

General strike and mass protests stagger Israeli regime

Patrick Martin
27 March 2023

Late Monday, Jerusalem time, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced he was temporarily suspending action by the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, on his plan to carry out what amounts to a coup against the country's judicial system, the only arm of the state that his ultra-right coalition does not control.

Netanyahu made this tactical retreat in the face of the largest outpouring of popular opposition in the history of Israel, with massive street protests Sunday culminating in a full-scale walkout Monday by vast sections of the Israeli working class. Airports, shipping, transport, manufacturing, utilities, schools, day care centers, universities and virtually all government operations were affected. Israeli embassies all over the world were closed, and the Israeli consul general in New York City resigned.

The immediate trigger for this political explosion was Netanyahu's firing of his defense minister, Yoav Gallant, who on Saturday called on him to abandon the plan to straitjacket the judiciary because the political conflict over it was splitting the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Gallant, a top leader of Netanyahu's own Likud Party, cited statements by thousands of reservists that they would refuse their regular call-ups because they did not want to serve under a government that was destroying democracy.

The crisis in the military is only one expression of a conflict that has profoundly shaken Israel and blown up the fundamental myth of Zionism, that Israel represents the unity of all Jews against the world. Instead, Israel is riven by enormous social, political and class conflicts. As Netanyahu himself admitted, the country is on the brink of "civil war."

The self-proclaimed leaders of the protest movement, mostly officials of the previous government that gave way to Netanyahu after elections last year, like Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid, are themselves committed defenders of the Zionist state and its oppression of the Palestinian people, as is the judicial system which they defend. They do not represent a "progressive" alternative, objecting to Netanyahu's measures only because they fear that he will destroy the democratic fig leaf of the state of Israel.

Nonetheless, the massive popular movement shows that far deeper issues are involved. Long suppressed social contradictions are exploding through the opening provided by the conflict in the ruling elite, bringing broad masses of the Israeli population and, above all, the working class onto the political stage. The postponement or even the resolution of the conflict over the Supreme Court will not suppress the further development of this social movement, fueled by immense economic inequality within Israel and the impact of the global capitalist crisis.

Despite its enormous scale, however, this mass movement has a

weakness that will prove fatal if not combatted: It has not so far embraced in any way the struggles of the Palestinian people. There has been a sea of Israeli flags, with not one attempt to mobilize support from Israeli Arabs, let alone the Palestinian population of the occupied territories.

To have any chance of success, Jewish workers and youth must cast off the blinders of Zionist ideology and adopt a socialist strategy, based on the revolutionary unification of Jewish and Arab workers in a common struggle against capitalism.

There exists a powerful objective basis for the development of such a movement. For months, there have been large protests in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and other cities, huge for a country the size of Israel. The events of this weekend were a qualitative leap, however. Masses of people took to the streets, and a crowd estimated at 100,000 blocked the main road through Tel Aviv, fighting police attempts to clear it. Thousands demonstrated in front of Netanyahu's official residence in Jerusalem.

Strikes began on Sunday, a normal work day in Israel, and became so widespread that the Histadrut, the official union federation which has long been a direct arm of the Israeli state, was compelled to call a nationwide general strike. Many employers announced closures Monday, bowing to the strength of the strike movement. All departing flights from Ben-Gurion International Airport were grounded, and the country's two main seaports, Haifa and Ashdod, shut down.

Netanyahu's statement announcing the temporary suspension of Knesset action on the judicial coup acknowledged the power of the popular opposition. "Out of national responsibility, from a desire to prevent the nation from being torn apart, I am calling to suspend the legislation," he said. "When there is a possibility to prevent a civil war through negotiations, I will give a time-out for negotiations."

While Netanyahu promised talks with the opposition, he has actually been negotiating with the openly fascist elements in his own extreme-right coalition because they initially opposed making any retreat, even a tactical one, in the face of the mass movement. Their agreement to accept the postponement came with an ominous concession: The government will establish, fund and equip a new National Guard, under the control of the interior ministry, which is headed by Itamar Ben-Gvir, one of the main leaders of the fascist settlers on the occupied West Bank.

The time during which the judicial coup is suspended will be used by the fascists and the government to prepare the systematic use of violence against renewed political opposition. Their aim is to create a paramilitary force that, unlike the military, is politically vetted to include only the most rabid racist and religious Zionists and therefore can be more easily used for internal repression against the Israeli

working class and youth.

