

What way forward for mass social struggles in Israel?

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Nearly half a million people poured into the streets of Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and towns and cities across Israel on Saturday to raise the banner of “social justice” and protest against low wages and the rising costs of housing, food, transportation, education and other basic social necessities that are rendering life intolerable for the majority of the population.

Fueling the mass anger behind these protests is Israel’s ever-increasing social inequality that has handed huge profits to a handful of billionaire “tycoons,” even as millions face social deprivation. It is widely recognized that the policies of the right-wing regime of Benjamin Netanyahu are dictated by the interests and demands of a tiny plutocracy.

The sheer scale of the protests Saturday—encompassing 5.5 percent of Israel’s population of 7.75 million, the equivalent of 18 million people protesting in the US—underscores the movement’s profound historical significance.

More than six decades after the founding of the Israeli state, following continuous wars against neighboring Arab countries and more than 44 years of occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the demonstrations have served to undermine a central Zionist myth. They have exposed the fact that in Israel, as in every other country, it is the class question that is fundamental, not nationality, race, religion or ethnicity.

Moreover, Jewish workers in Israel are responding to the same historic crisis of global capitalism that produced the mass revolts that have swept the Middle East, toppling the Western-backed dictatorships of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt. Many of the protesters who pitched tents on Tel Aviv’s Rothschild Boulevard and took to the streets of other towns and cities compared themselves to the Egyptian masses who

occupied Tahrir Square.

This involves the embryonic consciousness that workers in Israel, just like in Egypt, are entering into a struggle that is international in its scope and that cannot be resolved within the confines of the national borders dividing the Middle East.

However, those in the leadership of these protests along with the Zionist union federation, Histadrut, which has backed them, and the various pseudo-left organizations that follow in its wake are determined to divert this movement back into the safe channels of Israel’s existing political setup.

This has been the significance from the outset of the insistence of the protests’ organizers on “no politics.” It had the same significance as similar proscriptions offered by the organizers of protests by Spain’s *indignados*: reinforcing the domination of the existing politics of the parties of the ruling elite and their servants in the union bureaucracy.

The leaders of the protest, together with the bureaucracy of Histadrut, have explicitly rejected any struggle to bring down the Netanyahu government. Instead, they have indicated their willingness to negotiate with this government, the most right-wing in Israel’s history, which has formed a committee for the purpose of presenting some cosmetic “reforms” based on moving around spending within the exiting Israeli budget, while leaving untouched the existing system of capitalist exploitation and social inequality.

In Israel, of course, the proscription of politics has additional and even more fatal implications. It excludes from a struggle waged in the name of equality and social justice the deep social oppression arising from the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza; the fate of the millions of Palestinian refugees driven from their land; and the unequal status of Israel’s Arabs, 20

percent of the population, under a state that defines itself as Jewish.

It also leaves this movement defenseless in the face of the Netanyahu government's invocation of alleged threats to Israel and appeals for Zionist unity to stifle social unrest. Netanyahu even exploited the protests over housing prices as the pretext to push ahead with more Zionist settlements around occupied East Jerusalem.

Finally, it prevents any real challenge to the vast diversion of social wealth into maintaining Israel's massive military complex, which serves to intimidate the Palestinian people and all the countries of the Middle East.

In the wake of the fatal ambushes near the Sinai border last month, the following weekend's protests were called off by the organizers. And it appears that the huge demonstrations last Saturday will not be repeated.

The decision to wind up this movement in September is hardly an accident. It coincides with a steady drumbeat of warnings from the Netanyahu government that the attempt this month by the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority to secure recognition from the United Nations of Palestinian statehood will be accompanied by widespread violence.

As Israel's reactionary foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, put it recently, "The Palestinian Authority is planning a bloodbath."

In reality, it is the Israeli military apparatus that is preparing for a bloodbath and a new round of war. There is no evidence that Palestinian workers and youth see the bourgeois Palestinian leadership's maneuvers at the UN as of vital import. This UN resolution will do no more to better their conditions than all the ones that have preceded it. And even if the UN were to grant statehood—which it will not—a national entity created on the irrational and economically unviable borders left by the carve-up of Palestine would resolve none of the social and democratic demands of the Palestinian people.

The Israeli regime makes such threats because it fears above all the undermining of the ideological basis of its rule and an explosion of the class struggle throughout the Middle East. To forestall the threat of a unified struggle of the Jewish and Arab working class against imperialism it is willing to take the most desperate and

reckless measures, including war—a situation that highlights the deep political significance of a struggle to unify the workers of the Middle East.

The mass protests in Israel have shown that there exists the objective basis in the Israeli working class for such a policy. However, carrying forward these struggles against the ruling class's policy of social reaction and war requires elaborating a new political program and forging new mass organizations of the working class on the perspective of socialist internationalism. This means building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Israel and Palestine, in Egypt, Tunisia and throughout the region, committed to a common fight a Socialist Federation of the Middle East.

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