

# Israeli anti-war activists speak with the WSWS

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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke on May 18 with Tova and Anat (not their real names), members of an anti-war group of Israeli mothers. The group, which has hundreds of supporters, was founded last November by mothers of young people required to serve in the armed forces, not only to prosecute the war against the people of Gaza but to maintain the ongoing occupation of the West Bank.

Alongside more established organisations, like Combatants for Peace and the Parents Circle Families Forum, this group has joined in many demonstrations against the war and for the return of the Israeli hostages in the framework of a negotiated deal to end the war.

Such protests have been slowly growing, despite a near-blackout in the international and Israeli media, as opposition develops to the fascist Netanyahu regime. As the WSWS has reported, the United States and the European imperialist powers continue to arm and support the regime, despite the mass protests that have erupted against the war around the world, and the charges of war crimes levelled against Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defence Secretary Yoav Gallant by the International Criminal Court.

Following the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, which killed 1,139 people, Israeli forces have killed well over 35,000 people in the Gaza Strip, most of them women and children. Another 10,000 are missing, presumed buried under the fallen masonry. More than 79,000 have been wounded. Hospitals, schools and other vital public infrastructure have been destroyed by bombs and entire cities have been reduced to rubble.

The vast majority of the 2.3 million people in the territory have been turned into homeless refugees and are being subjected to a policy of starvation and deprivation of medical care. The barbaric assault now underway against Rafah is forcing the further displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, who now have nowhere left to go.

Anat explained that “as mothers we feel that we have an ethical and political voice and message for the future of all children living in this heartbreaking land. We call to stop the war not only because we don’t want our children to die or get wounded, but because we are horrified and care deeply about the lives of Palestinian children, women, and men in Gaza as well as in Lebanon.”

The mothers’ group is one of several organisations that have drawn inspiration from the group Four Mothers, founded by mothers of soldiers in 1997 in opposition to the deployment of Israeli troops to Southern Lebanon. The group organised demonstrations which grew in size and were largely credited with turning public opinion in favour of military withdrawal, which occurred in 2000.

Today’s anti-war protesters confront what Tova described as a “very militarised” society. “We live with the military, our children grow up knowing they will be in the army when they are 18 or 19,

everything is kind of based on that. In our group we want to change this.” Tova became involved in the group after her son became a soldier (he is not deployed in Gaza on active duty).

Anat said: “I have a daughter who’s 17. What she will do, I don’t know, I’m happy that we have another year-and-a-half before that question becomes a reality.”

Tova explained that there has been some opposition to the assault on Gaza since it began following the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel, but not nearly enough. “In my surroundings, the people I meet are for peace, they are all against the war. There is opposition in the universities and many other places.” The mothers’ group was calling for a complete end to the war and for “everyone to go home, the hostages and the soldiers.”

As one recent indication, Anat noted that hundreds of university staff across Israel had signed an open letter demanding an end to the war. As of May 22, more than 1,470 lecturers and administrative staff had signed the petition, which denounces the “tremendous damage to civilians in Gaza, starvation, and unprecedented destruction of infrastructure” as well as the death and injury of Israeli soldiers and the harm to Israel’s standing in the world.

There are no clear figures about how many young people are able to avoid conscription. “You can opt out as a conscientious objector, but it’s quite rigorous, you have to prove you’re a pacifist through and through, but not many people do it. That’s one option and you don’t go to prison,” Anat explained. There are also many people who are exempted for psychological reasons.

The military is an extremely brutalising environment, and there are stories of people returning from deployment traumatised and unable to sleep. *The Times of Israel* reported in January 2023 that suicide was the leading cause of death among Israeli soldiers. According to *Haaretz*, at least 10 soldiers have died by suicide since October 7.

Calls for a ceasefire are now being tolerated by some parts of the protest movement calling for negotiations to return the hostages taken by Hamas. “It feels very late in the day, but it is beginning to happen,” Anat said.

She continued: “Our society has become so polarised, the discourse is so toxic, that even the demand for a deal to release the hostages has been labelled as ‘left-wing’ by the right, because the right is so extreme. So you don’t even have to say ‘stop the war,’ you can just hold up a picture of a hostage to get spat on and have police brutality directed to you. It’s become that toxic. If you are wearing a T-shirt in support of the hostages’ release, you are labelled as anti-Netanyahu.”

Politicians and the media have fuelled a climate of hostility and intimidation against anyone who speaks out. “I speak to people who say: ‘I’m really upset about the civilian casualties in Gaza.’ But they

won't necessarily hold a sign because it's really, really scary to do that," Anat said.

