

Sharon government scapegoats foreign workers in Israel

Harvey Thompson
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The start of 2002 saw a dramatic escalation in the victimisation, legal targeting and expulsion of migrant workers by the Israeli government.

Following an announced crackdown on migrant workers, together with a total ban on the entry of any new workers, on January 1 by Labour and Social Affairs Minister Shlomo Benizri of the right-wing orthodox Shas party, a massive dragnet operation began on the streets of Tel Aviv. Seven teams comprising 50 policemen, 50 Labour Ministry and 12 Interior Ministry officials trawled through the districts of Israel's largest city rounding up illegal foreign residents and detaining them pending deportation. After Tel Aviv the teams moved from south to north, operating throughout the country's major cities.

The stated goal of the operation is to facilitate the deportation of at least 1,000 workers each month. In addition, the ministry said, most of the foreign construction workers who are in possession of valid work and residency permits would be asked to leave the country as soon as possible. Government officials expressed their hope that the fear of detention will motivate "illegal" workers to return home on their own initiative.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is keeping a close personal watch on the dragnet operation. At Sharon's request, the cabinet recently approved a motion requiring Benizri to present ministers with regular reports on the expulsions. Sharon is believed to have wanted to accelerate the campaign so that some 10,000 workers would be deported each month. The police, however, pointed out that such an increased pace would require a far larger budget allocation and would not be practical.

The clampdown has had a devastating effect on Israel's estimated 300,000 migrant workers, forcing many to go underground. Hanna Zohar, manager of Kav Le'Oved (Workers Hotline), which provides counselling and advocate services for foreign workers said: "There is fear in the streets ... People are hiding. I have people calling me asking if I think it will be safe for them to go to church on Sunday."

On January 16, during the Supreme Court debate on a petition filed by the Building Contractors' Union, Benizri made another policy announcement. All foreign workers from the building industry, who had permits to work until the end of 2001, would have to leave Israel immediately. Only 18,000 (half the original number) would be allowed to stay until the end of February.

According to the latest figures, the overall number of foreign workers granted temporary work permits will be reduced to 48,000, excluding those caring for the elderly, whose numbers remain unrestricted. At present 45,000 foreign workers are allowed to work in construction and 22,000 in agriculture.

The Employment Bureau has proposed that in future, only agencies will be allowed to supply foreign workers. It also proposed that foreign workers in the building industry should have their permits extended until the end of May and after they leave Israel, 23,000 new workers would be brought by the agencies to replace them in accordance with the new quota.

Such erratic policy shifts have caused unease amongst sections of the Israeli government. The deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Office, Yuri Stern, last week called the official pronouncements "absurd and harmful." Stern was chairman of the Committee on Foreign Workers in the last Knesset.

The Association of Contractors and Builders (ABC) has complained that Benizri's announcement effectively transformed around 900 building contractors into criminals, guilty of employing newly deemed "illegal" foreign labour. Shmuel Olpiner, president of the ABC, said the decision spelled "the downfall of the construction sector in Israel."

Benizri has repeatedly stressed that the government's present campaign against foreign workers will ultimately reduce unemployment in Israel. But there are some academic critics who have questioned this rationale and pointed to the underlying racism and nationalism motivating the government's campaign. Dr. Ephraim Tabory, a lecturer in sociology at Bar-Ilan University, says: "The underlying agenda is preserving the Jewish identity of the state. One of the issues that has really worried the Shas Party are the foreign workers who are intending to stay here long-term as guest workers, and that have children studying in Jewish schools and are becoming part of Jewish society."

Hanna Zohar, director of Kav Le'Oved, pointed to the curious legal form of "bonded-labour" that exists in Israel, whereby if a foreign worker should lose his or her job for whatever reason, they automatically become an "illegal". A substantial part of migrant labour to Israel comes from China. Chinese workers pay dearly for the right to work in Israel. Most pay Chinese employment agencies up to \$8,000 (equivalent to several years' wages in China) calculating that they will be able to repay the loans in their new jobs. But employers often confiscate passports on arrival to prevent their new employees from leaving, avoid paying the legal minimum wage or renege on agreements signed in China.

After years of exploiting cheap foreign labour, in both its "legal" and "illegal" forms, the Israeli state is seeking to curtail further immigration as the country faces its worst economic downturn in almost half a century. Gross domestic product fell by half a percent in 2001, the weakest figure since 1953. On January 16, the Central Bureau of Statistics announced that the number of unemployed Israelis had risen to 9.9 percent of the civilian workforce by the end of

November 2001. Over 250,000 Israelis are currently out of work and government officials expect this number to rise steadily during the coming year. A total of 49,995 Israelis joined the ranks of the unemployed in 2001.

