On-the-spot report from Israel

Students strike enters fifth week

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21 November 1998

The World Socialist Web Site *has received the following report from a correspondent in Israel.*

On November 17, 20,000 students, lecturers, teenagers and parents held a mass rally in Jerusalem's Safra Square to demand a cut in university tuition fees. The Israeli students strike is about to enter its fifth week.

'These thousands are a clear signal to the prime minister: the war on higher education has begun and we will get the people out on to the streets, because the public is with the students,' student leader Yoav Heller said. The striking student leaders put off a meeting with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, because the latter scheduled the meeting to coincide with the rally.

The students strike has led to bitter recriminations from the government. Minister of Finance Ne'eman accused the professors who are supporting the students of 'Bolshevism,' and claims that Israeli universities are run 'as in the Middle Ages' (a rather strange remark for an orthodox religious person).

Netanyahu attacked Defense Minister Mordechai, who met with the students' representatives, and denounced him for 'breaking the government's united front.'

At the same time 20 students out of 60 hunger strikers have collapsed and been taken to hospital. A lecturer of history from Be'er Sheba University has also joined the hunger strike.

After media and government denunciations that the students were spoiled and self-centred, and that their struggle was an upper-middle-class one, the atmosphere in demonstrations has become more militant. The strike leaders have begun to emphasise the connection between the inaccessibility of higher education and unemployment, and have attacked the social polarisation taking place in Israel.

At the same time, officials from the Labor Party and the trade unions have postured as defenders of the students. One of the major speakers at Wednesday's rally was Amir Peretz, general secretary of the Histadrut, the trade union confederation. Peretz promised the students the support of Israeli workers. He said that in the coming negotiations between the Histadrut and the treasury on compensation for the recent wage erosion, the workers would donate 0.25 percent of their wages to the higher education system.

This step would reduce the cost of the students' demands from the government by some 40 percent. Peretz also threatened that if the government continued to oppose the students' demands a general strike by workers would take place next week.

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