

Israeli cabinet approves whitewash report on social crisis

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday secured cabinet approval for the recommendations of the Trajtenberg “dialogue committee” on Israel’s social crisis. So limited are the recommendations that new demonstrations have been planned in response.

Netanyahu appointed economist Manuel Trajtenberg to head the committee in order to defuse the mass protest movement against the lack of affordable housing and soaring living costs.

The movement started as a tent city on Rothschild Boulevard in central Tel Aviv, but spread rapidly to other towns and cities and soon encompassed opposition to the “free market” reforms and the domination of the economy by a handful of billionaires. It culminated in 450,000-strong demonstrations on September 3, the largest in Israel’s history, testifying to the social crisis confronting working people and their families that is no different to that faced by masses throughout the Middle East.

Trajtenberg acknowledged some of the most obvious features of Israeli society: the “real, painful economic difficulty experienced by the backbone of Israeli society, working families, educated, with children who are not making ends meet”; the “deep sense of injustice,” that “has to do with the growing inequality in Israel” between the rich and the poor; and the “estrangement of the ordinary citizen from state institutions, a sense that the powers that be do not listen to him, and that the political system had severed itself from him.”

Trajtenberg clearly understood that the protest movement, if not checked, would undermine Israel’s fragile social cohesion, held together with nationalist rhetoric that has stoked fears of and provoked wars against Israel’s neighbours on behalf of its US patron. He said that Israel’s “social security” was just as important as its military might and warned the Knesset (parliament), “We must not miss the opportunity created by the social protest of 2011. And there will be no second, peaceful and nonviolent chance.”

Despite such warnings, his recommendations—which are short on details—will do little to address these problems, least of all the high cost of housing. There are few concrete measures and these would require legislation whose passage through the Knesset is not assured.

The proposals include implementing legislation already passed to fund education from the age of three instead of age

five as it is at present, the provision of 200,000 new homes—both to be phased in over five years—and anti-trust regulations to promote competition and reduce prices.

The total cost of the package would be NIS 30 billion, to be paid for by cuts in Israel’s defence budget and raising taxes on the rich and on corporations. The Ministry of Finance claims that it would cost at least double that to meet the demands of the protestors.

Stanley Fischer, former International Monetary Fund (IMF) economist and governor of Israel’s central bank, commended the proposals for remaining within the government’s fiscal framework, adding no additional debt. But ministers from the Shas party, which represents ultra-orthodox Jewish Israelis, voted against the proposals, saying they did nothing for the poorest members of society.

Daphne Leef, one of protest leaders and a video editor for the New Israel Fund, rejected the Trajtenberg report, saying that the government had simply continued with the same policies that had produced the crisis in the first place. “Where is the public housing? The affordable housing?” she asked.

Leef said that if the government did not come up with serious suggestions then on October 29, “just as the Knesset [Israel’s parliament] is due to return from its break, we will return to the streets in full force.”

Stav Shafir, one of the student leaders who organised the tent city protests, is calling for students to strike at the beginning of the new academic year and close down universities and colleges following the protest rally on October 29.

Protest leader and National Student Union chairman, Itzik Shmuli, who works closely with Ofer Eini, the leader of the Histadrut trade union federation (which did cooperate with the Committee) only expressed disappointment with the proposals.

It is instructive to take note of the organisations involved in attempting to gain control over the protests that emerged after Leef first pitched a tent in Tel Aviv’s Habima Square on July 14 after finding it impossible to get affordable housing. Central roles were played by the “National Left”, one of whose leaders is Eldad Yaniv, a former advisor to Ehud Barak, the minister of defence and former prime minister; the US-based New Israel

Fund, which funds social projects in Israel; and the National Union of Israeli Students. They were joined by several human rights, anti-poverty and environmental groups, as well as the Meretz party and the Stalinist Hadash.

Later they were joined by the Histadut and several mayors, including those of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and various local authorities, all of which have been instrumental in the government's attacks on social and welfare programmes.

These forces reject any connection between attacks on living standards and the government's anti-Arab policies. They insist on keeping the protest movement non-political, restricting their demands to calls for "social justice" and a "welfare state". This is justified in terms of appealing to all layers of Israeli society, so as not to antagonise the ultra-nationalists and the settler and religious movements.

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

All of these organisations seek to keep the demonstrations from posing a challenge to the Netanyahu government, the most right-wing in Israel's history, while channelling them behind Kadima and other official opposition parties.

Eini is on record as saying, "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."

Like its counterparts elsewhere, the Histadut union federation has sold out countless struggles and this year alone has called off several national strikes of public sector workers against budget cuts.

As the protests around Tel Aviv grew throughout July and August, the organisers decided to focus them in smaller cities and scatter the movement from Israel's largest urban area, reflecting their growing concern at the developing confrontation with the government. They billed the mass rallies at the beginning of September as the "climax" of the movement. What they meant was that this was the end—there were no plans for further action.

Shmuli called for the tent cities to be dismantled, a signal to the authorities that they could move in and close them down without any organised opposition. Members of the Students Union claimed that the tent city on Rothschild Boulevard had been infiltrated by "anarchist elements that impractically raise demands."

In Jerusalem, Itai Gotler, the chairman of the Hebrew University Student Union, said that they were closing down the main camp.

The Tel Aviv mayor and other municipal authorities, ostensibly supporters of the protest movement, then served notices to quit on the tent cities and sent squads to close them down, leading to the arrests of dozens of activists. Many of the evicted were homeless with nowhere else to go.

Ha'aretz, inspectorAccording now to breaking news, the tent cities have been dismantled. According to meetings of the homeless and social activists in the former tent city sites around Rothschild Boulevard, Levinsky Street Park, and Rabin Square, and have confiscated occupiers' possessions.

These actions take place as more than 355 medical residents, who have been involved in sanctions and strikes over their wages and conditions for the last six months, have resigned, with senior doctors supporting them. The government has gone to court to get an injunction against the doctors.

There have been protests by Israel's Bedouin—long deprived of running water, schools, and hospitals—about the government's latest plans to drive 30,000 people from their homes in the Be'er Sheva region. Elsewhere, there have been angry demonstrations by Palestinian Israelis against provocative attacks by right-wing nationalist thugs who have torched a mosque in Galilee and desecrated a cemetery in Jaffa with anti-Arab graffiti.

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.

This means the building of a new revolutionary leadership in the working class—a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Israel to unite Jewish and Arab workers in a struggle for a Socialist Federation of the Middle East.



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