2001 saw the Israeli economy experience a significant slowdown in its high-tech industries. According to a recent survey based on job advertisements, demand for jobs in the high-tech sector fell an unprecedented 51.7 percent in 2001, compared to 2000. The second worst hit sector was engineering, with a 30.1 percent decline in demand for workers. Throughout all industries demand for workers fell by around 30 percent in 2001. Dalia Narkis, manager of Manpower Israel said: "In 2001 we had a recession in economic activity, with worker demand similar to that found in 1997."

Due to the crisis in high-tech industries, the number of college graduates seeking work rose dramatically by 35 percent, reaching 23,700 by the end of December compared to the corresponding month in 2000. On a monthly average, the number of unemployed college graduates has risen by 2.9 percent, higher than any other sector. They currently account for some 20 percent of all job seekers.

Wages in the contract work sector fell by up to 33 percent in 2001, according to a survey of 3,000 workers employed in all fields. Rafi Elimelech of L.M. Personnel Services, which conducted the survey, said that the sharpest fall was seen in the support jobs for computing where net wages dropped to NIS 9,000 (\$US1,930) from NIS 12,000 in January 2001. According to the survey, a manager's wage had dropped to NIS 22,000, down from NIS 27,000, while sales staff wages had dropped from NIS 8,500 in 2001 to NIS 7,000 in January 2002.

With some irony, given the government's campaign of expulsions, the two main areas that bucked the employment trend were construction and agriculture. Demand for construction workers surged 78.6 percent in the final quarter of last year. Contractors say that with the shortage of Palestinian workers in the past year because of the *Intifada*, the current quota of 48,000 foreigners is insufficient.

Shortages in the agricultural sector prompted Agriculture Minister Shalom Simhon of the Labor Party to walk out of the cabinet last week, after ministers rejected his request for 4,000 more foreign workers. Simhon said there is currently a lack of some 6,000 workers, which is causing severe damage to the agricultural sector. Simhon's motion was voted down 11-8. Among those opposed were Finance Minister Silvan Shalom of Sharon's Likud party and Benizri, who claimed there were enough workers in the country to fill these positions.

The government is seeking to extricate itself from the present economic crisis by scapegoating those most vulnerable in Israeli society. Aside from migrant labour, Arab and Bedouin workers suffer the greatest levels of discrimination and unemployment. At the end of December, 15 "unemployment hubs" reported a jobless rate of 10 percent or higher.

Benizri has continually sought to play foreign and Israeli workers off against one another. In a recent speech on unemployment, he insisted, "The main problem we are dealing with right now is reducing our dependence on foreign workers ... It is shameful that Israel is number two on the list of [Western] countries with the highest proportions of foreign workers."

The government's campaign is being supported by the rightwing of the Zionist establishment, who link the attack on foreign workers with demands for an offensive against the jobs and social conditions of the Israeli working class.

Leora Eren-Beardstulem writing Posin the on argued: "[T]he current campaign will be futile if Israel doesn't stop the entry of new foreign workers—and make it less worthwhile for employers to hire them."

Barbara Swirski, director of the Adva Centre, a social affairs think tank, complained that work now performed mainly by migrant workers, such as construction and agriculture, were once the most prestigious and high-paying positions in the nascent Israeli state.

"Building a state," she said, "was once taken literally to mean building cities brick by brick and there was great honour and good compensation in doing that." This all changed after the Six Day War, according to Swirski. "In 1967 we got an influx of Palestinian workers willing to work for much less, allowing employers to lower costs and raise profits."

In 1992, when Palestinian workers were deemed a security threat, then-prime minister Yitzhak Rabin allowed in more foreign workers. More followed in the wake of the Palestinian uprising beginning in September 2000.

Swirski concluded her diatribe with the ominous statement that the "policy of bringing in foreign workers to satisfy the greed of employers has done us in as a society" and "driven down salaries in the whole economy." Her answer to the problem was for cuts in the wages of Israeli workers. "If the country really wants to get rid of foreign workers," she said, "the best and easiest way to do that is to enforce the minimum wage law equally for everyone—Israeli and foreign workers alike. Then employers will have no incentive to hire a foreign worker over an Israeli one."

Economist Jonathan Lipow, the vice president of the Bank of America securities in Israel, has called on the government to go much further with a US/European-style gutting of the Israeli social benefit system. Lipow claims it is "not worthwhile" for many Israelis to work and bemoaned the fact that as yet, Israeli workers are not ready to accept poverty wages. "In many cases, we're talking about skilled Israeli workers who used to do jobs for NIS 8,000 a month that are now done by Romanians and Palestinians for NIS 5,000 a month ... Construction may not have the prestige that it once did, but I don't see any reason why Israelis wouldn't do that work for a decent salary."



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