# The Israeli protests and the unity of Arab and Jewish workers

**Patrick O'Connor**
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The growing protest movement of Israeli workers and youth against worsening economic hardship is a development of enormous political significance for the working class throughout the Middle East and internationally.

Protests against the unaffordable cost of housing erupted a fortnight ago, with young people erecting "tent cities" in different parts of Israel. The movement initially had a largely middle-class composition, with demonstrations centred on Tel Aviv's grand Rothschild Boulevard, but far wider layers of students and youth are now involved and polls indicate that the protests are supported by about 90 percent of the population.

Sections of the working class are entering into struggle with the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Local authority workers are set to strike Monday in solidarity with the student protesters, shutting down public offices and leaving rubbish uncollected. More than 20,000 young workers have expressed their support on the Internet for a campaign to halt work on Monday. Doctors have been on strike for weeks, reflecting wider discontent among professional workers.

The Histadrut trade union federation—which, like its counterparts internationally, is complicit in the driving down of workers' wages—is clearly under enormous pressure and has cautioned Netanyahu that it may need to call strikes in order to contain and head off the movement if he is unable to do so.

These developments underscore a basic fact that is ignored or denied by the bourgeois media, the middle-class "left," and various nationalist and Islamist organisations throughout the Arab world: there is a working class in Israel. Its interests, moreover, are in ever more open conflict with those of the Israeli ruling class and all of the official institutions of Zionism.

The protests to date are only the initial expression of an emerging movement of the Israeli working class. What is developing within the Zionist state is an integral part of a broader process—the rise of mass social resistance throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

The revolutionary struggles in Egypt, Tunisia and other Arab states have been dominated not by religion or national identity, but rather by social questions—unemployment, poverty, inequality, access to education. Increasingly in these struggles, the working class has come to the fore. Now the workers in Israel are beginning to stir, driven into action by the same crisis and the same social issues.

What this points to is a new road of political and social struggle for the working class and oppressed masses of the Arab countries as well as Israel, in which the axis is social class, not nationality, race or religion.

Israel has always been a deeply divided country. But in the last two decades, successive Labor, Likud and Kadima governments have imposed sweeping "free market" and pro-business reforms—including the privatisation of state assets, banking and corporate deregulation, and the elimination of various employment protections.

The same measures have been imposed on workers in Egypt and many other Arab countries. In Israel, as in neighbouring countries, unprecedented social inequality has been the result, with workers' real wages declining while a tiny elite has amassed enormous personal wealth. Discussion is now commonplace in Israel about the country's new oligarchy, based on the wealthiest 20 families who control about half the stock market.

The protesting Israeli youth are clearly taking their lead from international developments. They have been inspired by both the European movements against

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austerity and spending cuts and the upheavals across the Middle East and North Africa—a significant matter, given that the Zionist establishment has portrayed these movements as dangerous disturbances threatening a regional Islamist takeover.

The fate of the uprisings in many countries across North Africa and the Middle East now hangs in the balance. In Egypt, for example, the hated dictator Hosni Mubarak is gone but his repressive regime remains in place, run by a military clique that is working closely with the US government. The question can be raised—who has proven to be the main enemy of the Egyptian workers and youth? Not the Israeli working class, but the Egyptian bourgeoisie, backed by the Israeli ruling class and imperialism. The various representatives of the Egyptian ruling class, ranging from Mohamed ElBaradei to the Muslim Brotherhood, have rushed to defend the military as a bulwark against any challenge to existing capitalist property relations.

For decades, the political subordination of working class struggle in the Arab Middle East to the bourgeoisie in the name of "national unity" or "Arab unity" has produced one catastrophe after another. The extraordinary evolution of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO)—from a mass movement that waged many courageous struggles against the murderous Israeli military machine to a right-wing apparatus that operates openly as an agency of US imperialism and the Zionist state—is the sharpest expression of the historical dead end of bourgeois nationalism.

The current crisis in Israel no less dramatically demonstrates the bankruptcy of the Zionist project. What was presented as a means of salvation for the Jews after the Nazi Holocaust is revealing itself ever more nakedly as a trap for the Jewish masses and a political vehicle for the enrichment of a narrow capitalist elite that depends upon continued subsidies from its American imperialist sponsors, ceaseless wars of aggression, and the ever more brutal exploitation of its own working class.

Who is the main enemy of the Jewish working class? Not the Palestinian and Arab workers, but the Israeli ruling class and its political agents in the Knesset, as well as the trade unions, which are now seeking to place themselves at the head of the protest movement the better to strangle it.

Even before Israel was founded in 1948, and certainly in the six decades since, tensions between the Jewish and Arab peoples have been incited and exploited by the imperialist powers and by the ruling elites in Israel and the Arab states. Now, however, a new stage is developing in the crisis of world capitalism and a major shift in the balance of class forces internationally is under way. The objective conditions are emerging in which the unresolved historical problems of the 20th century can be resolved.

The fundamental dividing point between the peoples of the Middle East is not religion or race, but class. What is required is a united struggle of the working class throughout the region, based on a socialist and internationalist program that aims to abolish the profit system and establish the United Socialist States of the Middle East as part of a world socialist federation. This is the perspective advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Patrick O'Connor

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