Israel: Public sector strike and protests against austerity budget

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The Histadrut trade union federation has threatened to expand its public sector strike following the failure of negotiations with the Finance Ministry on October 14. Garbage continues to pile up in the streets and many kindergartens are disrupted by the absence of teachers' aides. In addition, sanctions have been extended at government hospitals.

Shlomo Shani, the head of Histadrut's Trade Unions department, has warned that if no agreement is reached on workers' demands, workers employed at ports and government companies will join the strike. Other possible targets include rail, the post office and the state phone company Bezeq.

Employers' representatives told the press that a cost-of-living pay increase would only be agreed if Histadrut agreed to a three-way package with the government and employers. Employers want an agreement from Histadrut not to hold any more strikes until 2004. The government's part of such a deal would be to curb increases in taxes and fees and to reinstate subsidies for employer payments to the National Insurance Institution.

The wage strike takes place against a background of mounting economic hardship for Israeli workers. The Labor and Social Affairs Ministry estimates that only 20,000 new jobs will be created during the coming year. Its latest report indicates that 419,000 families depend on some form of social assistance, made up of some 1,127,000 individuals out of a total population of just over six million. Between June 2001 and June 2002, the number of families who sought social welfare help rose 5.9 percent compared to 2.7 percent in the same period the previous year.

On October 14, hundreds of activists from social organisations gathered in the Israeli parliament (Knesset) hall to protest the proposed 2003 state budget. Senior Knesset members from the Labor Party, the main coalition partner of Ariel Sharon's Likud, and the liberal opposition party Meretz attended the meeting which was filled with vehement attacks on the government's economic policies. The meeting signalled the start of the social organisations' campaign to block approval of the 2003 budget. In weeks to come, activists in the campaign plan to lobby all 120 MKs and try to persuade them not to approve the budget.

Up to now, activists in the campaign have held weekly protest vigils in front of the Likud Finance Minister Silvan Shalom's home, as well as protest rallies in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Participants at the Knesset rally represented a wide scope of opinions and organisations. Protesters came from groups that represent the Arab sector, the ultra-Orthodox, the homeless and the unemployed.

Eran, a social activist, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "I believe that we have spent a lot of time in the streets and now it is the time to express our popular power by preventing our MKs from supporting Sharon's government. Our aim is to bring down this government, but this government is only a symbol. We need to carry forward the tasks of a workers' government, and that's why I am not in favour of replacing the current government by other government. The only way is to replace the regime, not the politicians."

Edna, a nurse in a public hospital, said, "This government is not investing even one shekel in the public health. We don't have money for medication. There is no money for new beds, and the patients are actually being tortured. How can we proceed in this way? I don't think that there is much of a difference between the Labor and the Likud, and that's why I

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refuse to accept any political intervention from politicians who are members of this party. Neither Meretz nor the Communist Party represent alternatives for me. I didn't believe that I'd ever say this, but today the call for revolution is attracting me. We need to build a workers' party as soon as possible, which will fight for our own interests."

Muhammad, a 27-year-old student, said, "I am coming from a communist family and we don't have any illusions about the nature of capitalist Israeli society. Nevertheless, the current crisis was one of my best teachers in understanding economic reality and its political implications. As a daily reader of the *World Socialist Web Site*, I am happy that you have come to this demo in order to cover our protest, so any person across the globe will understand why we wants to bring down this government. The answer to the current crisis is to drive forward the task of building a workers' party. Today, we need to discuss the alternative and the core of any genuine alternative to capitalism is—as it was always—socialist ideas."

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