

Israeli police charge protest movement leader with assault

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Last week, police filed charges against 27-year-old Daphni Leef, one of the leaders of Israel's mass social protest movement in the summer of 2011. This is a profoundly undemocratic move whose official justification turns reality on its head.

Leef stands accused of assaulting a police officer, disrupting the peace and resisting arrest during a demonstration in June 2012. The police claimed that the demonstration was illegal, as it had not been cleared with the authorities, and demonstrators "disturbed the peace in a way that could intimidate the public".

The indictment added that Leef "led the angry demonstrators and encouraged their acts against [municipal] inspectors and policemen".

The action against Leef portends a vicious crackdown by Israel's political elite on opposition to Israel's pro-business policies that will be stepped up in the 2013 budget. This elite includes the Labour Party, whose leader Shelly Yachimoch is on record as having supported the police's conduct during the demonstration.

Leef, a video editor, was arrested along with another 11 people after she and several hundred activists had attempted to set up a tent city on Rothschild Boulevard in downtown Tel Aviv. Labour mayor Ron Huldai, who had initially supported the 2011 protests, was determined to prevent another outbreak of mass protests a year later, and municipal inspectors and his "Green Patrol" moved in forcefully.

Ten police officers seized Leef, pinned her down and beat her, before dragging her along the street, throwing her into a police van and taking her to the police station.

The police violence was photographed, causing widespread outrage. The following evening, 7,000 people gathered to voice their opposition to the

detention of the 12 activists, Leif's arrest, and police behaviour. The police responded with force, and angry scuffles and clashes broke out. Shortly afterwards, police chief Yohanan Danino admitted that Leef's arrest was a mistake and should have been handled differently, although he denied any misconduct and violence against protesters.

Leef only learned about the indictment on January 7, the evening before the hearing at Tel Aviv Magistrate's Court—via a telephone call from the police. She had not received the evidence on which the charges were based. As a result, the court was forced to agree to a postponement of the hearing until January 23, one day after the general election.

Leef rejects the charges and is considering suing the police for injuring her during the demonstration. She ended up with a broken hand and had to be sent for medical treatment. Her defence counsel, Gabi Lasky, said, "The indictment is not just against Daphni; all the protesters are being indicted".

The police brought the charges after the attorney general refused to indict Leef.

In July 2011, Leef set up a tent in Habima Square following her inability to find an affordable apartment—and her discovery that rents had doubled in the previous five years—to highlight the situation. She was soon joined by thousands of people who pitched their tents in cities across Israel.

However, the leadership of the protest movement articulated the political and social interests of a narrow layer of the better-off. There were just a few isolated pockets of Israel's Palestinian citizens, workers and youths of Russian, Middle East and North African origin and impoverished ultra-Orthodox families who participated.

Like the Occupy Wall Street and the "Angry Ones"

in Spain and Greece, the leaders insisted on “no politics” to ensure that there was no fundamental challenge to the capitalist order within which they sought their own social advancement. The real argument of these forces with Israel’s oligarchs was that they were not sharing the spoils with the upper-middle-class layers, as they had in the past.

The protesters initially won support from established politicians such as Tel Aviv’s mayor Huldai, who when asked to define “affordable housing” for *Globes* business magazine, said it “means a solution for the middle class: working people with salaries who still struggle to meet housing prices in the city center. We want to retain this population, which is the city’s heartbeat. There’s a lot of confusion about the term. Affordable housing isn’t socialism; it’s meant for the middle class”.

He added that legislators were “participating in it and there is a realisation that the government will fall if it doesn’t let the middle class live in Israel. Continued success depends on the organisers’ ability to translate the protest to a practical political issue, i.e. to ensure that in the next Knesset elections will vote in people who will strengthen the middle class and create a more equitable and social-democratic society in Israel”.

All these movements have suffered a major decline, largely because many of the leading figures found the niche they sought—leaving the more deeply affected elements increasingly isolated.

Itzik Shmuli, the leader of the National Union of Students who is close to the Histadrut trade union federation, has received US\$200,000 from one of Israel’s foremost tycoons for a project.

In November 2011, the daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* reported that Leef and another of the protest leaders, 27-year-old journalist Stav Shaffir, decided to establish a fund so that they could draw a salary for continuing their social activism. Last February, Shaffir and two others set up the Israeli Social Movement. But both Shmuli and Shaffir have now joined the Labour Party and are now seeking election to the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, where their position on Labour’s list assures them a seat.

Shmuli said, “From my perspective, what started on the street has to end in the ballot box”, adding that he never had any doubts about joining Labour, although his politics made him attractive to other parties.

There they join a leading venture capitalist Erel Margalit, who has long been associated with Labour. One of Israel’s top venture capitalists, Margalit heads Jerusalem Venture Partners, which manages investments approaching US\$1 billion.

The protest leaders have splintered, with many, including Shmuli, openly embracing patriotism and militarism. Their rallying cry has become “equal responsibility” in the form of compulsory national service for all men, including religious Jews, until now exempt if they pursue religious studies, and Palestinian Israelis. They insist that everyone should share “equally in the burden of defending the state”.

By taking up the demand for compulsory conscription, Shmuli and other leaders of the social movement are fostering divisions between religious and secular Jews and creating conditions for the persecution of Palestinian Israelis who refuse to serve for obvious political reasons. Above all, they support the militarist line of the Netanyahu government, which also means further cuts in public and social services and tax rises to pay for a defence budget that at 6.5 percent of GDP is one of the highest in the world.



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