

Israel: Labour Party to prop up Sharon's Likud coalition

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On December 17, the Labour Party agreed in principle to shore up Ariel Sharon's crumbling Likud-led coalition. Subject to getting eight cabinet posts and the deputy premiership, it will join—without any political conditions—the most bellicose and right-wing administration in Israel's history to form a government of national unity.

By doing so, Labour will lend support to Sharon's land grab in the West Bank being mounted under the cover of the Gaza pull-out plan, and his attempt to place the full cost of the war against the Palestinians and the accompanying economic recession that has cost \$12 billion onto the Israeli working class. This will ensure that Sharon avoids an early general election under conditions where the dominant issue is the mounting opposition within the country at large to the government's economic policies, and which he would almost certainly lose.

While the Labour Party long ago abandoned its socialist pretensions, in the 1990s it had reinvented itself as the party of peace. It has now also shed this mantle. There are today no essential differences between Labour and Likud on either relations with the Palestinians or the Israeli working class. The broad mass of the population have been politically disenfranchised.

The last thing that any of the parties want is an election where even the possibility of debating the issues that confront working people might arise.

Shimon Peres, the 81-year-old Labour leader who received the Nobel Prize for peace in 1993, justified coming to Sharon's rescue by saying that this would ensure that the plan to disengage from Gaza and four isolated settlements on the West Bank goes ahead.

Notwithstanding the international press extolling this as an "opportunity for peace," the disengagement plan in fact signifies Israel's intention to use the withdrawal from Gaza as a cover to expand the settlements on the West Bank and scuttle Palestinian plans to establish even a truncated state.

Sharon admitted as much when he told the Knesset that disengagement from Gaza "will strengthen Israel's hold over territory which is essential to our existence."

The plan represents an attempt to complete the military conquests of the 1967 war by incorporating Palestinian territory into Israel and driving the Palestinians from their land.

Under Sharon's disengagement plan, Israel will pull out all its 8,000 settlers in 14 settlements in Gaza and the 6,000 troops that protect them, and four small and isolated settlements in the West Bank starting in March 2005. Israel will continue to maintain

control of Gaza's borders, coastline, airspace and its water supply, while Egypt will police Gaza's southern border.

Labour has been waiting in the wings to join the government ever since May, when it became clear that Sharon did not have sufficient support from his own right-wing party or coalition to dismantle the settlements and withdraw the army from Gaza. Two ministers were sacked for voting against the plan and two walked out of the government in disgust.

Peres promised to support Sharon in the Knesset to ensure the withdrawal went ahead, even though it meant signing up to an austerity budget that entails huge cuts in the welfare budget and further privatisations, to which Labour is supposedly opposed.

Earlier this month, the budget was defeated by 69 votes to 43 when the secular Shinui party, one of Sharon's coalition partners, opposed budget concessions to supporters of the right-wing religious parties. Sharon engineered a crisis by sacking the Shinui ministers, despite their broad support for both the budget and the withdrawal plan, and threatened his rebellious Likud party with a general election which would cost many MPs their seats.

While initially the Likud central committee had opposed Labour's entry into the government, it now agreed to do so in order to stave off an election. Sharon called in the main opposition party, which has 19 seats in the 120-member Knesset. He is also expected to ask two of the small religious parties to join the government.

What has Labour rescued in reality?

The fraudulent character of the Gaza disengagement plan is demonstrated by the fact that Israel will remain the occupying power under international law. It will control the sea and road access to Gaza and control its airspace and water supplies. There will be nothing to stop its military incursions against its powerless neighbour whenever it sees fit to do so.

A recent report by the World Bank expressed the fear that the withdrawal would worsen the Palestinian economy. Israel's border and road closures were an obstacle to economic activity. Its proposal to end the current customs union with the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Gaza would lead to a significant loss in revenue for the PA and prevent the recovery of the Palestinian economy. But without such a recovery, the World Bank warned that it would be impossible to justify the large increase in aid that the PA needed.

Israel's armed forces have also continued their attacks on the Palestinian population. At the very same time as the Labour Party

was announcing its decision, the Israeli army killed 11 Palestinians and wounded more than 40. People were left homeless in the cold winter conditions as tanks demolished and damaged their homes.

