

Israel's labour court bans teachers from striking in opposition to soaring Omicron infections

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27 January 2022

Tel Aviv Labour Court issued a ruling Wednesday barring members of the Israel Teachers Union from striking against Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's new school attendance policy. Bennett has exempted children from quarantine if exposed to a confirmed Covid carrier. The ruling comes amid soaring infections and rising opposition to the government's lifting of public health measures.

Teachers and educators at all public kindergartens and schools, excluding special education schools, had been set to hold a protest strike yesterday.

The court ruled that as the strike notice arrived just 11 hours before schools were due to open, there was insufficient time to hear the matter. Unions are required by law to announce a labour dispute at least two weeks before taking strike action. Education Minister Yifat Shasha-Biton said his ministry was issuing orders preventing protests and demonstrations by teachers following the court's ruling.

The court's injunction comes as the government, like ruling elites across the world, is relaxing all virus mitigation measures. Israel is suffering a fifth wave of infections but is pursuing a "let it rip" policy, relying on vaccinations--including a fourth jab for the over 60s, and clinically vulnerable under the age of 60--and "socially responsible behaviour" by the public to limit the spread of disease.

Orna Barbivai, Minister of Industry and Trade declared, "The government is leading an economic policy alongside coronavirus [rise] with the intention to cause as little damage as possible to businesses and workers who constitute a major growth engine in the economy."

She added that where 20 percent of the workforce are in isolation, employers will require essential staff to work overtime, "to ensure a minimum impairment of the ability

to function and provide necessary services and products to citizens and the economy." In effect, workers are to be forced to work inhuman stints to keep profits rolling in.

The government has also cut the period of quarantine from seven to five days as hundreds of thousands of workers isolate at home. Children are now required to take a home antigen test twice a week before going to school and the government will distribute nine million free antigen test kits to 400,000 families.

Israel's pediatricians have urged the government to delay its plans to exempt school students from quarantine. Professor Tzahi Grossman, who chairs the Israel Pediatric Association, told Kan Reshet Bet public radio, "We're waving a red flag. It's still not too late to change the decision."

The teachers' union, which represents 150,000 teachers, had called on its members to stay home in protest at the government's new measures. On Wednesday, 93,000 more people tested positive to COVID, equal to a 22 percent positivity rate and an R number of 1.17. The average number of daily deaths is around 40, fast approaching last year's peak of 60. As of Tuesday, there were 888 serious cases, with 187 on ventilators.

With hospital admissions rising, more than 8,000 doctors, nurses and healthcare workers are self-isolating, leaving hospitals and clinics unable to cope. On Wednesday, the government announced that as of Sunday, healthcare professionals including physiotherapists, communication clinicians, dietitians and occupational therapists in hospital inpatient units would start working in emergency "Sabbath mode."

The government's decision follows a letter sent by Health Professions Association chairman Eli Gabay to government ministers saying, "We will not be able to continue to give the dedicated care we provide on a daily

basis in hospitals. Health professionals have been stretched too thin. I'm calling on Nitzan Horowitz [the health minister] to intervene in this severe crisis immediately."

The situation in schools is no less dire, with more than 100,000 children in quarantine. Many schools are half empty and some schools are moving to remote learning.

On Tuesday, the Knesset (parliament) approved a law restricting the government's ability to impose restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of the disease. In future, the government will only be able to declare a healthcare emergency or "special healthcare situation", while also limiting its duration, with the approval of the Knesset or its Constitution Committee.

The new law effectively bans the government from ordering a lockdown or requiring schools to move to remote learning or imposing restrictions on people leaving the country unless it has declared a state of emergency. It also restricts the application of Israel's green passport system that limits entry to some venues to those who are vaccinated, allowing unvaccinated people to present a negative antigen test instead.

Yaffa Ben-David, secretary-general of the Israeli Teachers Union, has done nothing to oppose the dangerous reopening of schools and in-person learning. But faced with mounting teacher opposition she announced a strike in certain knowledge that Israel's labour court would outlaw it.

The union's de facto collaboration with the Bennett government, in office since last June, comes as Israel's National Insurance Institute (NII) issued its annual report showing income inequality, already the highest among OECD nations, had widened by 3.3 percent in 2021. It found that 22 percent of Israel's nine million population now lives in poverty, mainly due to the government's ending of COVID aid packages, including unemployment payments for those laid off during work closures in 2020. The NII estimates that child poverty stands at 31 percent, up from 29 percent in 2020, with lowest paid workers hardest hit by the pandemic.

Israel's poverty rate fell during 2020, due to the impact of Covid support packages. This was especially so for those among the bottom 10 percent of income earners where per capita income increased by 12 percent. The 10 percent of the population just above that group experienced a 5.6 percent rise. Without government aid packages, workers' income would have fallen by more than 10 percent in 2020.

LaTet, an anti-poverty advocacy group, confirmed that

over 220,000 households fell into economic hardship during 2021. Nearly two-thirds of poorer families went without medical care or prescription medicine last year when they were sick.

Gilles Darmon, LaTet's president, said, "It is important for us to show the gap in 2021 between the start-up nation and the soup kitchen nation. There are two different realities in Israel."

He added, "The Israeli middle class is on its way to disappearing. This is more than one-quarter of the entire Israeli society that is in danger of falling into poverty."

Israel is burdened by one of the highest costs of living in the world. The Economist Intelligence Unit, a sister company to the *Economist* magazine, recently rated Tel Aviv the most expensive city in the world, above Paris, Singapore, Zurich, Hong Kong and New York. Greater Tel Aviv is home to around 42 percent of Israel's population.

In its recent survey of the European housing market, financial services firm Deloitte estimated that a 70-square-metre home in Israel cost more than nine times the average salary, making it the fifth-costliest country in the world in which to buy a house. Prices for many basic items in 2019 were typically 19 percent higher than the average of 36 countries in the OECD, while Israeli salaries are lower.

Finance Minister Avigdor Lieberman and his officials, who speak for Israel's super-rich, have warned that regardless of any lockdowns in the future, the government has no intention of reintroducing aid packages. At the same time, documents leaked to labour news website *Davar* show the repressive state measures being prepared to deal with worker unrest. It reported that the Ministry of Public Security, responsible for Israel's police, prisons, and fire services is preparing legislation restricting firefighters' right to strike, with a leaked letter stating, "It is important to neutralize any obstacle that the workers try to put in our way."



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