

Israel: An attempt to resuscitate the Labour Party

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Israel's Labour Party is again seeking to restore its tattered credentials as the party of peace, electing a "dove", Amram Mitzna, the Mayor of Haifa and a former general, to lead them into the general election due on January 28.

Mitzna replaces Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, who became party leader after the defeat of Ehud Barak's Labour government in February 2001 and served as Minister of Defence in Ariel Sharon's Likud-Labour coalition government—much to the increasing disquiet of Labour Party members. He quit the government last October amid mounting economic and social tensions, precipitating the collapse of Sharon's government and an early general election.

The peace camp won a decisive victory: Mitzna gained 54 percent of the vote that was split between Ben-Eliezer and Haim Ramon, a serving Knesset [parliament] member, and another nominally "dovish" candidate.

Mitzna's victory reflects the increasing social polarisation and alienation from the government's policies, which the Labour Party has loyally carried out.

Under the leadership of Shimon Peres and later Ben-Eliezer, the Labour Party had joined the minority Likud government headed by the war criminal Sharon whom Israel's own Kahan commission had said in 1983 was unfit to be a minister of state.

Peres, who shared the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize for helping to negotiate the 1993 Oslo Accords promising peace with Israel in return for the creation of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, gave a much-needed cover to Sharon's government as it proceeded to tear up the Accords. Peres and the Labour Party acted to deflect international criticism in Europe from Israel and Sharon. For 20 months, they acted as the chief apologists for the government's acts of brutality, its human rights abuses, war crimes against the Palestinians, the smashing up of the Palestinian Authority and reoccupation of the Palestinian territories.

Within Israel, the Labour leaders sought to stifle opposition to the government's policy. They liked to claim that they exerted a moderating influence on the Sharon government by arguing against the expansion of the settlements in the West Bank and Gaza. Nevertheless, the settlements continued to expand and the army, under Ben-Eliezer's command, defended them against the Palestinians whose land they had usurped.

Until recently the Labour leaders insisted that "security", a euphemism for war against the Palestinians, demanded economic sacrifice on the part of the working class, in the forms of jobs, wages and social conditions. That position has now become untenable. Firstly, the war has led to the loss of hundreds of Israeli lives, many young people. More than one quarter of the 2,200 killed thus far have

been Israelis. And there is a widespread perception that there is no military way out of the morass.

Secondly, the economic situation is becoming increasingly desperate. Foreign investment and tourism has plummeted. Unemployment and inflation is rising while economic growth has slumped, leading to a fiscal crisis and an austerity budget that places the full burden of the crisis on the working class.

Ben-Eliezer was forced to pull out of the Likud-Labour government due to the mounting opposition of broad sections of the working class to the government's austerity measures and its war against the Palestinians. Sharon's refusal to transfer some \$147 million from the settlements in the Occupied Territories to reinstate social welfare programmes was the final straw. To continue supporting the government would have consigned Labour to electoral oblivion.

Ben-Eliezer also hoped that his decision to quit the coalition over the issue of the settlements and distance himself from the government would boost his popularity in the party and help him retain the leadership in the contest against Mitzna. In the event, he was resoundingly defeated.

European leaders who fear that the reckless war drive of the Bush administration against Iraq will destabilise the whole region and jeopardise their own financial interests have warmly welcomed Mitzna's election. Indeed, Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, who is Washington's keenest supporter in Europe, has gone so far as to dispense with diplomatic protocol and invite Mitzna to London later this month, in an effort to raise his international standing and restart Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. According to international conventions, leaders say and do nothing that could influence elections in other countries. Thus inviting Mitzna, the leader of the opposition, is a significant rebuff to Sharon.

According to the Israeli peace movement, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak is considering inviting Mitzna to Cairo to discuss peace initiatives. Mubarak clearly sees in Mitzna a man willing to seek an accommodation with the Arab ruling class.

Within Israel, liberal circles have welcomed his election victory. Gush Shalom (Peace Block) said, "In what could be called a silent mass demonstration for peace, tens of thousands of Labour party members decided this week to give the newcomer a chance. The not so cautious Haifa Mayor Amram Mitzna had challenged the hawkish Ben-Eliezer as well as the balancing Haim Ramon with a more outspoken peace agenda than we remember ever anybody having succeeded with—in the race for the Labour Party leadership."

Mitzna has been avidly promoted by Labour's left wing in an effort to distance itself from those who joined the Likud-Labour coalition. He is closely connected to Israel's wealthy elite who did well out of

the post-Oslo rapprochement with the Arab regimes and view the recent deterioration of relations with Israel's neighbours as nothing short of disastrous.

However, Mitzna has no viable peace plan. He merely seeks to palm off Oslo's cold leftovers on the Palestinians.

