

Protest marches, tent city protests continue in Israel

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At least 75,000 Israelis took to the streets Saturday in 15 cities nationwide—away from the two largest cities, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem—to protest soaring rents and living costs, and the domination of the Israeli economy by a handful of billionaires. This is part of a wave of social protests that began four weeks ago in Israel and have the support of nearly 90 percent of the population.

Thousands are continuing to protest in the tent cities set up around the country at the exorbitant cost of housing.

Police claimed they had counted 3,383 tents, 2,300 of which are in Tel Aviv, mostly on Rothschild Boulevard. The movement has expanded to include Palestinian Israelis, who have set up tents in the centre of Taibeh, while some young Druze have set up tents outside the villages of Yarka and Julis in the Western Galilee. There is a joint camp in the northern city of Akko and East Jerusalem, where there have been ongoing protests against the evictions of Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah.

The largest demonstrations Saturday were in Haifa and Beer Sheba, which each attracted 25,000 people, and Afula, which attracted 15,000. There were also demonstrations in Netanya, Beit She'an, Modi'in, Dimona, Eilat, Petah Tikva, Hod Hasharon and Ramat Hasharon.

In Haifa, a mixed city where both Jewish and Palestinian Israelis attended the rally, Hamoudi Hujeirat, from the downtown neighbourhood of Hadar, called for cooperation between Jews and Arabs—the first time in years that such a call had been made in the city. He said, “We are one people,” to the cheers of the crowd.

Palestinian Israeli speakers repeated the slogan, in Arabic, “The people demand the fall of the tycoons”.

Despite these instinctive, embryonic efforts to unite Jewish and Palestinian workers, the protest organisers reject any connection between attacks on living standards and Tel Aviv’s anti-Arab policies. They insist they are trying to keep the protest movement non-political, restricting their demands to calls for “social justice” and a “welfare state”. They refuse to struggle to bring down Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition government.

The organisers have justified this in terms of appealing to all layers of Israeli society, so as not to antagonise the ultra-nationalists and the settler and religious movements and jeopardise their 87 percent public approval ratings.

Such views represent a political dead end for protesters and the entire Israeli working class. Its demands can only be met by bringing down the Netanyahu government and fighting for a workers’ government based on socialist policies.

The organisers’ decision to centre protests on Israel’s smaller cities itself reflects a retreat in the face of the massive social forces unleashed by the protests. The turnout for Saturday’s protests was significantly smaller than a week ago, when 300,000 people took to the streets across the country, including an estimated 250,000 in Tel Aviv. Organisers had anticipated that Beersheba’s rally would be the largest of Saturday’s events with 50,000 people, but it only attracted 25,000.

Spokesman Roe Neumann said, “The turnout is more or less what we figured. Even if there were only five people here, we would have been pleased. The point was that there was too much of a concentration of the movement in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and many of the

problems facing the country are not only in those cities, but all over Israel, so we decided that we would shut our mouths [in Tel Aviv] and let the rest of the voices speak.”

This determination to “shut the mouths” of the most powerful detachments of the Israeli working class—the population of the major urban centres—reflects the protest organisers’ growing concern at the developing confrontation with the government. They are rapidly signalling their willingness to negotiate deals, even though the government will not make any real concessions to the workers.

In Haifa, Yossi Baruch, the leader of the tent city on the Carmel, light-mindedly claimed it did not matter “If Bibi [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] falls in a week, a month or a year. Bibi will fall. So will Steinitz and so will Lieberman,” referring to the finance minister and the foreign minister, respectively.

One of the organisers of the tent city protest, Daphni Leef, said, “We do not want to replace the government, we want much more than that—to change the rules of the game and say loud and clear: Social services are rights, not commodities.”

In effect, this is a plea for the government to change course. This signals the protest organisers’ willingness to negotiate with Netanyahu’s “dialogue committee,” led by economist Manuel Trajtenberg.

Such a perspective is politically bankrupt, however, as Netanyahu has already made clear that he intends to make no such change of direction. He has insisted that the committee must find “solutions that are economically sound”—implicitly threatening state bankruptcy or a run on Israel’s currency, should the government increase social spending to meet the movement’s demands.

In other words, Netanyahu will only accept cosmetic changes that can easily be reversed later. It seems that he has agreed with Ehud Barak, the defence minister, to freeze the army’s budget to make room for some minor concessions. But such a freeze would be reversed in the event of a “security” threat.

Moreover, if a provocation by Netanyahu’s ultra-right wing coalition partners precipitates widespread unrest among Palestinians, he could call a state of emergency to

usher in army rule—not just in the Occupied Territories, but also in Israel itself.

Communications Minister Moshe Kahlon even called the protests a compliment to Netanyahu. He said, “If anything, this demonstration is a demonstration of trust in Netanyahu—though that may sound upside-down—’Sir, we demand of you, we insist, you know how to, you are capable of fixing this.’ ” He pointed out the lack of public support for Kadima, the main opposition party. It has essentially the same policies as the ruling coalition and is even more closely associated with Israel’s oligarchs.

In the meantime, however, the Israeli political establishment is trying to forcibly end the protests. The cities’ mayors have already attempted to dismantle the tent cities. Last week, inspectors issued eviction notices to protesters in Tel Aviv’s Kikar Hamedina, towed a caravan and confiscated a guillotine from Rothschild Boulevard. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel criticised the move, saying that the mayors were trying to “push the police to silence the protest”.

There is no way forward for workers protesting social inequality outside of a struggle against the Netanyahu government and the policies of imperialism throughout the Middle East, including the Zionist state’s oppression of the Palestinians. The central issue facing workers in Israel is how to turn this social movement into a politically conscious struggle. The International Committee for the Fourth International advances such a programme, based on the perspective of world socialist revolution.

The critical issue is the building of a new revolutionary leadership in the working class and the building of new organs of mass working class struggle, independent of the old organisations appealing to various sections of the ruling elite. The task of the next period is to build a section of the ICFI in Israel to unite Jewish and Arab workers in a struggle for a Socialist Federation of the Middle East.



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