

Israeli protest movement sparks mass strikes

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More than 100,000 Israeli municipal workers took action on Monday in a show of solidarity with the nationwide tent city protests against the exorbitant cost of housing. Local government offices were closed, streets were not cleaned and garbage was not collected.

The Union of Local Authorities in Israel and Histadrut, the general federation of trade unions, called off strikes earlier this year. This time they backed the protest in order to take control and stifle it. The Tel Aviv Municipality implemented a partial strike, opening its offices after 10 a.m., while Jerusalem did not join the strike to “avoid hurting the residents”.

In Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, teachers and supporters demonstrated, calling for better public education and a halt to a privatisation drive that has led to soaring costs and huge inequalities in access to decent schooling. They carried placards saying, “There’s private education, no social justice”.

Another protest over education costs is planned for Thursday.

Doctors have set up a tent camp outside the Prime Minister’s Office in Jerusalem and called on Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to intervene to resolve the months-long dispute between the doctors and the government.

The Nurses’ Union has announced that it will join the doctors’ struggle and is planning joint protests. Nurses walked out of four wards in the Sheba Medical Centre, Israel’s largest and richest hospital, for two hours in protest against management’s failure to employ sufficient nurses in the overflowing internal wards. “Why should tourists who come for medical treatment receive better treatment than the elderly Israeli patients on respirators?” asked Ilana Cohen, the Nurses’ Union chair. “Not hiring sufficient nurses is criminal negligence”.

In Tel Aviv, dozens of students took part in a march from the tent city on Rothschild Boulevard to government buildings, carrying bundles of hay on their backs. They cried out, “Bibi [Netanyahu] it’s over, my back is

broken”.

The strikes follow the 150,000-strong demonstrations, the largest in years, last Saturday to protest the soaring cost of living. The largest rally was in Tel Aviv, but others took place in Jerusalem, Be’er Sheva, Haifa and seven other cities, including Nazareth, where Arab and Jewish workers marched together.

What started as a protest of the cost of housing has spread to undisguised anger at the dozen-or-so billionaire families that control much of Israel’s economy—including real estate, communications, journalism, retail, manufacturing, construction, banking, pension savings and energy. There were calls to halt the programme of “free market” reforms and the cuts to social budgets in health and education.

While the social budgets have been cut in Israel, this is not the case in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, where residential construction is more than double that of Israel. As *Globes*, Israel’s business magazine points out, the higher construction and higher government spending on civilian public services was used to encourage Israelis to move to the Occupied Territories. It cited an OECD report that said that the number of Israelis living in the territories nearly doubled between 1997 and 2009.

As the protests have grown in size and support, they have created a major political crisis for the Netanyahu coalition government, the most right-wing in Israel’s history.

Netanyahu tried to defuse the protests with an announcement that a “special team” of ministers and experts would listen to the protest leaders and submit a plan to “alleviate Israelis’ economic burden”. He announced some minor policy changes and made vague promises of “reform”. These included the promise to build 50,000 housing units within 18 months, lower the excise tax on petrol for one month, double the home heating grant for some elderly people, and review taxes and water charges.

Netanyahu made clear that there will be no serious

concessions to the social demands of the protesting workers and youth. Speaking at a special Knesset session to commemorate 71 years since the death of Zionist right-wing leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky, he insisted that there was no going back on Israel's free-market economy.

Even his limited concessions have sparked fierce divisions within the government and the treasury. The director general of Israel's finance ministry, Haim Shani, resigned citing "differences of opinion in fundamental issues" with the finance minister, adding that "events of the past few days have exacerbated the problems".

Netanyahu is to replace Shani with Moshe Terry, the former chairman of the Israel Securities Authority. Terry has close links with Yitzhak Tshuva, the head of the Delek Group, one of the monopolies that are the focus of public anger.

Stanley Fischer, the governor of the Bank of Israel, expressed his surprise that Israelis had been protesting, as he believed "the economy is doing well". He claimed that there were no magic wands to solve the high cost of living.

Protest leaders are demanding lower housing costs, lower taxes, an increase in the minimum wage to 50 percent of the average wage, free education and smaller class sizes, improved medical care, enforcement of labour laws, and similar measures. But Netanyahu has refused to meet the leaders of the tent protests. Instead he plans to pass them on to the team of ministers. While earlier, they had demanded that all discussions with Netanyahu and government representatives should be public in front of TV cameras, this has been abandoned under pressure from Ofer Eini, the Histadrut secretary general.

Eini, who made clear that the union bureaucracy opposes the protests, declared, "I will not support a movement which aims to humiliate a democratically elected prime minister and bring about his downfall. We are not in Egypt or Syria".

Two years ago, Eini formed a political alliance with the former army chief of staff, Gaby Ashkenazi, to defend the military budget at the expense of social spending. As recent cables published by WikiLeaks show, he considers himself a key prop of Netanyahu's right-wing coalition and supports its policies.

According to a May 6, 2009 cable, Eini met with US diplomats to assure them that his approval of the Israeli budget was a "kosher seal" that would guarantee Netanyahu the support of the Labor Party. He also demanded that Netanyahu personally negotiate with him

over the budget, refusing to speak to Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz.

US diplomats concluded: "Eini, whose efforts were pivotal in bringing Labor into the government, views himself as a key power broker."

The Histadrut trade union federation is under enormous pressure from the working class. But its aim in calling strikes remains the same: to dissipate anger while opposing a decisive political and social challenge to the government.

For its part, there is a growing danger that the Netanyahu government will resort to its usual tactic of launching a provocation against the Palestinian people or neighbouring Arab states as a diversion from the growing social unrest.

Early on Monday morning, Israeli forces killed two Palestinians in Kalandia refugee camp in the West Bank, after raiding several houses after a minor scuffle with stone-throwing Palestinians. Kalandia is policed by Palestinian Authority forces, but the Israeli military claims the right to enter it at night. A military commander complained that the Palestinian Authority forces were arresting fewer suspects because of the unity agreement between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas.

This follows a raid last week on a well-known theatre in Jenin, when Israeli forces arrested two people. Two weeks ago, they killed a 21-year-old Palestinian man in a raid on a refugee camp near the city of Nablus.

On Monday there was a brief exchange of fire between Lebanese and Israeli forces, when Lebanese soldiers opened fire after an Israeli patrol crossed the border.

Shaul Mofaz, a former Israeli Defence Force chief and legislator from the Kadima party, said that it was highly likely the military would mobilize reservists in September, in anticipation of Palestinian unrest ahead of the Palestinian Authority's bid for statehood in the United Nations General Assembly. He told *Army Radio*, "September can potentially turn into a violent, painful event, with unclear results".



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