Workers' opposition grows to Netanyahu government over pandemic and social crisis in Israel

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Opposition is mounting across Israel to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud-Blue and White national emergency government's handling of the pandemic and the deteriorating economic and social conditions.

On Sunday, some 2,000 public health laboratory workers in 400 public laboratories went on strike over poor working conditions and low wages. In public hospital labs, they are carrying out emergency work only. They are continuing to carry out coronavirus tests but are only contacting those testing positive.

Esther Admon, chair of the Association of Biochemists, Microbiologists and Laboratory Workers, blamed the government after talks with the Finance Ministry broke down on Monday saying, "The indifference and disregard of the prime minister and his ministers is outrageous. Beyond words. I understand with sorrow that there is no leadership in Israel."

Around 200 of the striking workers protested outside Netanyahu's official residence in Jerusalem Tuesday evening. They criticised the government for pouring funds into private labs, saying, "If the government had invested even only 10 percent of the NIS 4 billion ($1.3 billion) allocated to the private laboratories, there would have been no reason to strike... We decided to go demonstrate at Balfour [the prime minister's residence] because we have no choice."

The strike takes place amid rising opposition to the government's handling of the pandemic, its return to work policy, and the reopening of schools. Twice weekly demonstrations against Netanyahu's refusal to resign, even after being indicted on charges of corruption, bribery, and breach of trust in three separate cases, have continued for weeks and are growing larger.

The government initially put tight restrictions in place in early March. In late April, as the infection rate began to fall, the government announced a relaxation of restrictions, allowing the reopening of schools—partially at first and fully on May 17, the day that the new coalition government was sworn in, and a return to work. Later, the government green-lighted the reopening of restaurants, bars, clubs, swimming pools and hotels.

Netanyahu did so without putting in place any measures to guard against or deal with a second wave, despite recommendations from a team of experts, headed by Professor Eli Waxman from the Weizman Institute of Science in Rehovot. His team also recommended that the government reconsider its decision to restart the economy if the daily number of infections rose above 200—another recommendation the government ignored.

Within days of the government lifting restrictions on class sizes, there was a resurgence of the virus, with tens of thousands of pupils later sent into quarantine as their classmates tested positive, ultimately infecting hundreds of students, teachers and relatives. Without contact tracing, hundreds of schools were forced to close. According to the Ministry of Education, by the end of the school year in late June, 977 pupils and teachers had contracted COVID-19, with teachers the worst affected. At least one teacher is known to have died.

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 warned that this would soon overload Israel's hospitals, which have been starved of funds for decades.

Waxman warned other countries considering reopening their schools, "They definitely should not do what we have done," adding, "It was a major failure." Experts insisted that smaller classes, mask wearing, keeping desks two metres apart and providing adequate ventilation would be crucial until a vaccine is available. But such conditions are impossible without a near doubling of the number of classrooms and teachers.

In July, Siegal Sadetzki, Israel's director of public health

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services, resigned, saying that insufficient safety precautions in schools, as well as large gatherings like weddings, had fueled a “significant portion” of second-wave infections.

In the last two weeks, Israel has reported nearly 22,000 infections, one sixth of the total since the start of the pandemic, and a daily rate now of over 2,000 cases. Nearly 970 people have died, half of them in August. This contrasts with around 250 deaths at the beginning of May when restrictions were lifted.

The situation is no less acute in the occupied Palestinian Territories. In the West Bank, there are 8,172 active cases and 161 people have died. In the Gaza Strip, there are 280 active cases and four people have died. Three of the four deaths occurred in the last week and were due to community transmission, in contrast to previous cases that had contacted the disease abroad.

Dr Ashraf Alkudra, spokesman for Gaza’s Ministry of Health, said there was a major shortage of testing kits at Gaza hospitals. Last week, with limited means to stop the spread of the pandemic, Gaza imposed a full lockdown that is set to continue. There are only 90 available ventilators in Gaza, 10 of which were donated by the World Health Organisation.

Coronavirus czar Professor Ronni Gamzu, a physician, is strongly opposed to opening Israel’s schools in the “red areas” designated by regional councils as hot spots. He said it was unreasonable to open schools in such places because it is impossible to avoid new cases in the process. It was a question of managing risk and “this is not a risk to take.”

In the event, on Monday evening, just hours before all the schools were due to reopen at the start of the new school year, the coronavirus cabinet decided to keep schools in the designated red zones with high infection rates closed.

The reopening of schools has met with fierce opposition from teachers, whose union had threatened strike action. This was only averted the day before schools were due to reopen when Judge Hadas Yahalom ruled against the union’s right to strike. This was after the union and the Education Ministry agreed to maintain discussions and a guarantee that no teachers would be placed on unpaid leave without being allowed to present their case in the space of 24 hours.

The Education Ministry agreed to offer 800 pre-retirement positions to teachers who can show they are at risk of becoming seriously ill from the coronavirus and to provide $10 million for personal protection equipment for preschool and elementary school teachers.

The government only averted a strike by schools support staff, including student aides, maintenance staff, and secretaries, at the start of the school year by agreeing to find funds to support the Karev programme. The programme provides educational services for some of the most needy children, including at-risk students, Ethiopian Israelis, immigrants, special needs students, the ultra-Orthodox and Arab students. Without it, some 4,000 workers would have lost their jobs.

This is part of a larger political problem flowing from the government’s inability to agree a 2020 budget—the deadline has now been postponed until the end of November—leaving many school programmes with no funding earmarked for them and at risk of cancelation.

In recent weeks, there have been several strikes by public service workers over low pay and COVID-19-related issues, including:

• A nationwide strike of bus drivers in 16 bus companies in July over the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) as more than 1,000 drivers became infected.

• A nationwide strike of nurses over low pay and staff shortages, only carrying out emergency work, that was only called off after the government agreed to hire an additional 2,000 nurses on a temporary basis, 400 doctors, and additional security personnel.

• A 16-day strike by social workers in support of their demand for higher wages and a reduction in their burgeoning case load amid the pandemic.

Far from leading any united struggle of workers against the most right-wing government in Israel’s history, the Histadrut trade union federation has been in talks with Amir Peretz, a former Histadrut leader and now Minister of Economy and Industry. The talks are aimed at setting up roundtable discussions with employers and government departments over “flexible unemployment benefits.” The official unemployment rate has reached more than 21 percent, and food poverty is soaring.

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