

Israel: 130,000 protesters demand resignation of Netanyahu government

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Demonstrators took part in rallies in hundreds of locations throughout Israel Saturday, in defiance the government's new legislation banning protests during the lockdown.

The protests, encompassing an estimated 130,000 people in total, follow the months-long twice weekly protests calling for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to resign. Netanyahu has been indicted on charges of bribery, corruption, and breach of trust in three separate cases and faces growing anger at his disastrous mishandling of the pandemic and the economy. His ban on protests backfired, swelling the numbers who took to the streets.

The protests were organized by the Black Flag movement, Arise Israel, and the "Crime Minister" campaign, under the banner "A kilometer it is,"—a reference to the law passed by an all-night Knesset session on Wednesday night, banning protesters from rallying more than one kilometre from their homes and outdoor gatherings of more than 20 people during the coronavirus lockdown.

Protesters included members of the opposition parties, Netanyahu's Likud voters and religious and ultra-Orthodox Israelis. Some called for former army chief of staff Benny Gantz's Blue and White party to withdraw from the National Emergency Government formed just four months ago.

Clashes with the police broke out in Tel Aviv leading to at least 38 arrests, with arrests in other parts of the country and police dispersing demonstrations and imposing hundreds of fines for violating restrictions. Videos circulating on social media show police violence, including stopping journalist Jonathan Hempel from photographing a march in Tel Aviv and throwing him to the ground.

There were several reports of Netanyahu's supporters

attacking protesters, prompting the rallies' organisers to accuse him of incitement that could lead to civil war. Netanyahu has denounced protesters as "anarchists," "leftists" and "traitors" out to topple "a strong right-wing leader." It is part of Netanyahu's move to assert his own political dominance amid a broader range of authoritarian measures aimed at curbing opposition and dissent under the cover of the pandemic.

Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit has sanctioned the transfer of personal data to the head of Military Intelligence, Major General Tamir Heyman. He was given sweeping access to all the Tax Authority's data on private Israeli citizens. Tax Authority spokeswoman Idit Lev Zerahia refused to explain the new measure, whose legality is unclear, but revealed that a similar permission had been given to the heads of the Shin Bet security service, Mossad, the Crossing Points Authority in the Defense Ministry, the Anti-Terrorist Unit, the Defense Ministry department for the Oversight of Defense Exports as well as the Money Laundering Authority at the Justice Ministry.

With the onset of the pandemic, the government, using its emergency powers, authorised Shin Bet to use its technological surveillance tools; gave the police sweeping powers to pinpoint cellphone location and use drones to catch quarantine violators; allowed the hospitals to film and eavesdrop on patients; and installed facial identification systems.

Israeli workers now face measures long associated with the suppression of the Palestinians in the territories illegally occupied by Israel since their seizure in the June 1967 war. The new legislation follows the tightening of the second lockdown restrictions—Israel is the first country to impose a second national lockdown, albeit less strict than the first.

According to opinion polls, only about a quarter of the public has confidence in the way Netanyahu has dealt with the pandemic. Such is the dissent within his dysfunctional cabinet that it rarely convenes and did not meet for more than a month in the run up to the second lockdown.

Netanyahu tried to argue that the move was similar to the limitation on the size of synagogue services over the Jewish holidays, even though these were held indoors in crowded spaces and were attended by the ultra-Orthodox communities that have by far the highest infection and morbidity rates. Likud had sought to have the ban on mass protests remain in effect even after the lockdown was lifted, a demand the Knesset rejected. Netanyahu had called for a state of emergency to be declared, a move disqualified by Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit on legal grounds.

Earlier demonstrations saw soldiers deployed to help the police, leading to widespread public outrage. Gantz, as Minister of Defence and Lieutenant General Aviv Kochavi, the head of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), were forced to say they would stop the use of soldiers. Gantz nevertheless praised the “unparalleled” work being carried out by police officers and soldiers, stating, “I strongly condemn the attempts to attack them as they carry out their duties.”

His real fear was that the army would be seen for what it is, the armed body of men and women imposing the rule of Israel’s venal bourgeoisie, of which Netanyahu is only the most noxious example.

Israel, with a population of 9 million, has recorded more than 260,000 infections and nearly 1,700 deaths, the highest toll in the world on a per capita basis. The most susceptible to the virus are Israel’s Palestinian citizens, who suffer budgetary discrimination, and its ultra-Orthodox communities, the poorest communities in the country with inadequate housing and poor education, health, and other public services.

The number of confirmed cases has risen to 51,000 in the West Bank and 2,613 in Gaza, while there have been 376 deaths in the West Bank and 19 in Gaza. With totally inadequate healthcare facilities due to Israel’s occupation, its punitive withholding of taxation and utility revenues to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the 13-year long blockade of Gaza, the lockdown has taken a heavy toll on people’s livelihoods and brought many to the brink of starvation.

The protests, while growing, are still relatively small, in part because they have no political party or program but also because of the disillusionment with all the official parties that claim to oppose Netanyahu. Blue and White, the main “centre-left” opposition bloc under Gantz’s leadership, fought three elections claiming it would not serve under a Netanyahu-led government, only to do so as the pandemic brought Israel’s economy to its knees and Netanyahu reopened the economy in the interests of Israel’s corporate and financial oligarchs. But the fact the protests have taken place after the ban was put in place testifies to the explosive nature of social relations in Israel today.

These new protests are developing alongside struggles in Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, Egypt, and Sudan as well as in the US and Europe. The key issue this raises is to establish the political independence of the working class from all of the various bourgeois parties and the unification with workers in struggle throughout the region.

In 2011, a social justice protest movement over the soaring cost of housing erupted, at the same time as the Arab Spring protests in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere. But as with Egypt, a leadership drawn from the pseudo left milieu that reflected the interests of affluent sections of the upper-middle class served to prevent the emergence of a unified political challenge to the bourgeois powers of the region and to imperialism. Two of their leaders went on to serve in the Knesset as members of the Labour Party, which later joined Blue and White and the National Emergency Government, with Itzik Shmuli now serving as Welfare Minister.

The fundamental issue remains that of building a new leadership to unify and mobilise the working class across the region against capitalism, imperialism and war, and for socialism. Such parties must be built as sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Israel and across the Middle East.



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