

# The mass protests in Israel and the “left-anti-Semitism” witch-hunt

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For years, a relentless campaign has been waged internationally against opponents of Zionism and the establishment of Israel through the expulsion of the Palestinians and their ongoing persecution, denouncing them as “left-anti-Semites”.

This witch-hunt has targeted anyone making an analogy or drawing any comparison between Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians and Hitlerite fascism, or identifying Israel with apartheid rule in South Africa. It rested on the assertion that Zionism represented the collective interests of Jews the world over and that Israel was the embodiment of that collective self-identity.

The centrepiece of this campaign was the insistence on the adoption of the “working definition” of anti-Semitism agreed in 2016 by the intergovernmental body, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). The IHRA definition included definitions and examples of anti-Semitism that effectively outlaw criticism of the Israeli government:

- Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a state of Israel is a racist endeavour.
- Applying double standards by requiring of it behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.
- Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.

Not one of these proscriptions on free speech, defining what is supposedly illegitimate criticism, stands up when measured against the reality of the explosive conflicts that have now erupted in Israel. The political lie of the unchallenged universal legitimacy of the state of Israel has suffered a devastating exposure with the mass protest movement of Jewish Israelis against the far-right government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Since the election of Netanyahu’s government last November, resting on far-right and ultra-religious parties, it has set about consolidating the power of the government over the judiciary. This is designed to facilitate the suppression of social and political dissent and to pave the way for the permanent annexation of much of the occupied West Bank and bloody military interventions, not only against the Palestinians but also Iran and its allies.

The coalition also has plans for legislation disqualifying Palestinian Knesset members from serving in the Israeli parliament and banning their parties from standing in elections, permanently disenfranchising 20 percent of Israeli citizens.

This builds on Israel’s 2018 Basic Law, popularly known as the Nation-State Law, enshrining Jewish supremacy as the legal foundation of the state. This new Basic Law declares, “The right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people”, proclaims Jerusalem “complete and united” as Israel’s capital, declares that the development of Jewish settlement in the Occupied Territories is “a national value” to be encouraged by the state, and removes Arabic as an official state language. This has led groups including Amnesty

International, Human Rights Watch and Israel’s B’Tselem to denounce it as a new form of apartheid rule.

Netanyahu’s planned political coup has provoked the biggest mass protest movement in Israeli history. And though its leaders still proclaim their Zionism and loyalty to Israel, events speak for themselves regarding the assertion of “national unity” on which Zionism rests.

Hundreds of thousands have marched and demonstrated week after week to denounce the lurch towards dictatorship led by a government including self-avowed fascists such as Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich. The extent of the opposition testifies to the broader social and economic concerns animating a protest movement that has involved at least one in five of the population. The Zionist Histadrut trade union federation was forced to call strikes to try and control spontaneous walkouts by Israeli workers.

In response, the police have fired tear gas and used water cannon to break up demonstrations, carrying out mass arrests. Almog Cohen of Jewish Power and others have called for the arrest of opposition leaders for treason, including former Defence Minister Benny Gantz, former Prime Minister Yair Lapid, and former Major General Yair Golan, amid warnings on both sides that Israel faces a descent into civil war.

Millions of Israelis and some of its most prominent political representatives now routinely denounce the country’s descent into fascist rule in a manner that would be proscribed in the UK and much of Europe and provoke accusations of anti-Semitism, intimidation and victimisation.

## The “left anti-Semitism” witch-hunt in the UK

The “left anti-Semitism” witch-hunt in the UK was led by an alliance of the Blairite right-wing of the Labour Party, Zionists and Conservatives, all with intimate connections to the security services of Britain, the US and Israel. Focusing on Jeremy Corbyn once he became Labour leader in 2015, the witch-hunters claimed his supporters had transformed the party into an anti-Semitic threat to British Jews, who would be forced to flee the UK if he ever became prime minister.