He pledged in a recent interview with *Ha'aretz* that if he becomes prime minister after the January elections one of the first actions of his government would be the evacuation of the 7,000 or so Jewish settlers in Gaza and their resettlement inside the Green Line (Israel's pre-1967 borders).

He would restart unconditional negotiations with Yassir Arafat to establish an independent Palestinian state. "We will talk as if there is no terrorism and we will fight terrorism as if there are no negotiations. To say there can be no negotiations while there is terrorism is to give the right of veto to the extremists. That's stupid," he said.

Such talks would be based on the Clinton proposals made at Camp David in July 2000 and a document drafted recently by the former head of Israel's General Security Service, Ami Ayalon, and Professor Serri Nuseibah, a Palestinian official in Jerusalem. Nuseibah is seen as a man the Israeli elite can do business with and is being cultivated as a possible replacement for Arafat in the "reform" of the Palestinian Authority that Washington has insisted upon in order to control the Palestinians.

Nuseibah recently told a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter he was ready to compromise with Israel on two key issues: the right of the Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland and the question of Jerusalem.

While some bourgeois Palestinian leaders may be willing to agree to such a deal with the Israelis, it is not one that they can readily sell to the Palestinians. Arafat was forced to reject the Clinton proposals precisely because it would have been political suicidal to have signed such a deal. The two year long uprising that began in October 2000 after Sharon's provocative march into the Temple Mount area is a product of the Palestinians' anger and frustration with Oslo's thin gruel. Far from alleviating their desperate economic and social conditions, it has only made them worse.

Mitzna stressed that he would pull the army out of the West Bank and Gaza within 12 months of taking office, with or without an agreement with the Palestinians. Although he expected that the settlers would fiercely resist any attempt to close the settlements, he did not expect that they would revolt against an elected government. Successive governments have backed down against the settlers precisely because they were prepared to resist the orders of elected governments that did not want to precipitate a civil war.

He also said that he would also seek an arrangement on Jerusalem that would leave the majority of the Palestinians outside the Israeli part of the city, now very much larger than it was in 1967.

Mitzna emphasised in the interview with *Ha'aretz*, "There is no logic to an Israeli presence in Palestinian cities", and said that he had public opinion surveys showing that "a majority of Israelis want a solution to the conflict based on compromise." He attacked the Likud-led government for its refusal to implement such measures and claimed that his plan, in addition to attracting voters from the left and centre, would also enjoy support from "the right wing of the centre".

If the Palestinians refuse to make peace on his terms, then Mitzna supports the unilateral "separation" of the Palestinians and Israelis. This apartheid-style solution is presently being enacted by the Sharon government, which is erecting an eight-foot high, 250-mile long concrete barrier between Israel and the West Bank at a cost of nearly

\$400 million. It will include settlements on the Israeli side of the barrier.

Mitzna's sole proviso is that he would include only the larger settlements within Israel and re-house the rest of the settlers. The Labour lefts propose to dismantle the settlements, rather than leave them for the Palestinians.

Mitzna's proposals mean that he concurs with Israel's previous land grabs and has no intention to giving up all the settlements. If the Palestinians won't make an agreement with Israel, then they must be penned in borders of Israel's choosing until they see reason. The security barrier will turn the West Bank into a prison, since Israel controls all the exit points. It would remain in place until a final agreement was reached on a political border.

Mitzna also stands foursquare behind the US offensive against Iraq and its mission to seize control of the oil resources and create a new regional order in the Middle East.

Apart from pinning his flag to the broken Oslo mast and the US war effort, he has little to say. He has promised to cooperate with the hawks within the Labour Party such as Ben-Eliezer who worked with Sharon to jettison Oslo. Neither has he said anything about how he will deal with the ultra-nationalists. In relation to the mounting economic and social crisis that precipitated the collapse of the Sharon government, he has said little to distinguish himself from Sharon. Indeed, Labour supports privatisation and the dismantling of social services.

Far from being the great left hope that the liberals portray him as, his role is to stifle the leftward movement of the Israeli working class and subordinate it to the financial elite. Shlomo Ben-Ami, a Labour member of parliament and a former Israeli foreign minister who resigned last August from Sharon's government, spelt this out quite clearly in an article for the *Financial Times*.

"Labour's true mission is far more vital to the interests of the nation than 'unity': it is to constitute a solid political axis around which the Israeli centre-left could rally and mobilise the great number of grassroots organisations that have emerged throughout Israeli society in the past year, in a desperate search for a way out of this terrible impasse of blood, hopelessness and unprecedented economic decline."

Mitzna represents a desperate attempt to resurrect Labour's authority in the working class. A progressive outcome to the forthcoming election depends upon a political break by the working class not just with Labour, which propped up Sharon until it became impossible to do so any longer, but with the Labour lefts who cover for the right wing.



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