

Israel's largest ever protests oppose inequality

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About 430,000 people took to the streets in cities across Israel Saturday evening to protest soaring rents and spiralling living costs that are making it impossible for working people to make ends meet.

The rallies were the largest social protests in Israel's history, far larger than the 250,000 on August 6, and larger even than the 400,000 that took to the streets in September 1982 to protest Israel's role in the massacre at Sabra and Shatilla refugee camp in Beirut.

More than 5.5 percent of the Israeli population of 7.75 million were involved in the demonstrations, the equivalent of 3 million people in Britain or more than 18 million in the United States.

The demonstrators denounced high housing prices and government privatization programs. They called for increasing taxes on corporations and the wealthy, while reducing VAT and taxes on gasoline.

The main rally took place in Tel Aviv, where 300,000 young people, retired couples and families, both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, demonstrated under the slogan, "They [the government] only understand numbers," and called for social justice.

The atmosphere was carnival-like, with concerts and giant television screens displaying the protests all over the country.

Jerusalem saw about 50,000 people fill Paris Square and the nearby streets. This was almost twice the number on previous rallies this summer.

In addition, 40,000 people took to the streets of Haifa, Israel's third largest city with a mixed Jewish and Arab population, to protest against Israel's discrimination against its Arab citizens. Shahin Nasser, a representative of the Wadi Nisnas tent city protest tent, said, "Today we are changing the rules of the game. No more coexistence based on hummus and fava beans. What is happening here is true coexistence, when Arabs

and Jews march together shoulder to shoulder calling for social justice and peace. We've had it. Bibi [the prime minister], go home. Steinitz [the finance minister], go and don't come back, Atias [housing minister], goodbye and good riddance."

The impoverished "development towns" saw big demonstrations, with 12,000 people taking part in rallies in Afula and 7,000 in both Rosh Pina and Kiryat Shemona. In the south, a total of more than 1,000 people took part in rallies in Mitzpe Ramon and Arad, towns in the Negev desert, where the organisers had expected only 100 people.

Three hundred Israelis living in the United States also demonstrated in New York, chanting, "New York, Tel Aviv—the same revolution".

Tzipi Livni, the leader of the opposition Kadima party, called on her supporters to join the demonstration, while Meretz, which presents itself as social democratic, held meetings before and during the demonstration, and called for the restoration of the welfare state. The aim of these political forces is to keep mass opposition over inequality contained within the existing political system.

Ahmed Tibi, a Palestinian Israeli legislator and member of the UAL-Ta'al party, joined the protests calling for social justice and the closing of the economic gap between the majority and minority.

While the organisers had originally called for a "march of a million", nearly one eighth of the population, the number that did turn out, 430,000, testifies to the enormous social crisis confronting working people and their families. The number must also be seen against determined efforts by the authorities to close down the tent city protests and limit the size of the rallies.

The Home Front Command issued a directive

prohibiting demonstrations in the impoverished southern towns and cities of Be'er Sheva, Ashdod, Ashkelon and Sederot, citing fears of rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip.

On Wednesday, Israel Railways had announced that it would close the Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Beersheba, and Tel Aviv railway lines on Saturday night to carry out repair work on the lines, despite the fact that it had known for weeks about the mass demonstration. It took a High Court ruling on Friday afternoon to force the Transportation Ministry to run increased numbers of trains, as well as replacement bus services, to allow people to travel to Tel Aviv to take part in the protest.

In Jerusalem, the police are taking an increasingly heavy handed approach. On Tuesday, police indicted two of the first people to set up tents in the city in protest at the high cost of housing. They were charged with attempting to break into the Knesset compound, Israel's parliament, after a march, and with burning tyres on the Tel Aviv Jerusalem highway in an effort to disrupt traffic. On Friday, police arrested two protesters at a small demonstration outside the prime minister's official residence in Jerusalem claiming that they were disrupting traffic.

The main danger confronting the protests is the lack of an independent political leadership. The mass rallies this weekend were billed as the "climax" of the movement, with nothing else planned. Many of the tent cities are emptying as students and workers return to school and work at the end of the vacation period.

Three weeks ago, the organisers decided to focus the protests on Israel's smaller cities, a retreat in the face of the massive social forces unleashed by the protests. It reflected their growing concern at the developing confrontation with the government.

Itzik Shmuli, one of the protest leaders and National Student Union chairman, has signalled his willingness to negotiate a deal with the Netanyahu government that would shut down the demonstrations. A committee set up by Netanyahu is set to propose some cosmetic reforms within the overall budget, even though the government is determined not to make any real concessions to the workers. Defence Minister Ehud Barak has rejected any calls to cut the defence budget.

The protest organisers reject any connection between attacks on living standards and the government's anti-

Arab policies, seeking thereby to prevent a unified movement with Palestinians. They insist they are trying to keep the protest movement "non-political," restricting their demands to calls for "social justice" and a "welfare state".

In fact, the organizers have a definite perspective, that of keeping the demonstrations from posing a challenge to the Netanyahu government, while channelling them behind Kadima and the official opposition. They oppose a struggle to bring down Netanyahu's coalition government, the most right-wing in Israel's history.

Daphne Leef, one of the protest organisers, speaking about Netanyahu in an interview with *Ha'aretz*, said, "Even at the first rally I said, 'Fix things, you can still fix things. If you don't fix things, you should be fired.' I still think he can fix things. But for that he needs to make an about-face. He has a capitalist ideology that gives money to the rich first and then [lets it] trickle down. That is not the language of this protest."

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



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