Peres knows full well that the plan has nothing to do with getting the “peace process” going again or establishing a Palestinian state, but everything to do with annexing as much of the West Bank as possible. Only last September, Sharon’s chief aide, Dov Weisglass, admitted publicly that the real purpose of the disengagement plan was to freeze the peace process and prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state, and that it had Washington’s backing.

Labour will be joining a coalition that includes ultra-nationalist and religious parties who want an all-out war against the Palestinians and the end to any pretence of negotiating with them. This has already led to bitter divisions within the ruling Likud coalition. Last October, 17 of the Likud voted against the proposal. At first it seemed as though Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Sharon’s arch rival for the leadership of Likud and a former prime minister, would vote against or abstain. In the event, he cast a “yes” vote in a recount. The ultranationalist and religious parties voted against it.

In the event, the vote was carried by 67 votes to 45 with seven abstentions and one absentee with the support of the opposition Labour Party, left-wing parties and two Arab MPs.

The fact that Sharon, the architect of the settlement policy and staunch advocate of the Greater Israel project, is now so dependent upon the so called left-wing opposition parties illustrates how right-wing the political debate in Israel’s ruling circles has become.

Sharon has come under sustained fire from the far right, but the venal and fascistic character of his critics—who see the tactical withdrawal of a single settlement as a betrayal of Zionist principles—does not make Sharon’s own agenda more palatable. And it is he who has done more than any other to create the political and ideological conditions for the ascendancy of the settler and religious right.

Both sides are dedicated to increasing the settlements, annexing the West Bank to Israel, driving the Palestinians into neighbouring Jordan and confining those that remain in squalid homelands reminiscent of Apartheid South Africa’s Bantustans. But Sharon must take account of the mounting cost of the military operations, its impact on the Israeli economy and above all the need to secure an arrangement that has the backing of the Bush administration.

Labour’s eagerness to join Sharon’s government means that it, like the nationalist parties, approves the expansion of the settlements and the building of new ones in the West Bank, and their incorporation into Greater Israel. Its former policy of a “two-state solution” through negotiation with the Palestinians is to all intents and purposes dead and buried.

Sharon has been able to gain the support not just of Labour but the Peace Now camp, whose formation in the late 1970s was bound up with opposition to the settlements, Sharon’s war against Lebanon and his role in the massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camp in West Beirut. For Peace Now, the solution to the long-running Israel/Palestine conflict was to seek a two-state solution through a negotiated settlement with the Palestinians, a cause that Labour was later to take up.

As recently as October 2003, one of Peace Now’s leading members, former cabinet minister Yossi Beilin, who was one of the architects of the ill-fated Oslo Accords, secured European support for a peace initiative with the Palestinians in Geneva. It was that very initiative that Sharon’s disengagement plan was designed to scuttle.

Only a few months ago, Beilin rejected the plan, calling it a “dangerous approach,” a “disaster for Israel” and a “prize for Hamas.” He had opposed Weisglass’s “frightening comments” which had revealed the fraudulent nature of Sharon’s disengagement plan. “They reveal the fact that it is Sharon who is not a peace partner, and the peace camp must work for him to be overthrown,” he said.

Beilin too has now swallowed his misgivings and supported Sharon’s annexation of most of the West Bank to Israel. It demonstrates the moral and political collapse of the notion that it is possible to oppose the oppression of the Palestinians, while at the same time supporting the Zionist project.

This happens under conditions of mounting economic and social unrest within Israel itself when a coalition of the left, including Labour, and secular parties, and above all the Arab parties, could form a government.

Repeated polls have shown that despite their confusion and disorientation, the overwhelming majority of the Israeli people want an end to the long-running Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But such is the dependency of all the political parties on support from the US, without which Israel cannot survive, that none are willing to cut across Washington’s plans for the reorganisation of the Middle East in its interests and confront politically the right wing with a programme that corresponds to the objective interests of the Israeli people, both Jewish and Arab.

The capitulation of the peace camp flows inexorably from their adherence to Zionism: the fundamental conception of a state based upon religious exclusivity. The defence of such exclusivity in the context of the existence and growth of the Arab population makes any pretence of democracy untenable. It is this that gives rise to the growth of right-wing parties who espouse policies akin to apartheid and ethnic cleansing.

All those who seek peace must recognise that this is incompatible with the preservation of the Zionist state and the nationalist ideology that spawned it, and work to unite the peoples of the region on a democratic, secular and socialist basis.



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