, Mr. Ne'eman, will no doubt utilise this in order to put more pressure on the students to abandon their struggle. A government victory would be a harsh blow against future social struggles in Israel.

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[29 October 1998]



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