The aim of the Blairites in driving out Labour’s left-leaning rank-and-file was to make sure that the party remained a reliable instrument of the most reactionary elements within the British state apparatus. Thousands were suspended, expelled or driven out, including many of Corbyn’s closest allies, while he prostrated himself before his critics and handed leadership of the party over to Sir Keir Starmer.

Today, Corbyn has been removed from the Parliamentary Labour Party and told he will never stand again as an Labour MP because he dared to suggest that his political opponents had exaggerated the threat of anti-Semitism in the party.

The witch-hunting went much wider than the British Labour Party,

however, as the IHRA definition was used as a political cudgel to silence the voice of Palestinians and their supporters on campuses and to ruin the lives and besmirch the integrity of academics and artists as varied as Günter Grass and Roger Waters all over the world.

The broader aim of this offensive was to justify the global enforcement of the policies of British and US imperialism in the Middle East using the dishonest and illegitimate identification of anti-Semitism with principled opposition to the policies of the Israeli state—especially its military-police role against the Palestinians, Syria, Lebanon and Iran.

The ultimate target of this McCarthyite orgy is the working class, facing censorship, political victimisation and even criminal prosecutions for opposing imperialism's crimes internationally and at home.

Moreover, accepting that Israel embodies the interests of all Jews leaves Jewish workers under the control of the Zionist state and politicians, and Arab workers prey to the claims of bourgeois Islamist groups, Sunni and Shia, including the Iranian-dominated Axis of Resistance, to represent the anti-imperialist strivings of the region's workers and oppressed masses.

The political restrictions being demanded in the name of combating "left anti-Semitism" would make it impossible to wage a struggle against imperialist warmongering and to fight for the unification of the working class in the Middle East. This made the attempt to denigrate and discredit socialism, and any identification of the independent and universal interests of the region's workers, Jewish and Arab, the essential political aim of the witch-hunters.

Responding to a column by Roger Cohen of the *New York Times* titled "Anti-Semitic Anti-Zionism," the WSWS explained:

Its broader purpose, however, is made clear in the very first line: 'The hard left meeting the hard right is an old political story, as Hitler understood in calling his party the National Socialists.'

Cohen's 'old political story' is an old political lie. Nazism was developed not primarily as an anti-Semitic, but as an anti-communist movement. Anti-Marxism and opposition to the international unification of the working class was Hitler's driving obsession, to which he counterposed ethnic German nationalism. His hatred of the Jews was based upon their association with the socialist movement.

He stated in *Mein Kampf* that his aim was to destroy 'Jewish Bolshevism.' He wrote of his 'conviction' that 'the question of the future of the German nation is the question of the destruction of Marxism... In Russian Bolshevism we must see the attempt undertaken by the Jews in the twentieth century to achieve world domination.'

The service provided to German imperialism by 'National Socialism,' i.e., fascism, was to mobilise the ruined petty-bourgeoisie and the declassed lumpen-proletariat as a shock force against the organised workers' movement. Its essential political aim was to eradicate Marxian socialism and destroy the labour movement as a precondition for the unleashing of militarism and war, which were necessary to secure the markets and territory required by German imperialism, as expressed in Hitler's goal of 'Lebensraum.'

In contrast, the socialist movement, that is the Marxist movement, attracted so many Jewish workers and intellectuals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries precisely because it stood resolutely for internationalism, for equality and unity, and an end to all forms of ethnic or religious discrimination, especially the anti-Semitism espoused by all of Europe's bourgeois governments.

These latest attacks on socialism, under the guise of defending against

"left-anti-Semitism", occur under conditions where the far-right is once again re-emerging as a significant political force, both in Europe and internationally, including the fascist Alternative for Germany and Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France. Today it will become clear to ever broader layers of the more thoughtful workers and intellectuals in Israel itself that it is impossible to combat a similar descent into far-right reaction without making a political accounting of the Zionist project and challenging its underlying political assumptions.

