Palestinians strike, protest against Kushner's "deal of the century"

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In the more than quarter-century since the signing of the US-backed Oslo Accords between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Israeli state, the so-called "peace process" has become a bitter joke for millions of Palestinians and people throughout the Middle East.

The deal, which was ostensibly to result in Palestinian "self-determination" based upon the creation of an independent state on territory occupied by Israel in the 1967 war, has only provided a cover for the continuous seizure of Palestinian land and the vast expansion of Zionist settlements in the occupied West Bank, alongside the unending and deadly siege of Gaza. On the other hand, it resulted in the PLO's creation of the monstrosity known as the Palestinian Authority, which serves as a security contractor for Israel and the US, while enriching a thin layer of corrupt Palestinian officials and businessmen.

Even in this protracted and bitter context, however, the conference convened in Bahrain this week with US President Trump's son-in-law and fellow real estate scion Jared Kushner at its head, represents the most degraded farce ever realized in the discredited name of "Middle East peace."

The so-called "workshop" in Bahrain brought together representatives of the ruling oil monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, US officials, a smattering of Israeli businessmen, the US private equity billionaire Stephen Schwarzman, the ineffable ex-British Prime Minister Tony Blair, World Bank President David Malpass and Christine Lagarde of the International Monetary Fund.

Absent, however, was any Palestinian representatives or any officials of the Israeli government, making the idea that the gathering provided some new path to peace ludicrous on its face.

The Palestinian Authority boycotted the event. Its convening was met with a general strike in the Gaza Strip and demonstrations in various parts of the West Bank, including a march by 3,000 in Nablus. Some of the protesters were fired on by Israeli troops.

The Israeli state did not bother to send anyone to the conference; its interests were already well represented by Kushner and the other two top US officials overseeing the proceedings, Trump's ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, and White House Middle East envoy Jason Greenblatt. Kushner's family and Friedman are longtime active supporters of the Zionist settlements, while all three unconditionally defend the right-wing government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Opening the "Peace to Prosperity Workshop," Kushner delivered a speech from a stage that looked like it had been borrowed from the set of a US television game show. His main task was delivering a Power Point presentation of a 136-page glossy brochure issued by the White House.

"For the moment, imagine a new reality in the Middle East," he told his audience of sheiks, bankers and right-wing officials, who were assembled in one of the world's last absolute monarchies, which executes, imprisons and tortures its political opponents.

Kushner's improbable "vision" was that of the transformation of the West Bank and Gaza into a capitalist investor's paradise, where profits would be so great, and the banks and big business so unfettered, that "money can trickle down to the people."

The plan itself represents a series of vague and boilerplate proposals for improving education, health care and infrastructure, along with the demands for a "proper security situation, because investors don't feel comfortable investing where there's not proper security," and for an agreement with the "Palestinian public sector to clearly define property rights."

Described by Kushner as the "opportunity of the century," this presentation was two years in the making, with the date for its unveiling repeatedly postponed. The document presented in Bahrain represents a collection of previous development schemes—all of them unrealized or failures—drawn up by international agencies over the past decades. Much of it was literally cut-and-pasted into the "Peace to Prosperity" brochure.

Yet, with nothing whatsoever to present outside of remarkably round numbers—a $50 billion investment that would create a million jobs in the occupied territories, cut their poverty rate in half and double their GDP—Kushner had the nerve to demand that Palestinians "think outside the box" and abandon "tired talking points" and "the broken record of negativity."

By this, of course, he means abandon any struggle against Israeli occupation and any demands for basic rights.

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Spelling out what Kushner meant, Israel's ambassador, Danny Danon, wrote a bluntly thuggish column for the *New York Times* on the eve of the Bahrain "workshop" titled, "What's Wrong With Palestinian Surrender?"

He wrote that the striving of Palestinians for an end to Israeli occupation only "engenders a culture of hate and incitement," adding that he would like to see "a national suicide of the Palestinians' current political and cultural ethos."

"I ask: What's wrong with Palestinian surrender?" demands Danon. "Surrender is the recognition that in a contest, staying the course will prove costlier than submission."

Kushner refused to address any of the political questions underlying the conditions in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. The brochure itself makes no reference whatsoever to the occupation, turning Gaza and the West bank into a blank fantasy land ready for transformation into the next Dubai or Singapore.

This renders large portions of the document laughably absurd. For example, it bemoans that "High real estate prices across the West Bank and Gaza have made it difficult for many Palestinians to purchase a home." And it proclaims the "goal of reducing regulatory barriers to the movement of Palestinian goods and people."

One would hardly guess that the issue of real estate in the West Bank is bound up with the mushrooming of Israeli settlement and the expropriation of Palestinian land, along with the systematic destruction of Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem. Or for that matter, that the "barriers to the movement of Palestinian goods and people" include an 11-year siege that has trapped 2 million Palestinians in what is often described as the world's "largest open-air prison," subjected to repeated bombardments and invasions that have claimed the lives of thousands.

While political issues were not addressed, both the Bahrain event and what the Trump administration has carried out in practice make it clear that Washington is preparing to back the Israeli government in the outright annexation of the West Bank and the implementation of an even more naked apartheid system of rule.

The Trump administration has carried out a policy of systematic attacks on the Palestinians and support for Israeli repression. Kushner's feigning concern for their welfare is laughable in the face Trump's recognition of Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem and moving the US embassy there in a break with former US policy and international law. He similarly recognized Israel's claim to the illegally occupied Syrian Golan Heights. Additionally, he has cut off all US aid to the Palestinians, including $350 million for UNRWA, which assists Palestinian refugees, while scrapping another $200 million in aid funneled through USAID and $25 million for hospitals in predominantly Palestinian East Jerusalem.

While Kushner indicated that outstanding political "issues" would be dealt with in a subsequent US proposal, which will certainly not be released before the Israeli elections called by Netanyahu for September after his failure to form a government. Annexation of the West Bank is being openly raised by his right-wing supporters in advance of the vote.

The other promises of the Oslo Accord, to provide an independent Palestinian state in the territory occupied by Israel in the 1967 war, a capital in East Jerusalem and justice for the millions of Palestinian refugees demanding the right of return, have already been precluded by US and Israeli policy and "facts on the ground," including the expansion of the settlements and the division of the West Bank into a patchwork of discontinuous and economically unviable "Bantustans."

The chimera of a $50 billion development program is being advanced by Kushner and the Trump administration not so much to bribe the Palestinians as to set the stage for annexation by using their rejection of this farce as a pretext for US support for Israeli action.

The other purpose of the farce in Bahrain is the solidifying of an alliance between the Israeli state and the reactionary Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms as the basis of a regional axis in support of US imperialism's buildup to war against Iran, which Trump once again threatened with "obliteration" Monday.

Millions of Palestinian working people have concluded that their liberation will never been realized through an imperialist-brokered "two-state solution." This is the result not just of US imperialism's open abandonment of this tactic, but also the betrayals carried out by the Palestinian bourgeoisie, both the imperialist stooges and policemen of the Palestinian Authority and the Islamist faction, Hamas.

Putting an end to the decades of displacement, oppression, poverty and violence inflicted upon the Palestinian people can be realized only by means of uniting the Jewish and Arab working class in the struggle for a Socialist Federation of the Middle East as part of the struggle to put an end to capitalism all over the world.

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