

The self-immolation of Moshe Silman

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The self-immolation of Moshe Silman raises fundamental questions of political perspective before workers and youth in Israel and throughout the Middle East.

Silman's was a desperate act, for which the Israeli ruling elite is entirely culpable. The appalling personal circumstances that drove him to douse himself with petrol, leaving him near death with burns to 90 percent of his body, are well known.

His suicide note is eloquent testimony to two things: how even a moderately successful small businessman can be plunged into abject poverty under the impact of the deepening crisis of Israeli and world capitalism, and, secondly, the casual indifference of the political representatives of the ruling class and its state authorities.

"The state of Israel stole from me and robbed me," he wrote. "They left me with nothing."

"I can't afford medication or rent," he added. "I blame the State of Israel, [Prime Minister] Benjamin Netanyahu and [Finance Minister] Yuval Steinitz... They take from the poor and give to the rich."

Though he fell further than many, Silman's experience is shared by millions of Israelis suffering ever-greater hardship. Yet the media and politicians are insisting no broader conclusions can be drawn from his fate. For Netanyahu, Silman's is an "individual tragedy," while Labour Party leader Shelly Yechimovich insists that he "certainly must not be seen as a symbol of the social protest."

The *Jerusalem Post* was particularly incensed by the comparisons being made with Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor who set himself on fire in December 2010. His suicide played a catalytic role in the mass social movement that ended with the fall of the regime and then spread to Egypt and beyond.

The *Jerusalem Post* editorialised: "Are we to believe that Israel's dynamic, free economy and relatively

generous welfare state can conceivably be compared to the stifling nepotism, Byzantine bureaucracy and arbitrary restrictions under then-president of Tunisia Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's autocratic rule?"

The answer is clearly yes.

Silman set himself on fire on a July 15 demonstration marking the first anniversary of the mass social protests, known as the July 14 movement, which at their height brought close to half a million Israelis—out of a population of just 7.75 million—onto the streets.

Protests against the spiralling cost of housing won mass support. They targeted the oligarchy—the 20 families that control most of the economy in a country with one of the highest levels of poverty and inequality in the developed world, where 75 percent of workers earn \$1,700 or less a month.

The protests punctured a myth that is essential to the Israeli bourgeoisie and which the *Jerusalem Post* again seeks to utilize—that Israel is different from the rest of the Middle East and North Africa, an oasis of democracy and economic prosperity. They proved that the social crisis in Israel is inseparably bound up with the social, economic and political developments taking place throughout the region, which, in turn, are shaped by the worsening crisis of the global capitalist system.

They above all demonstrated that the fundamental divide in the Middle East, as everywhere else, is not nationality, race or religion, but class. Jewish workers, like their Arab brothers and sisters, are facing ever more brutal attacks on their living standards. In Israel, as in the Arab countries, the enemy of the workers is not workers of other countries, but their own bourgeoisie and its imperialist backers in the US, Europe and around the world. The failure of the world capitalist system has created the objective conditions for the unification of the struggles of Israeli and Arab workers against imperialism, Zionism and the Arab bourgeoisie.

Silman resorted to his own personal destruction not only to register a terrible protest, but in the hope of re-galvanizing the movement in which he had been an activist from the earliest days. He clearly drew inspiration not only from Bouazizi, but also from Greek pensioner Dimitris Christoulas, who killed himself with a handgun on April 4 in Syntagma Square and called for young people to rise up against the government. In video clips of Silman, he declares the need for a “revolution.”

Silman’s immolation has led to protests involving several thousands against Netanyahu and the government. But it is not a matter of simply reviving the July 14 movement.

The perspective on which that movement was built is politically responsible for Silman and a number of other individuals who have tried to emulate him being left in such an apparently hopeless position.

Though winning the support of broad layers of workers and youth, its leadership articulated the political and social interests of a narrow layer of the petty-bourgeoisie. As with innumerable similar formations, such as Occupy Wall Street and the “Angry Ones” in Spain and Greece, an insistence on “no politics” was meant only to ensure that no fundamental challenge was made to an economic order within which the leading elements of the protest were seeking their own social advancement.

Their real argument with the oligarchy was that it was not sharing the spoils with the upper-middle layers as it had in the past. They wanted to change the status quo only insofar as they wanted a position for themselves closer to its apex.

All these movements have suffered a collapse, in large measure because many leading figures have been afforded the niche they sought—leaving the more genuine elements increasingly isolated.

The two main instigators of July 14, Daphni Leef and Stav Shaffir, now run a non-profit organization whose stated aim is “to change the order of priorities, to recreate social mobility.” In Shaffir’s words: “We all miss last summer. It was amazing. But it is time to mature and move on.”

Others have followed suit, entering the world of official politics or starting businesses.

Haaretz reported July 1: “The leaders of last summer’s cost-of-living protest have joined forces with

members of the business community and academia to put together a social justice covenant.” Their call for “gradual increases in the state budget... to get the wheels of development moving” is backed by Histadrut trade union federation leader Ofer Eini and various professors.

“We figured we’d enlist as many groups in the economy as possible, such as protesters, members of the political system, and, first and foremost, players in civil society,” states Uri Matoki.

The 2011 protests were only the initial expression of a broad and a still inchoate radicalization of workers and youth that unfolded as part of the mass movements throughout the Middle East and Europe against ever deepening social misery and the tyranny of the banks.

One year on, bitter political experience in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere has demonstrated that such spontaneous outbursts of social anger, even when assuming insurrectionary forms, do not obviate the requirement for a socialist and internationalist programme and a leadership that articulates the independent interests of the working class. What is required is a unified struggle throughout the region, led by the International Committee of the Fourth International, to abolish the profit system and establish the United Socialist States of the Middle East as part of a world socialist federation.

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