Protest by Israeli reservists opens new chapter in the struggle against Zionism

Chris Marsden
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Close to 200 Israeli military reservists are now refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In a few short weeks, a movement that started with just two officers, David Sonnschein and Yaniv Itzkovitz, posting a note at Tel Aviv University offering support for those unwilling to serve in the Occupied Territories has become a rallying point for hitherto inarticulate opposition to the Sharon government.

The reservists, mainly officers and combat veterans, have decried Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's offensive against the Palestinian Authority as having "nothing to do with the security of our country". Its sole purpose, they insist, is to perpetuate "our control over the Palestinian people" at a price of "the corruption of the entire Israeli society". Some of those who have been dubbed "refuseniks" have given harrowing accounts of the violent repression of the Palestinians, including shooting at women and children and forcing unarmed people to pick up objects that might be bombs. "We were raised to be officers with values, and they've turned us into combatants who deal in bloodshed and war crimes," said Lt. David Sonnschein, a 28-year-old software engineer and one of the founders of the movement.

The courageous stand taken by the reservists has been met with vitriolic condemnation and threats of reprisals from the government, the military and the far-right parties. All the original 50 signatories, including Sonnschein and Itzkovitz, have been relieved of their command positions and could face jail sentences. Army Chief Lt. General Shaul Mofaz has warned that if the protesters were "ideologically motivated" by a political view that Jewish settlements should be abandoned and the occupied territories handed to the Palestinians, then "this is not only refusal but grave sedition. In my eyes, it's more than refusal to serve, it's incitement to rebellion," he said. "There is no more serious act than that."

Despite this level of political intimidation, support for the protest keeps growing. A poll conducted for Israel radio found that 31 percent of Israelis supported the protesting officers. Other protests have also gravitated to the reservists' stance. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel announced that it would give free legal aid to any soldier who refused to carry out a morally illegal order. Yesh Gvul (There is a limit!), a group that counsels individual soldiers on refusing to serve in the West Bank and Gaza, said that more than 400 Israelis have refused to serve in the occupied territories since the current *intifada* erupted. Ever since the reservists' protest it has been inundated with calls from reservists, their wives and mothers asking for advice.

Spokesman Ishai Menuvhin said that in his view, "the reaction of the army shows that it is in panic."

The reservists are not the first to have raised a voice in protest, but it is they who have succeeded in sparking the first major public debate on Israeli war crimes since the present *intifada* began 16 months ago. This has been helped by the fact that they are serving officers, who have acted out of conscience after having been told to commit atrocities. This has lent enormous moral authority to what they say. But the major reason for the impact of the officers' protest is that, unlike during the first *intifada* a decade ago, organised opposition to the military repression of the Palestinians has been virtually nonexistent.

The stand taken by the reservists has revealed the real state of political and social relations in Israel—the true extent of opposition to Sharon's war on the Palestinian people—in contrast to the opinion polls supposedly proving overwhelming support for the government's actions. It proves that the wholesale capitulation of the official liberal left to Sharon was not, as they claimed, because of an overwhelming popular belief that the survival of Israel was imperilled. Rather than the millions of Israeli workers, students, youth and intellectuals who

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once supported efforts to secure a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians having been won to the bloodthirsty agenda of Likud, their views have been denied expression due to the virtual collapse of the Israeli peace movement. Crucial to this has been the decision of the Labour Party to join Sharon's coalition.

The reservist have thus performed an invaluable political service in exposing the rank cowardice and political treachery of the Labour Party, and of Foreign Minister Shimon Peres in particular—who has acted as the chief apologist for Sharon's war-crimes on the domestic and international arena. In doing so, the officers' protest has raised fundamental questions of political strategy and orientation for the Israeli, Arab and international working class.

The refuseniks have insisted on their loyalty to the state of Israel and commitment to Zionism. They limit themselves to a call for a return to the pre-1967 Israeli borders and a peaceful coexistence of two states, Jewish and Palestinian. However, this cannot provide a viable basis for opposing Sharon's brutal treatment of the Palestinians and the drive to consolidate Israeli control of the Occupied Territories.

It is impossible to reconcile loyalty to Zionism and the Israeli state with a consistent defence of democratic ideals. The 1967 War and subsequent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip were a turning point in Israel's emergence as an aggressive and expansionist regional power. Its military/political dictatorship over the Palestinians has placed Jewish workers permanently at odds with their Arab brothers and sisters and provided the far right with a vital social base amongst the settler population.

But the expansionist turn by Israel flowed from the very nature of the Zionist project, based as it was on the premise that creating a religious-based state would provide the only basis for the free cultural and social development of the Jewish people. Israel's founders fulfilled their aims through the forcible expulsion of the British protectorate of Palestine's Arab inhabitants. They created a state in which anti-Arab discrimination was built into its very foundations and all aspects of social and political life were scarred and deformed.

Whatever the political and ideological confusion evinced by the reservists, their actions objectively challenge the very foundations of Zionism—built as it is on the assertion of the primacy of a Jewish identity over all other political and social considerations.

That such a powerful expression of democratic and progressive sentiment has arisen within the army of occupation itself—and that this finds widespread support amongst Jewish workers—also serves as an indictment of every variety of Arab nationalism.

Whether it is the secular stance of Yassir Arafat's Fatah or the Islamic fundamentalists of Hamas, no Palestinian group is capable of making a genuine political appeal for unity between the Jewish and Arab working class. As bourgeois nationalist movements, their aim is to secure the right of the Palestinian elite to share in the exploitation of the Arab workers and peasants. This places an absolute limit on their conflict with the Israeli bourgeoisie, in that nothing must be done that throws into question the survival of the capitalist order in the Middle East.

Whether or not the various Palestinian groups accept the right of Israel to exist, they all defend the existence of the Arab bourgeois regimes and view the appearance of a class-based movement that cuts across national, ethnic and religious divisions as an anathema. This organic hostility to the unity of Jewish and Arab workers finds its most degenerate expression in terrorist bombings targeting Israel's civilian population, which their authors seek to justify by asserting that all Jews share the guilt of the Israeli state for the oppression of the Palestinians.

By opposing the brutalisation of the Palestinian masses and appealing for mutual tolerance and respect, the officers' protest offers a pledge for the future. It indicates that the conditions are emerging for a reorientation of the Israeli working class on a new and opposed perspective to Zionist nationalism, one that sets out to unite the Arab and Jewish working class on the basis of socialist internationalism. It opens up a new and exciting chapter in the struggle of the peoples of the Middle East for their social and political emancipation.

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