Ben-Gvir, the last cabinet minister to give his approval to the temporary suspension of the judicial “reform” bill, gloated to his supporters in a tweet: “The reform will pass. The National Guard will be established. The budget I demanded for the Ministry of National Security will be passed in its entirety. No one will scare us. No one will succeed in changing the people’s decision. Repeat after me: de-mo-cra-cy!” The last was a mocking reference to the main chant of the anti-government demonstrators.

Moreover, now that Netanyahu has bought himself some breathing space, he may well use that time to launch a military provocation against Iran, seeking to create national “unity” on the basis of an explosion of militarism. In this he would be following the example of his imperialist patrons in Western Europe and the United States, who have incited the proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, in large part to divert their mounting internal tensions towards a foreign adversary.

Netanyahu put forward the plan to place the courts under direct control by the cabinet and Knesset at least in part to save his own skin. He is being prosecuted on a series of well-founded corruption charges, and the courts could declare him ineligible to remain in office if convicted.

But the issues are far more fundamental than this. The real substance of the judicial measures is to eliminate all legal and procedural obstacles to the unrestrained dictatorship of the religious Zionists and the settler fanatics, who are a minority of the Jewish population but increasingly dominate the political system.

The turn toward violent repression and dictatorship in Israel is part of a global process. As demonstrated in recent months in France and Sri Lanka, in both imperialist powers and impoverished and oppressed countries, the ruling class sees no way out of the social and political crisis of world capitalism except through such methods. The safety switches of democracy are burning out, and the two major classes in modern society, the capitalists and the working class, are confronting each other in open struggle.

The events of the past months mark the end of a long period of political reaction in Israel, in which the class struggle has been systematically suppressed and the ideology of Zionism employed to justify the subordination of the working class to the garrison state erected to maintain the continued oppression of the Palestinian people. Now the forces mobilized against the Palestinians—above all, the fascist settler elements—are being turned against the Jewish workers and youth as well.

These attacks have provoked a mass movement that has brought masses of Israelis into the streets, where they have begun to measure their strength against the ultra-right. At the same time, they have brought Jewish workers and youth face to face with the historical necessity of a political reckoning with Zionism.

The Zionist presentation of Israel as a classless state, one where all the Jewish people could be united under one flag, where social divisions would be erased, was always a lie. The foundation of the state of Israel came about through the systematic dispossession of the Palestinian people and their forced expulsion through violence and terror. Then followed the series of wars waged to expand the territory of Israel and build it up as a powerful, nuclear-armed spearhead for American imperialism in the Middle East.

In 1948, the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, condemned the establishment of Israel based on religious identity as reactionary, a tragedy for both the Arabs and Jews living in Palestine. It declared:

The Fourth International rejects as utopian and reactionary the “Zionist solution” of the Jewish question. It declares that total renunciation of Zionism is the *sine qua non* condition for the merging of Jewish workers’ struggles with the social, national and liberationist struggles of the Arab toilers.

This perspective of the unification of the working class of the Middle East—Jews, Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Armenians and other peoples—in a common struggle against capitalism, resonates more powerfully today than ever. It is the only basis for a revolutionary struggle against dictatorship, national oppression and imperialist war.

It is impossible for Jewish workers and youth to defend their democratic rights under conditions where the Palestinian population of Israel and the occupied territories remains under savage military repression and increasingly brazen vigilante and settler violence. There cannot be military dictatorship in the West Bank and Gaza and democracy within Israel.

All groups which reject the possibility of uniting Arab and Jewish workers in a common struggle are politically bankrupt and in the final analysis share the perspective of Zionism, albeit in an inverted form, accepting the state of Israel as permanent and unalterable and writing off the Jewish working class.

This includes both the bourgeois national groups among the Palestinians, such as the corrupt PLO and the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas, and international “solidarity” movements like Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), which effectively blame Jewish workers for the crimes of the Zionist ruling class.

We repeat again the formulation of the Fourth International in 1948: Our perspective is “for the merging of Jewish workers’ struggles with the social, national and liberationist struggles of the Arab toilers.”

The events of the past weeks have put paid to the notion that the Jewish workers of Israel are somehow different from their class brothers and sisters around the world, including the Arab workers of Palestine. The central issue is to overcome the reactionary Zionist leadership of the protest movement and fight for the unity of Arab and Jewish workers in a common struggle to defend jobs, living standards and democratic rights, including the national rights of the Palestinian people. This can only be done on the basis of the program and perspective of international socialism.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)