

Israeli student strike ends in failure

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The following article was submitted to the World Socialist Web Site by a reader in Israel.

Forty-four days after the beginning of the biggest student strike Israel has ever known the students have returned to their studies with a bitter taste of failure: 'We have decided to return to the universities now, because of the obtuseness of the government and of the prime minister,' National Union of Israeli Students Chairman Li'or Rothbart said at a press conference last week. The Treasury had proved stronger than Netanyahu, he said.

Refusing to sign the government proposal, Rothbart promised to continue the struggle from inside the campuses. Tel-Aviv University Students Union leader Erez Eshel announced he would take personal responsibility for the failure and resign.

The strike began in October with great militancy and enthusiasm. It led to more than 600 students being detained and 50 wounded by police violence. But the strike lost its momentum in the last few weeks, with fewer students on the streets, and growing opposition to the strike within the students' ranks. Student leaders accused Netanyahu of spreading misinformation in the media in order to confuse the students and break them.

Almost none of the students' demands have been fully achieved. The main demand for a 50 percent unconditional and universal reduction of tuition fees has ended in a poor compromise. Less than 20 percent of the students will have the possibility of enjoying that reduction, within two years from now, on condition that they volunteer for five hours weekly work for the 'state project on children's education'.

Student requests for the government to widen the arrangement to other social activities as well, so that more students are able to join it, or to recognise long military reserve service as social work, have been refused. The government has also refused to allow students the requested \$9,000 annual loans for living

expenses. They have allowed loans for tuition fees only, which must be paid back within one year after graduation, plus 3 percent interest.

Another attempt by the students to increase the number of dormitories has ended in a promise by the Treasury 'to check the possibility'.

The failure of the student strike can be expected to have a demoralising impact on other groups considering similar action in the short-term. The Treasury has proved its strong, unbreakable patience and its mastery of manipulating exhausting negotiations.

In the long-term, however, the continuous strike may prove fruitful in one aspect. For the first time it has seriously established an alliance of Israeli students and workers. The Histadrut (Israeli Trade Union Confederation) supported the strike, supplying the strikers with material help. Students were also supported by the unemployed movement. This collaboration included a joint demonstration of students and unemployed in the depressed southern town of Qiryat-Gat on 25 November. Declaring they are for 'social revolution', the student leaders promised to keep that co-operation going. Still, it is not yet clear whether Israeli students, who have been showing social indifference for years, will take the challenge and go onto the streets for their new allies.

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