

Interview with Israeli refusenik: "We can put in place a new leadership"

David Cohen in Israel
29 June 2002

Israel's Supreme Court ordered on June 25 that an Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) officer be released from military jail, despite completing only 13 days of a 35-day sentence for refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories. First Lieutenant David Zonshein, 29, a co-founder of the *Courage to Refuse* group, was jailed on June 13 after he disobeyed a call-up notice ordering him to serve in the territories. He was subject to a disciplinary hearing by his commanding officer, without legal counsel. His release came after the Supreme Court decided to postpone a ruling on an appeal by Zonshein to stand trial before a military tribunal. Under Supreme Court regulations, the verdict handed down in the disciplinary hearing was deemed to be invalid, as it was not accompanied by any explanation of the decision.

His supporters met Zonshein's release with cheers and applause. His attorney argued that the court should really issue a ruling on whether a democratic state should grant its citizens the right to voice their arguments in a judicial framework, especially when they are facing a potential jail sentence.

The *Courage to Refuse* movement started out in January 2002 as a letter signed by 35 reserve soldiers, declaring they would not serve in the West Bank and Gaza because they believed the Israeli occupation was illegitimate and its military actions immoral.

Amit Mashlach, a spokesman for the group, told *Haaretz* newspaper that to date 88 group members had disobeyed call-up notices and been summoned to disciplinary hearings in front of their commanding officers. "All of them received the maximum sentence of 35 days, after a 10-minute hearing," he explained.

Yesh Gvul ("There is a Border") reports that many other reservists and soldiers have been jailed, including Sgt. First Class Amit Bar-Tzedek, an Armoured Corps

reservist, who was sentenced on June 16 to a 21-day confinement (until July 11) at a tank base in eastern Galilee (This is his second sentence for refusal to serve in the Occupied Territories, after being jailed for 28 days in February-March 2001). Infantry First Sgt. (res.) Guy Rozin, (Military ID 3777618) was sentenced on June 16 to 28 days.

There are nine refuseniks currently serving prison sentences, a reduction from the record total of 69 jailed in April, when 'Operation Defensive Shield' involved a massive emergency call-up of reservists.

AR is a 28-year old young man, who recently signed on the *Courage to Refuse* letter. He spoke with a *World Socialist Web Site* correspondent in Israel. A few details in his biography were changed at his request.

WSWS: Tell us about yourself.

AR: I served all my life in the IDF and every time I came to accomplish my duties. I am proud to be a Jew and I believe in the need that Israel will be a Jewish and democratic state. Therefore I think that Sharon's policy, with the support of US president, can only cause damage to Israel's chance to protect itself and be a part of the region. I think that the occupation is causing nothing but despair and hatred among the Arab population. Thirty-five years of occupation are the reason why young men and women blow themselves up in our towns and cities. But I think that their actions are disqualified from the moral point of view. When we struggled for our national liberation during the 1930s and the 1940s, we did not commit suicide bombings. Nevertheless, I think that in order to encourage intellectuals who will advance a moral way for the Arabs, we need to get out of their homes and lands.

WSWS: How do you see the present conflict in Palestine?

AR: I don't believe in Yasser Arafat's leadership and

I believe that his refusal to accept Barak's proposals at Camp David was the reason why Sharon received massive support in the elections of February 2001. Nevertheless, I urge my people to leave the Occupied Territories—not for the Palestinian's sake, but for our sake. Thirty-five years of occupation did not serve even one goal of Zionism. We need to defend ourselves from the borders of June 1967, and not occupy lands that do not belong to us. We certainly have a historic connection to Judea and Samaria [the West Bank], and I know that you and your tendency reject Zionism and our historic privilege to have a Jewish state in the land of Israel.

WSWS : We think that the future of the Jewish and Arab workers and youth should be based upon a socialist, democratic and secular solution.

AR: I think that the unification of Israel's and Palestine's inhabitants is only a matter of time, but we need at least one or two decades in order to start thinking about one state, especially when we know that in spite of Israel's mistakes, it has a democratic tradition. Is Arafat better than Saddam Hussein or Bashar el-Assad? He is less corrupt, because he has less power than them. I think that you cannot hurry along history; there are stages, and you must consider those stages.

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I believe that we should recognize the fact that there are two nations in Eretz Israel [the land of Israel] and we must go forward with a two-states solution. I don't believe that Arafat can carry out this historic compromise; neither Arafat nor Ariel Sharon is looking for a common future. Both of them are living in a past of national symbols. We need a new leadership, and I mean we—Israelis and Palestinians.

WSWS : What motivated you to refuse to serve in the territories?

AR: I accept the argument that in a democratic state, you should accept decisions arrived at by the majority of the citizens. But if we are occupying another nation for 35 years, why shouldn't we give it the right to participate in the decision-making process? Israel refuses to accept international law; it doesn't have sovereignty over the Occupied Territories. I will serve my people, my country, my state—from its recognised borders.

WSWS: Do you define yourself as a Zionist?

AR: I am a Zionist who strives to have a democratic-Jewish state. For me, the two things can't be separated. Politicians like Efi Eitam [chairman of the National Religious Party] are distorting Zionism's goals. Although we are a minority, the reservists started only with a few tens of people, and today they are hundreds. I think that we can put in place a new leadership. After the Labour Party decided to side with Sharon, the left in Israel needs new leaders—young people, social-democrats, who are ready to fight for the future of their nation with a lot of courage, morality and confidence in the historic role of a democratic Israel in the Middle East.

WSWS: As a reservist, as a refusenik, what message would you offer to the Palestinian people?

I think that the Palestinians need to learn from us in order to build a common future; only by struggle of Jews and Arabs for two states and the mutual right for self-determination can we offer a just future to our families and children.



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