## The dead end of Zionism

What is unfolding in Israel is the product of deep-rooted contradictions, political and ideological, within the Zionist state. It is fuelled by the growing divisions between the working class and the ruling elite in one of the most unequal countries in the world, making paramount the need to identify the class interests represented on both sides of the conflict over Netanyahu's coup and to delineate an independent axis of struggle for the working class.

This can only be done by taking an historical approach that penetrates beneath the political mythology of Zionism.

Israel's foundation was rooted in the catastrophe that overtook European Jewry in the 1930s and 1940s, culminating in the extermination of six million European Jews in the Nazi holocaust following the defeat of the European working class by fascism.

The conditions for this defeat were created by the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union and the Communist International, and the Soviet bureaucracy's betrayal of the struggle for world socialism, which prevented the working class from putting an end to the crisis-ridden capitalist system. It was the disastrous policy pursued by the German Communist Party under the direction of the Comintern that allowed Hitler to come to power without the working class being mobilised to prevent this, paving the way to World War II and all its horrors and crimes.

Zionism politically exploited the widespread disillusionment created by this defeat among Jews—often with deep connections to the socialist movement—and the desperate situation they faced, to urge the creation of a separate Jewish state. Emigration to British-controlled Palestine was encouraged throughout the 1930s by Jews seeking to escape Nazi persecution.

Israel was finally established in 1948 following a United Nations vote in 1947 for the partition of Palestine that precipitated a civil war. Its foundation, justified by references to the Jews having been expelled from their homeland 2,000 years ago, was advanced as securing "A land without people for a people without land". It would supposedly be a just and democratic haven for a people who had faced discrimination and oppression for centuries—a state defined by religion, open to all who could claim Jewish ancestry/descent.

The reality behind such rhetoric is the forcible and brutal expulsion of almost a million Palestinians, most of the population, the seizure of their land and the assertion of the ethnic and religious interests of Jews over those of Arab Muslims and Christians.

From the very day of its inception, Israel was organically incapable of developing a genuinely democratic society due to the denial of democratic rights to and repression of the Palestinians. Plunged immediately into war with its Arab neighbours, it grew into a militarised state, with the army serving as its central pillar, supported by US imperialism as its heavily funded garrison in the region.

The Arab-Israeli war of 1967 ended with Israel's occupation of lands belonging to Jordan, Syria and Egypt, the West Bank of the Jordan River, the Golan Heights and the Gaza Strip. It gave rise to the Palestine

Liberation Organisation (PLO) under the leadership of Yasser Arafat that called for the struggle against Israel to be carried out under the banner of Palestinian nationalism, and the beginnings of Jewish colonial-style settlement and renewed ethnic cleansing. This turn to a “Greater Israel” policy was then consolidated by the decisive victory against Egypt, Syria and other Arab powers in October 1973.

A naked policy of military expansionism destroyed the good will Israel had enjoyed internationally since its foundation. It was a turning point in the political development of *opposition to Zionism on the left*, against which Israel’s rulers were to develop over many years the campaign to denounce “left-anti-Semitism”.

The escalation of militarism and war, including the military repression of the Palestinian national movement, the cultivation of a settler population, together with ultra-orthodox groups encouraged by the propagation of pseudo-biblical justifications for Israeli expansion, were all funded by the US. It was accompanied by free market policies and the abandonment of limited social welfare measures.

As social inequality in Israel grew to one of the highest levels in the world, a ruling class with less and less to offer workers increasingly based itself on the support of settler and ultra-religious groups. This created the basis for the emergence of the fascist tendencies within the political and military establishment. These are the forces that now dictate government policy and threaten not only the Palestinians but most Israelis with brutal repression.

It has left Israel today under a government intent on imposing the dictates of Jewish religious law, with religious discrimination enshrined in its constitution, and a society riven with explosive social and political divisions.

