Back-to-work policy accelerates spread of COVID-19 in Israel

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The direct result of the back-to-work policy dictated by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud-Blue and White coalition government is a renewed rise in the number of new COVID-19 cases in Israel, the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

As of July 3, Israel had recorded 28,055 cases and 326 deaths, with an additional 1,008 new cases. The number of new cases has doubled every 12 days over the last month and now averages more than 500 a day. While the number being ventilated is stable, at around 30, this is because hospitals are deferring ventilation to a later stage of the disease, if at all, due to fears of long-term damage. Likewise, the number of seriously ill, which has risen to more than 40, is still relatively low because it takes about two weeks after the detection of new cases to reach this level of severity.

The rise in new cases has led to the closure of many schools throughout the country, and the re-imposition of restrictions in certain areas, including limits on the number of people at concerts, events, weddings and funerals.

The government has brought back the rule requiring Palestinians, who cross the border into Israel to work predominantly in the construction industry, not to go home to their families at the end of their working day. Instead, they must remain in Israel until July 17, in accommodation provided by their employers.

The government is also introducing legislation allowing Israel's security agency, the Shin Bet, to continue using a surveillance system originally developed for monitoring the Palestinians, in a bid to curb the spread of the disease, despite widespread criticism.

In late April, as the infection rate began to fall, reaching just a few dozen new cases a day—and the cost of the closures reached $285 million a day—the government announced a relaxation of restrictions. This allowed the reopening of schools and a return to work, and later, the reopening of restaurants, bars, clubs, swimming pools and hotels.

Netanyahu has failed to put in place any measures to guard against or deal with a second wave. This was despite recommendations from a team of experts, headed by Professor Eli Waxman from the Weizman Institute of Science in Rehovot, that advises the National Security Council. It had called for a contact-tracing body, a national information centre on the COVID-19 crisis and a unit within the Ministry of Health to tackle emergency situations. His team also recommended that the government reconsider its decision to restart the economy if the daily number of infections rose above 200, far lower than the current rate.

Waxman blamed the increase in cases on the speedy and uncontrolled reopening of schools and the economy and the government's failure to implement his team's recommendations. He said, "In another three weeks, we are liable to reach a thousand new infections a day. And even if a small percentage of them turn serious, an overload will gradually be inflicted on the hospitals."

The social and economic impact of the pandemic has been devastating for Israeli workers and their families. While around 400,000 workers have returned to their jobs, more than 861,000 are unemployed, 21 percent of the workforce, compared with 27 percent at the height of the lockdown and just 3.5 percent in February. This figure does not include people above the legal retirement age, who do not normally qualify for unemployment benefits but have been receiving special grants during the pandemic.

The government's emergency unemployment support for 262,000 workers is set to expire at the end of August. This will leave hundreds of thousands without a financial safety net amid one of the worst unemployment crises Israel has ever seen, even as it announces an additional $580 million aid package for small and medium-sized

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businesses. The poorest Israeli households will find themselves in dire straits, with no income, no government support and nowhere to turn for help.

According to a government survey, job vacancies are at an all-time low, with just 42,000 vacancies in May, as the demand for workers fell by 55 percent in telecoms and 64 percent in retail. One-fifth of businesses expect their income to fall by half, while retail businesses, which have furloughed more than 46,000 workers, reported that they are likely to reemploy only 34 percent in the best-case scenario and just 10 percent in the worst-case scenario.

The Palestinian territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza have recorded more than 2,100 coronavirus cases, with 258 new cases in the previous 24 hours, and a total of 11 deaths. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has ordered a full lockdown throughout the West Bank for five days.

Anger is mounting against the Netanyahu government on several fronts. Last week, thousands of workers in the travel industry, one of the country's major employers, rallied outside the Finance Ministry in Jerusalem demanding grants and aid for the sector.

El Al, Israel's largest airline, already struggling before the pandemic, has suspended all flights as pilots refused to operate the few flights set for Wednesday, and ordered all flights, even those in transit, to return to Tel Aviv's international airport. The airline reportedly told pilots that if they refused to fly, they would be transferred to other active positions in the company, although many would be furloughed. It has already put 80 percent of its 6,303 workers on unpaid leave, cut management salaries by 20 percent, stopped all investment and purchases, including a signed agreement for new planes.

According to pilots' representative Nir Reveni, El Al had failed to abide by agreements made with pilots during the coronavirus pandemic and was holding out for a bigger bailout from the government. This package would dilute the main shareholder's stake from 63 percent to 15 percent and slash one-third of the workforce in the name of efficiency savings.

Teachers, furious at government plans to extend the academic year for secondary school students at their expense to make up for students' lost education, had threatened strike action that was only averted by a court ruling outlawing the government's proposals.

While 100,000 government employees have returned to work, the Ministry of Finance has announced drastic cuts in spending, including slashing both wages and jobs, leading the union to declare a labour dispute. The intention of the government workers' union is not to defend jobs but defend its place at the negotiating table and present its own plans on how to cut costs.

Ariel Ya'akobi, chair of the union, made this very clear, saying, "Usually, when they want to cut wages or fire workers, they approach the union saying that the government is in financial difficulty. Whenever the government is in difficulty, we're always there to help, and we find a way to solve the problem with as little harm to workers as possible. But this time, the government has already decided how much and where they're going to cut expenses."

Netanyahu has caused immense anger, expanding the cabinet to buy off his political supporters and demanding the Knesset approve retrospective tax benefits for him even as he faces charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three separate cases. Blue and White leader Benny Gantz, who now holds the specially created position of deputy prime minister, is seeking an official residence and other trappings of office at public expense.

Israeli and Palestinian workers and youth have joined in the international protests against the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May. They voiced their opposition to the brutality of Israeli police towards the most impoverished layers—Ethiopian, Jews of Arab and North African descent, migrant workers, Israel's own Palestinian citizens, Bedouins, or the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories—and the persistent refusal of politicians and the authorities to end racism and improve conditions in the wake of similar protests.

Not least, there have been protests against Netanyahu's deeply controversial and illegal proposal to annex the settlements and the Jordan Valley in the occupied West Bank, which appears to have been put on hold pending approval—with some cosmetic concessions—from the Trump administration.

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