

Protests and general strike in Israel pose the need to break with Zionism

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The mass protests of the past two days in Israel have exposed the broad popular opposition to the far-right Netanyahu government, but also the political impasse confronted by any oppositional movement that remains trapped within a Zionist perspective.

Hundreds of thousands took to the streets on Sunday, including significant sections of workers, in what was the largest day of protest since Israel's genocidal war in Gaza began last October. The demonstrations denounced the government's failure to secure a hostage-exchange deal and were prompted by the recovery of six dead Israelis from Gaza the day before. The Histadrut trade union federation responded by calling a general strike on Monday.

Anger was enflamed by the news that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his cabinet had effectively torpedoed a hostage exchange deal just days before, on Thursday, by insisting on continued occupation of the Philadelphi Corridor between Gaza and Egypt. According to an Israeli Health Ministry postmortem, the six hostages had been killed as recently as Thursday or Friday, amid fighting between the Israel Defense Forces and Palestinian fighters.

The events starkly exposed the Israeli government's contempt for the lives not only of Palestinians in Gaza, but also of the hostages—whom it cynically uses as a pretext to wage a war of annihilation aiming to murder and expel as many Palestinians as possible from Gaza and increasingly from the West Bank as well. Escalating Israeli military attacks against Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as against Syria and Iran, threaten a catastrophic escalation of the conflict across the region.

Since the first and only exchange in November–December 2023—of Israeli hostages for Palestinians held captive in Israel's prisons—every time a similar deal has appeared to be possible, the Netanyahu

government has done something to sabotage it. The Israeli regime is not trying to save lives, it is massacring Palestinians and threatening a regional bloodbath of Arabs and Israelis in pursuit of its ethnic supremacist ends.

The deaths of the six hostages brought a broad section of Israeli society face-to-face with this reality. But it cannot be changed, as the current outlook of the protests suggests, by placing pressure on Netanyahu or by replacing him with other war criminals.

No progressive struggle can be taken up against the Israeli government without opposing the genocide which has so far claimed at least 40,000—and most likely closer to 200,000—Palestinian lives.

Histadrut Chair Arnon Bar-David's pledge that "we won't allow life to be abandoned" must be treated with contempt. This is precisely what the nationalist Histadrut bureaucracy has done for the last 11 months. Ignoring the call of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions Gaza for international solidarity action to stop the genocide in Gaza, it has worked to divide Jewish from Arab workers and allow the massacre of innocent men, women and children to continue.

The issues raised by the mass protest movement which swept Israel in the first half of 2023 are raised again, brought to a level of extreme urgency by the war.

In that movement, in which a significant percentage of Israeli society protested Netanyahu's efforts to carry out a far-right judicial coup, defence minister Yoav Gallant, former defence minister Benny Gantz and former prime minister Yair Lapid were put forward as opposition leaders. The protest organizers based themselves on complete support for the Zionist project and refused to take up the question on the democratic rights of the oppressed Palestinian people.

That perspective is in large part responsible for the

catastrophe which has since unfolded. As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time:

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...

To have any chance of success, Jewish workers and youth must cast off the blinders of Zionist ideology and adopt a socialist strategy...

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.

The protests were wound down, even as abuses of the Palestinians under the far-right government continued.

After the October 7 incursion, Gallant and Gantz were both happy to take part in Netanyahu's war cabinet and its crimes, while Lapid took on the role of an unswervingly loyal "opposition." Now they are again put forward as the answer to a crisis placed solely at the door of Netanyahu, Smotrich and Ben Gvir, and still framed solely in terms of the harm done to Israelis.

Gallant is being touted for his sole vote of opposition in Thursday's cabinet meeting to Netanyahu's insistence on including the Philadelphi Corridor as a condition. Gantz had left the government in June.

But this is a falling out among war criminals. Both Gallant and Gantz have been willing participants at the highest level in Israel's genocide—Gallant, alongside Netanyahu, is the subject of an arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court. Theirs is a purely tactical disagreement, on the basis of the same Zionist perspective; and, moreover, with an eye to furthering Israel's war plans against Lebanon and Iran, which Gallant in particular feels are undermined by unnecessarily bogging down Israeli soldiers in Gaza.

The political bankruptcy of an anti-government opposition which bases itself on these figures was

indicated Monday, when protests were reduced in size and the strike severely limited. Many demonstrations and stoppages had the character of a day of mourning for the killed hostages more than of a struggle against Netanyahu. Histadrut's careful management of the movement was summed up by its compliance with a court order ending the strike at 2:30 p.m., rather than the planned 6 p.m.

Without a new axis of political struggle being taken up by the Israeli working class, in unity with and fighting for the liberation of the Palestinian masses from Zionist oppression, the Israeli regime will continue with its policy of genocide, ethnic cleansing and apartheid, whether under Netanyahu, Gallant or someone else.

As ever, Netanyahu's immediate response to the threat to his personal political position is to escalate Israeli aggression in an effort to create the most right-wing climate possible and embolden his fascist supporters, telling a specially called news conference, "We will not surrender to pressure."

Netanyahu knows he can act with such impunity because he has the full military and diplomatic backing of the NATO imperialist powers, which support the genocide in Gaza as part of an escalating global war, including the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine.

Workers in Israel confront huge political questions, which can only even begin to be answered by a break with Zionism. In opposing their ruling class, they must place at the very center opposition to the genocide in Gaza and the ethno-religious exclusion that forms the basis of the Israeli state.

The only way out of the present catastrophe is a joint struggle of the international working class, including Jewish and Arab workers fighting for a United Socialist States of the Middle East, to put an end to the historic persecution and dispossession of the Palestinians with which the increasingly murderous and dictatorial development of Israeli politics is inextricably intertwined.



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