None of the major parties, whether in government or opposition, represent the interests of the “Jewish people” either within Israel or the diaspora. They are the contending spokesmen for Israel’s financial elite, courting Washington’s support—be it the Democratic Party or the Republican Party—for alternative perspectives for the preservation of Israel as a bastion of US economic and military domination in the region.

It is the protest leaders’ intransigent advocacy of Zionism and the social interests of the Israeli bourgeoisie that sets them against Netanyahu’s assault on the Supreme Court. They fear that “Bibi” and his fascist backers are undermining the bogus “democratic” veneer the Israeli state employs to legitimise its every military aggression—not only against the Palestinians, but against Iran.

Destabilising Israeli society by handing the initiative to Jewish supremacist and religious reactionaries, they know, wrecks the state’s ability to draw the population behind its warmongering agenda—and also risks an explosion of social struggles against economic policies of austerity to pay for war while enriching Israel’s oligarchs.

In the person of war criminals such as opposition leader Benny Gantz and Netanyahu’s rebellious Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, the Israeli bourgeoisie is acutely aware of the social and political threat it faces from the working class. In contrast these political realities find no expression among the petty-bourgeois opponents of Zionism and advocates for the Palestinians.

Understanding these historical and social processes raises the central question of how the working class must respond to the emerging crisis of rule in Israel.

### **Class unity, not ethno-nationalism**

Those accused of “left anti-Semitism”, Palestinian groups and their supporters in such organisations as the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions

(BDS) and Palestine Solidarity Campaign, are being slandered. But that does not mean they offer any basis for a genuine struggle against Zionism.

These groups and various liberal commentators have almost invariably taken the position that what is unfolding in Israel is purely a conflict between warring Zionist camps. Noting the reactionary character of the self-proclaimed leadership of the opposition protests, they not only insist that the same concerns animate the hundreds of thousands directly mobilised and the millions more who back them, but also that it is impossible to either challenge or change this situation.

This “plague on both your houses” position de facto accepts the Zionists’ own claim to be the legitimate representative of the entire “Jewish people.” It objectively throws a lifeline to the Israeli bourgeoisie at its hour of greatest need by reinforcing the myth of national unity and perpetuating the division between Jewish and Arab workers.

Their basic position, nationalist and pro-capitalist in essence, is that class distinctions count for nothing as the Jewish working class benefits from the oppression of the Palestinians and of Arab Israelis in their relatively privileged position as the social base of a “settler colonial state.”

This is only an extreme variant of the argument employed by pseudo-left tendencies internationally who not only write off any possibility of working-class unity and socialist struggle in any country beset by ethnic or religious conflicts such as Northern Ireland, Spain, and Belgium, but who also declare that the working class of the imperialist nations, above all in the United States, is similarly hopelessly corrupted by supposedly sharing in the “spoils of oppression.”

The political conclusion is an embrace of national and separatist movements as the supposedly “legitimate” representatives of the nationally oppressed peoples concerned. The working class, to the extent that it is even spoken of, is tasked only with supporting “national liberation” through military struggle led by various bourgeois tendencies and states.

The division of the world into ever smaller, “ethnically pure” states and statelets which flows from such a perspective has proved time and again, in Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe and throughout the Middle East and Africa, to be a recipe for fratricidal warfare ending in the creation of anti-democratic and dictatorial regimes that remain the playthings of the major imperialist powers.

### **For a revolutionary perspective**

The conditions exist to fight for a revolutionary socialist alternative in Israel and throughout the Middle East. The Israeli bourgeoisie and its state face an existential crisis—a fact now widely recognised. And under such conditions to reject a priori a successful struggle to break Jewish workers from Zionism is both profoundly sceptical and politically reactionary.

This is not the first time that divisions within the ruling elite, invariably of a reactionary and tactical character, have opened the road to an emerging revolutionary movement of the working class. One need only recall how the April 25, 1974 military coup in Portugal unleashed a mass socialist movement that ended the Salazar dictatorship and the colonial wars in Mozambique, Guinea and Angola. If anything, Israel is more socially polarised than Portugal was then between the working class and the ruling families.

