

Rising tensions as actions of ultra-Orthodox Jews spark Israeli protests

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Last weekend, days of clashes in Beit Shemesh began between right-wing Jewish organisations and the police. This was followed on Tuesday by a protest of thousands of secular and moderate Jews against the enforced gender segregation being demanded by ultra-Orthodox groups.

The immediate spark for the riots was the broadcasting, on the evening of December 23 by Channel 2, of a documentary showing footage of an eight-year-old girl, Naama Margolese, crying as she described being abused and spat at on the street by Haredi men. The girl said she was afraid to walk to school because of the abuse she had received.

According to reports, girls as young as six have been spat at and called “whores” and “Nazis” by Haredi men for wearing school regulation knee-length skirts and tops with sleeves to at least the elbow. Such a uniform is standard in mainstream religious schools in Israel.

The British Broadcasting Corporation reported that a Channel 2 news crew was attacked as they were filming last Sunday. The Israeli daily newspaper *Ha'aretz* said the news team was attacked by 200 Haredi men.

On Monday morning, according to *Ha'aretz*, “dozens of ultra-Orthodox men surrounded police officers and municipal inspectors who came to remove, for at least the third time this week, a sign on Hazon Ish Street, in the Haredi neighbourhood of Nahala Vemenuha, ordering men and women to use separate sidewalks. The men tried to prevent the sign’s removal, calling the police officers ‘Nazis’ and dancing around them in circles.”

Later in the day, a Channel 10 news crew were attacked, as well as a Channel 2 news crew around an hour later. According to *Ha'aretz*, a cameraman was physically assaulted and police were involved with

clashes with around 300 Haredim.

On Tuesday, around 300 ultra-Orthodox residents fought with police in clashes during the day. In the evening, a rally attended by several thousand people was held to condemn the actions of the ultra-Orthodox groups, their reactionary treatment of women and children and enforced segregation.

The government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu relies upon two ultra-Orthodox parties, Shas and United Torah Judaism, for a total of 16 seats of its 66-seat majority in the 120-member parliament. It will do nothing serious to alienate this vital wing of its support.

But the declared opposition of other sections of the establishment is hypocritical, as they seek to use the protests to whip up hostility against Iran.

Calling for people to attend the rally, President Shimon Peres said, “All of us ... must defend the image of the state of Israel from a minority that is destroying national solidarity and expressing itself in an infuriating way.”

A number of placards critical of the Iranian regime were on display at the protest, including some stating, “Free Israel from religious coercion” and “Stop Israel from becoming Iran.”

The protest was also attended by leading opposition party figures and addressed by Tzipi Livni, the leader of Kadima, the largest party in the Knesset. She said protesters were “fighting for the image of the state of Israel” and added, in an obvious reference to the Iranian Islamist regime, “It’s not just Beit Shemesh and not just gender segregation, it’s all the extremist elements that are rearing their heads and are trying to impose their worldview on us.”

Prior to the rally, Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, said the “treatment of this eight-year-old girl is

completely degrading to Israel's democracy.”

This is outright hypocrisy.

Ultra-Orthodox groups in Israel have long been cultivated by the ruling elite and have played critical roles in various coalition governments. The fascistic layers these parties represent are opposed to any concessions being made to the Palestinians, who are besieged by brutal Israeli forces in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Successive governments, including Netanyahu's, have utilised these ultra-right organisations to insist, as a new condition for any peace negotiations, that the Palestinians recognise Israel as a Jewish state.

While Israel's constitution refers to Israel as a Jewish state, this was until very recently broadly understood to mean a state of the Jewish people. Today this demand means recognising the explicitly religious nature of the state, reinforcing the second-class status of the non-Jewish population, the pre-existing Palestinian population and their descendants, who make up 20 percent of Israel. The acceptance of this demand would pave the way for their ethnic cleansing should any Palestinian entity be established.

Numerous concessions have been made to the ultra-right Orthodox parties and groups. Attempts to impose segregation among men and women in Beit Shemesh are not new, but go back years. Only the previous week, a female bus passenger refused to move to the back of the vehicle when ordered to do so by a Haredi man. She also refused when a policeman, called by the bus driver, asked her to move. Despite an Israeli court ruling outlawing enforced segregation on buses earlier this year, “voluntary segregation” is still permitted.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has previously warned about the cultivation of such rightist elements, which will be used against the Jewish working class just as surely as they are used against Israeli Arabs and the Palestinians. (See “The Israeli state and the right-wing settler movement”)

The recent protests have emerged just a few months after the largest social protests in Israel's history, in August and September. These mass movements demanded an end to the government's free market policies that have drastically increased poverty and social inequality. In October, further large protests were held, directly inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement.

The Haredim Jews have the highest rate of poverty, largely because so few work, as they are enrolled in religious educational institutions and live off state subsidies. Other impoverished groups include immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. Cultivating religious obscurantism helps isolate these layers from other sections of workers and reinforce religious identity as the basis for Israeli politics, rather than opposed class interests.

While opposing rightist elements within the ultra-Orthodox groups, and all attacks on the democratic rights of women and children, workers and youth must reject all claims that this brings them into an alliance with supposedly “progressive” elements within the ruling elite. What is required is the adoption of a socialist perspective for the redistribution of wealth from rich to poor and unity between Jewish and Arab workers and youth. This will tear the ground from beneath the clerical reactionaries and their political allies in government.



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