

Largest-ever social protests in Israel

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Over a quarter million people took to the streets Saturday to protest spiralling living costs and soaring rents that are making it impossible for working people to make ends meet. The marches were the largest social protest in Israel's history; accounting for the size of Israel's population, this is the equivalent of a protest by 10 million people in the United States, or 2 million in Britain.

At the largest rally in Tel Aviv, over 200,000 young people, retired couples and families, both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, demonstrated under the slogan "the government has abandoned the people." Banners read "The People Demand Social Justice" and "An entire generation demands a future."

At least 30,000 people turned out in Jerusalem, with some demonstrators marching on the residence of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Smaller rallies took place in Beer Sheva, Haifa and so-called development or slum towns such as Kiryat Shmona, Ashkelon, and Dimona.

Palestinian activists set up a tent city in Taibeh that has attracted hundreds of visitors, while a number of Druze youngsters have set up tents outside Yarka and Julis, villages in the Western Galilee.

Participants in the protests have made powerful comparisons with the mass movements that are sweeping Arab countries, particularly Egypt and Tunisia. Protesters carry signs written in Hebrew and Arabic reading "Resign, Egypt is here." Tel Aviv's Habima Square is being called Netanyahu's Tahrir Square.

The demonstrations, which are now in their fourth week, started as a Facebook call for a tent city protest in Tel Aviv over the cost of housing. They have spread throughout the country, fuelled by the outrage over the dozen billionaire families that monopolise much of Israel's economy. It is a powerful outcry against Israel's *proteksia*, the byword for its system of rule by money and connections.

The Israeli stock market plunged 7 percent yesterday,

after its opening was delayed 45 minutes to avert panic selling. Traders were reportedly responding both to Standard and Poor's downgrading of the US credit rating, and to fears about the impact of the protests.

The protesters' demands are growing. There were calls to halt the programme of "free market" reforms and the cuts to social budgets in health and education. The National Union of Israeli Students called for an expansion of free education and bigger government housing budgets.

In an unprecedented move, the protest organizers have embraced two demands of Israel's Palestinian citizens: state recognition of the unrecognized villages throughout the country, especially the Bedouin communities in the Negev, and approval of master plans to expand local authorities' jurisdiction and enable construction.

Last Thursday, parents marched in Tel Aviv, Ariel, Herzliya and other cities to protest the high cost of raising children, while high school and college students held a demonstration opposite the Education Minister's Tel Aviv residence. Demonstrators set up tents to protest the new housing law that aids developers by fast-tracking approval for residential construction.

Alongside the protests is the ongoing five-month resident hospital doctors' strike over low pay and long hours. The government and doctors' union leaders are desperate to settle the dispute, to prevent it from developing into a broader strike movement against the government. Doctors in a number of hospitals have threatened to resign if their demands are not met.

This week, the government agreed to fund an additional 1,000 posts and provide grants of up to NIS 300,000 (\$85,000) for doctors who move to outlying regions or transfer to in-demand specialities.

As the protests gather momentum, however, the main leaders have shunned direct political slogans and demands that the movement should come out in direct opposition to the government and Prime Minister Netanyahu. Stav Shafir, one of the founders of the Tel Aviv tent city, said in an interview on Israeli television, "We are not asking to change the prime minister. We are asking to change the

system.”

Netanyahu’s coalition government confronts a major political crisis. The most right wing government in Israel’s history, Netanyahu is dependent upon the support of Foreign Secretary Avigdor Lieberman from the ultra-right Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel is Our Home) party.

Netanyahu has made clear that his ultra-right government intends to make no real concessions to protesters’ demands. He has responded with some cosmetic changes and vague promises of “reform,” lauding the National Housing Committees Law, which the Knesset passed on Wednesday, as the solution to the housing crisis, all of which have been angrily dismissed by the protestors.

The role of the Histadrut trade union is particularly perfidious. Having called off several strikes over budget cuts last Monday, Ofer Eini, its general secretary, called a one-day strike of municipal workers. Eini claimed this was in solidarity with the protests; however, the real purpose was not to lead a fight against the government but to stifle and control the growing movement. Eini said explicitly in a radio interview that he had no intention of “bringing down the government.”

Under conditions where workers face an ultra-right government determined to make no concessions to the working class, this amounts to an open admission by Eini that his union intends not to prosecute a struggle by the working class, but to block it.

The prime minister has refused to meet the protest leaders to hear their demands, referring them instead to a “dialogue team” which is charged with coming up with a plan by mid-September, headed by Harvard-educated Israeli economist Manuel Trajtenberg. Netanyahu held out the prospect of “major change,” but warned that he would “not be able to satisfy everyone.”

There is a very real 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. Israel’s security forces have recently launched provocative raids on Gaza, killing at least two people, and arresting several people in the West Bank, increasing tensions in the region.

In recent months, Lieberman and his allies within Netanyahu’s Likud Party have pushed a number of anti-democratic laws threatening Israel’s Palestinian citizens, and those who seek a peace deal with the Palestinians and free speech. These include the Nakba law, which bans

public funding for groups that mark Israel’s “independence day” as Palestinians do by declaring the creation of the Jewish state to be a Nakba—Arabic for “catastrophe.”

Another makes it an offence for Israelis to take part in a boycott against Israel or Israeli settlements, rendering them liable to lawsuits or compensation payments of up to \$10,000 or both. Another strips those convicted of espionage against the state of their citizenship.

There are currently attempts to remove Arabic, the first language of Israel’s 1.8 million indigenous Palestinian citizens, as one of Israel’s three official languages—Hebrew, Arabic and English. Right-wing forces are also seeking to outlaw international funding for human rights groups whose reports were cited in the United Nations’ Goldstone report, which accused Israel’s army of war crimes in the 2009 Gaza war.

In contrast to the chauvinist policies of the ruling class, the entry into struggle of Jewish and Arab workers in Israel amid an upsurge of revolutionary struggles throughout the Middle East highlights the unity of the working class across ethnic and national boundaries. The fact that these struggles emerge amid an unprecedented and deepening crisis of world capitalism further underlines their historic significance.

As in Egypt and Tunisia, the fundamental question facing workers is the development of a politically independent movement of the working class, based on a unified struggle for socialist policies by workers throughout the region.



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