In 1914, in *The Collapse of the Second International*, Lenin outlined what he termed the “three symptoms” of a revolutionary situation:

(1) when it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change; when there is a crisis, in one form or another, among the 'upper classes', a crisis in the policy of the ruling class, leading to a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth. For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for 'the lower classes not to want' to live in the old way; it is also necessary that 'the upper classes should be unable' to rule in the old way;

(2) when the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown more acute than usual;

(3) when, as a consequence of the above causes, there is a considerable increase in the activity of the masses, who uncomplainingly allow themselves to be robbed in 'peace time', but, in turbulent times, are drawn both by all the circumstances of the crisis *and by the 'upper classes' themselves* into independent historical action.

The basic issue that must be given conscious political expression is the growing political chasm between the opposition movement's bourgeois leadership and the sections of workers now moving into struggle. Instead of dismissing Israeli workers as homogenous defenders of colonial occupation, the task of socialists is to make a class appeal for the unity of Jewish and Arab workers against their common oppressors and in this way bring an end to the divisions so carefully fostered by the bourgeoisie.

This is the essential lesson to be drawn from Israel's troubled and tragic history. Responding to the partition of Palestine in 1947 by the United Nations that led to the creation of Israel, the Fourth International insisted in a statement titled "Against the Stream":

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.

It warned:

By partition a wedge is driven between the Arab and Jewish worker. The Zionist state with its provocative lines of demarcation will bring about the blossoming forth of irredentist (revenge) movements on either side. There will be fighting for an 'Arab Palestine' and for a 'Jewish state' within the historic frontiers of Eretz Israel (the Land of Israel). As a result, the chauvinistic atmosphere thus created will poison the Arab world in the Middle East and throttle the anti-imperialist fight of the masses, while Zionists and Arab feudalists will vie for imperialist favours.

This prognosis has been vindicated by history and Jews and Arabs alike have paid a bitter price.

The reactionary Zionist utopia of a national state in which the Jews of the world could find sanctuary, unity and equality has led instead to the creation of a capitalist state acting as a garrison for US imperialism, built through the dispossession of the Palestinians, maintained through the constant eruption of war, wracked by immense social and political contradictions, and built on the denial of basic democratic rights to its Palestinian citizens. Far from being the "only democracy in the Middle East", Israel is undergoing a headlong descent into police state forms of

rule, the emergence of fascism and the eruption of civil war.

There is nothing unique in this catastrophe relating to Zionism or the State of Israel. The dead-end of Zionism is only one manifestation of the failure of all national movements and the states they have created to resolve any of the fundamental questions confronting the mass of working people. The same issues are posed to all the peoples of the region, where the working class is subject to brutally repressive forms of bourgeois rule amid grotesque levels of social inequality.

Nor is there anything unique in the eruption of opposition. Israel is a significant expression of the far-reaching political consequences of a global upsurge of the working class, from Sri Lanka to France.

A genuine revolutionary alternative must be based on the theory of permanent revolution. In the imperialist epoch, Trotsky explained that the realisation of the basic democratic and national tasks in the oppressed nations associated in the nineteenth century with the rise of the bourgeoisie can only be achieved only through the independent political mobilisation of the working class, acting on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

The only way to defend democratic rights and put an end to state repression, deepening financial hardship, and the rising threat of far-right reaction and war is to unite Arab and Jewish workers in a common struggle against capitalism and for the building of a socialist society. Transcending all national divisions, workers must fight for the United Socialist States of the Middle East, freed from the predatory interests of the imperialist powers and transnational corporations. Built on the essential principle of equality for all the region's peoples, this would guarantee a democratic and prosperous future for all, based on the use of the region's vast natural resources to meet essential social needs.



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