Israeli protest leaders ignore escalating attacks on Palestinians, direct opposition along nationalist lines

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Opposition to the power grab by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has grown to unprecedented levels, but the protests' leaders have said nothing about the ongoing attacks on Palestinians by Israel's security forces and settlers in the West Bank.

On Saturday evening, for the tenth successive week, a record number of people—estimated at 500,000—took to the streets of towns and cities all over Israel, calling for democracy and a halt to Netanyahu's plans to neuter the judiciary. As well as 100,000 demonstrating in Tel Aviv, 50,000 people rallied in Haifa and in Jerusalem and 10,000 in Beersheva.

This was despite the police's use of horses, stun grenades and water cannon to break up previous rallies, and the government's efforts to use the shooting and wounding of three Israelis Thursday evening by a Palestinian, who was killed by security forces, to scare off protesters.

The rallies were again addressed by former government ministers, many of whom have served under Netanyahu in the past, as well as retired generals and intelligence chiefs, who are determined to channel the heterogeneous sentiments of the protesters along nationalist lines in defence of the Zionist project, amid the greatest political crisis and social and economic divisions in Israel's history.

The organisers have called for mass walkouts and rallies next Thursday in another "day of disruption," again without challenging the refusal of the trade unions to endorse the walkouts. The Zionist Histadrut union federation fears a massive explosion of anger over the rising cost of living, with inflation now running at 5.4 percent, interest rate hikes and spiralling housing costs. The Histadrut has just agreed a paltry 11 percent pay rise over a seven-year period for 350,000 public service employees, having fended off strikes during the pandemic and four elections in five years "to help with the economic recovery."

Neither have the organisers made any appeal to Israel's Palestinian citizens, sharing the concern of a government made up of a far-right coalition of fascists, racists and ultra-Orthodox parties to assert their pro-Zionist credentials. They have gone to great lengths to insist that these protests are in defence of Israel, issuing hundreds of thousands of Israeli flags to the demonstrators.

All factions of the Israeli bourgeoisie are united in their policy of occupying Palestinian land, expanding Israeli settlements—deemed illegal under international law and in violation of United Nations resolutions—and continuing the system of apartheid oppression against the Palestinian population.

The protest leaders are also no less determined to suppress any dissent within Israel itself that would challenge the rule of Israel's oligarchs. Former Prime Minister Yair Lapid and the other leaders of the opposition seek to convince the ruling elite that they are a safer set of hands to be entrusted with protecting the Israeli state.

The Israeli military has meanwhile stepped up its ever more lethal mass search and arrest operations in the West Bank, which include extra-judicial, targeted killings. They are being carried out during the daytime when towns and cities are packed with people, in an effort to intimidate and terrorise the Palestinian population.

From Monday to Wednesday last week, during the Jewish festival of Purim, the security forces closed the border crossings from the West Bank and Gaza into Israel, confining the Palestinians in a ghetto.

On Sunday, Israeli forces shot and killed three Palestinian gunmen after they opened fire on troops in the

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West Bank, while a fourth man turned himself in. This follows a raid by Israeli troops last week on the West Bank village of Jaba, where they shot and killed three Palestinians they claimed were “militants.”

On Tuesday afternoon, soldiers raided the West Bank city of Jenin, firing rounds of machine gun fire and explosives, with at least seven drones circling overhead, killing at least six Palestinians and wounding another 10. Video footage showed a damaged ambulance and witnesses said that medical staff were prevented from reaching the injured. A simultaneous arrest operation was mounted in Nablus.

On Monday night, settlers returned to Huwara, scene of a horrific pogrom-like attack a week earlier, where they threw stones at a supermarket and cars and injured five members of the same family, including an elderly man and a toddler. Israeli soldiers were seen dancing on the town’s main road to celebrate Purim. The Israeli military did nothing to stop the attack, instead firing tear gas on the Palestinians, of whom 25 needed medical treatment.

President Mahmoud Abbas’s Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA), which is widely reviled for its dictatorial and corrupt rule in the service of Israel, has done nothing to protect its citizens, despite being responsible for “security” in the West Bank’s towns and cities. It has enriched a handful of plutocrats while policing the deepening poverty of the majority.

Teachers have been on strike since February 5 over the PA’s failure to pay them their full salaries. With more than a million Palestinian students unable to attend school, families have started a movement to support the strike.

Israel’s orgy of criminal violence brings to 80 the number of Palestinians killed since the start of the year, while Palestinian attacks have killed 14 Israelis. It threatens the eruption of a violent conflagration that would engulf not just the occupied Palestinian territories, but Israel and its neighbours, even as Israel is involved in a covert war against Iran and its allies in Syria.

All this has the backing of Israel’s paymasters in Washington, with the Biden administration granting Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich—the Religious Zionist leader whose remit now includes the settlements in the West Bank—a diplomatic visa to visit the US where he will address the Israel Bonds conference. Civil rights groups and Palestinian and Jewish organisations have called for the self-confessed fascist and homophobe to be denied entry. Smotrich has called for Israel to “wipe out” Huwara, home to 7,000 Palestinians.

It is impossible for Israeli and Palestinian workers, no less than workers in other countries, to advance their struggle without recognising that there are no solutions to their oppression within the confines of capitalism and the nation state system. Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, defended by the International Committee of the Fourth International, demonstrates that workers and the rural poor in the Middle East and elsewhere cannot achieve any of their most basic needs—freedom from imperialist oppression, democratic rights, jobs and social equality—by aligning with any section of the national bourgeoisie.

In the imperialist epoch, the realisation of the basic democratic and national tasks in the oppressed nations—tasks associated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the rise of the bourgeoisie—requires the taking of power by the working class. This can be achieved only as part of the struggle for world socialist revolution: to place all the resources of the national and international economy under the control of the workers and oppressed masses. It requires the building of a mass movement aimed at bringing a workers’ government to power.

To conduct this struggle, two things are needed: an international socialist strategy and workers’ own independent fighting organisations to unite Palestinian and Israeli workers with their brothers and sisters in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Iran and throughout the region in a combined struggle against capitalist exploitation and imperialist oppression, for the United Socialist States of the Middle East, as part of a struggle for world socialist revolution. It means taking up the fight to build the revolutionary leadership of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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