Tova added: "In Israel the media doesn't show much about Gaza at all. The media here, even when it's critical there's a limit to how critical it is." Those who want to know the reality in Gaza have to find it on social media.

Meanwhile, Anat said, there is non-stop coverage of the trauma of October 7. "People describe it as a second Holocaust and most Israelis, with the assistance of the media, are reliving the 7th of October day after day. Besides the many people who died, there are many people who were affected and hurt, and the stories are limitless, unfortunately, and they are constantly broadcast. The psychological impact of that is to every day generate justification for the war. The whole focus is inward looking."

The media denounces the global protests as "absurd" and "antisemitic." "They say these are young people who know nothing about the conflict and now it's really trendy, and the media are focusing a lot on the Israeli students on campus who feel threatened by it. That's sort of the coverage it gets, and it gets a lot of coverage. It's a way of not dealing with the real issue, which is the war, the horrible consequences of the war."

In the face of this barrage, people had to make a conscious effort to "see the humanity of the other side." Anat said something had to change in "the power structures or the institutions like the media. We have to do something differently in order for people to change."

Tova said the problem "all starts from inequality" which pervades Israeli society. In addition to the occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, there is systematic discrimination against Palestinian citizens of Israel. Recently in the Negev region, where she currently lives (after she and her family were evacuated from the north of Israel due to the hostilities with Hezbollah), police have been demolishing houses built by Bedouin people, because they did not have the right permits.

She explained that there are many bureaucratic obstacles for people who do not speak Hebrew, which make it harder to apply for National Insurance and access welfare and other services. Arab villages and towns in Israel are typically overcrowded and have fewer resources allocated to them.

At the same time, Anat pointed out that Palestinians were an integral part of Israeli society, with many receiving university qualifications. "You go to a hospital and it feels sometimes that half the medical staff, nurses and doctors, are Palestinian Israelis. So there is a more educated society and they are demanding their rights."

She said politicians used "identity politics" to sow divisions between different sections of Israel's working class, including Ashkenazi Jews (with ancestors in Europe) and Mizrahi Jews (with roots in North Africa or Asia). Tova said, "There was built-in discrimination from the beginning [when Israel was founded] against Jews from certain origins. The trauma experienced by the groups that had prejudice directed against them hasn't been resolved since."

"I think one of the biggest problems now that Palestinian Israelis are facing is that now they are being scrutinised for everything they say and do," Anat said. "Especially people in education. Just recently there was a teacher who participated in a Nakba Day procession [marking the 1948 "catastrophe" which saw the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians].

"She teaches in a Jewish school and the right-wing hunters—we call them hunters—they took a picture of her in a procession and made a big deal of it. So the Ministry of Education has now called her in for an inquiry. It's crazy. This is a teacher who has been teaching Israeli

students for a long time and she teaches peace. So they face a lot of intimidation now."

Anat and Tova were not certain about the long-term political solution for Israel and Palestine, including whether there should be one or two states, but said the starting point had to be the recognition of equality of all people. "We are all in this together, Palestinians and Israelis, and we need to see everyone. We have to acknowledge the humanity of everybody who lives here, beyond our national, ethnic or religious affiliations," said Anat.

They thanked the WSWs for drawing attention to the anti-war movement in Israel, saying the world needs to see that the right-wing is not the only voice in the country.

In response, WSWs reporters explained that the WSWs see this as a genocide and the end to the genocide could only be achieved through the unification of the working class throughout the entire region—including in Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt and Iran—and internationally. We noted that the WSWs has called for workers internationally to take action to stop the production and supply of weapons for the Netanyahu regime in order to shut down its ability to wage war.

To stop the genocide and prevent an even greater catastrophe, the working class had to fight to abolish the root cause: the capitalist and imperialist system. The imperialist powers view Israel as an essential ally in their broader war for the redivision of the Middle East and the entire world. The genocide in Gaza is but the prelude to the accelerating US-NATO proxy war against Russia and the active preparations for war against Iran and China. With Israel as the US's main subcontractor in the region, it will—like Ukraine—serve as cannon fodder in the war for regional domination.

The struggle for socialism, on an international scale, is the only way to stop both the fascistic regime in Tel Aviv, as well as the accelerating drive towards a Third World War by the US and its allies against Iran, Russia and China. The WSWs urges workers and young people in Israel, Palestine and throughout the Middle East to contact us to discuss this urgent political fight.



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