



Israeli protest movement plans million-person march in September ? but will it challenge the occupation?

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Since mid-July ?tent city? protests and weekly demonstrations have been shaking the state of Israel, writes Mark Booth. On the 24 July, 30,000 protested, then 150,000 people on the 30th and 300,000 on 6 August. Activists involved in the protests have called for a million-strong march on 3 September.

On 6 August the mass demonstration made its way through Tel Aviv to Israel?s military headquarters. Banners ? in both Hebrew and Arabic ? read ?Egypt is here? and ?Walk like an Egyptian?. Remarkably for a population taught by media and politicians alike to fear and despise all Arabs, the protesters openly acknowledge their inspiration by the wave of Arab revolutions.

In Jerusalem on the same day, 30,000 marched, calling for social justice. The next day in the Israeli daily Haaretz, Yair Ettinger described the mobilisation:

?With emotion but great order, the masses marched through the city shouting ?revolution?. Is this rebellion here to stay? Will it die out? For the time being it?s only picking up strength.?

The movement is a response by young Israelis to steeply rising rents, housing shortages, low wages and the false promises made by the whole spectrum of politicians. In this it shares important features not only with youth uprisings in Tunis and Cairo but with those in London and Madrid too.

Despite a record low unemployment rate, according to official figures, enormous inequalities exist in Israeli society ? and not only the well-known one between Jews and Palestinians but also within the Jewish population itself. Long gone is the rough equality of the first decades of the settler state with its pretensions to socialism, Now 25 families or 16 billionaires own half the equity value on the Tel Aviv stock exchange.

Neoliberal ?reforms?, begun in the mid-1980s, have slashed taxation for the rich and tied the state to balancing the budget with the result that a large part of the working and middle classes have seen the ?Israeli dream? of a European or North American life style fade and die. The welfare state has been dismantled. Meanwhile the billions of dollars in aid received from America are funnelled into massive military spending and to the settlers, who are gobbling up the Palestinian lands on the West Bank, making a state for the country?s indigenous inhabitants impossible.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attacked the tent protesters in the Knesset when driving through his neoliberal housing bill saying:

?There is distress in Israel, but it should be solved in a responsible way. A wave of populism is sweeping the country. Our ability to meet social needs greatly depends on continued growth?

How the movement developed

The movement started when a young woman, Daphne Leef, refused to pay her landlord?s exorbitant rent and pitched her tent on Rothschild Boulevard in the richest quarter of downtown Tel Aviv. She sparked a wave of solidarity action, spread initially via facebook, twitter and other social media.

Thousands joined her on the streets of Tel Aviv, Haifa, Jerusalem, and dozens of smaller towns. Some came in protest over soaring rents, others about privatisation, or the rocketing price of consumer goods. All were motivated by the worsening standard of living across Israel as it feels the impact of the global economic crisis, and the cuts and privatisations forced on Israeli workers to pay for the continuing occupation of Palestine.

While in the first instance this was a protest dominated by middle-class youth, it drew in more working-class people and the downright poor, of whom there are many today. In Holon in the south of Tel Aviv metropolitan area is the Jesse Cohen campsite. Here around 50 young people, most of them homeless and jobless, set up their tents soon after Daphni Leef. An unemployed youth volunteer, Rafi Moseri told the press:

‘This is not Rothschild here, the people here grew up with nothing and have nothing. Any day it could explode if there isn’t a solution found.’

Public sector workers and doctors too have launched strikes for higher wages and increased spending on services.

The demands raised by demonstrators are progressive ones: homes for the homeless and jobs for the jobless, a restoration of the shattered welfare state, childcare and lower prices to combat the soaring cost of living. Since the crisis burst in 2008 rents have risen by 27 percent, and key food prices by 40 percent. House prices have risen by 55 percent. That is why the movement opposed Netanyahu’s National Housing Committees Law – a deregulatory, free market measure, which will not produce affordable housing.

At first the main Israeli trade union federation, the Histadrut, did little to link organised workers to the struggle, though its leader, Ofer Eini, eventually called on his members to join the demonstration on 6 August. At the same time he insists the unions will not try to bring down the right wing government.

The occupations and marches have already wrenched a few minor concessions from the right wing government of Binyamin Netanyahu – they have promised to speed up the approval for construction of 50,000 new houses over the next year and a half, for example.

Unity with Israeli and Palestinian Arabs

A new, if small trade union centre, trying to unite Arab and Jewish workers, has declared its solidarity with the tent city movements. Their statement says:

‘Despite the fact that the movement is new and diversified, with political limitations concerning Palestinian rights, we believe that it is the most important social movement in the history of Israel. It challenges the agenda that has united the ruling class for 25 years. Since 1985, when Israel adopted the economic stabilisation plan, the whole political system – including Labor, Likud, Kadima and Shas – united in selling the country’s public companies, assets and resources to tycoons. Eighteen families today control the economy.’

However, as with all things in Israel, the movement is coming up against the reality of its existence as a colonial settler state. Right wingers, like Avigdor Lieberman in the government, see the answer as more housing in the West Bank, and more land seizures from the Palestinians to facilitate the building of new settlements. This is their tried and tested strategy for turning the discontent of the Israeli middle and working classes into increased exploitation and oppression for the Palestinians.

Currently the movement – for all the references to Egypt – is studiously avoiding mentioning the enormous inequalities faced by Israel’s own Palestinian citizens and the remorseless occupation and settlement policies outside the 1967 border (the Green Line). As yet there has been no call to end the construction of settlements, or cutting Israel’s vast military budget. In fact Uri Avnery (the senior figure in Gush Shalom – the Peace Alliance) argues against raising the issue of the occupation at all as this would fracture the unity of the movement.

He states after listing the slogans used on Rothschild Boulevard:

?What is missing in this array of slogans? Of course: the occupation, the settlements, and the huge expenditure on the military. This is by design. The organisers, anonymous young men and women ? mainly women ? are very determined not to be branded as ?leftists?. They know that bringing up the occupation would provide Netanyahu with an easy weapon, split the tent-dwellers and derail the protests. We in the peace movement know and respect this. All of us are exercising strenuous self-restraint, so that Netanyahu will not succeed in marginalizing the movement and depicting it as a plot to overthrow the right wing government.

?As I wrote in an article in Haaretz: No need to push the protesters. In due course, they will reach the conclusion that the money for the major reforms they demand can only come from stopping the settlements and cutting the huge military budget by hundreds of billions ? and that is possible only in peace.?

In fact building bridges between this movement and Palestinians by arguing for the latter?s rights is the surest way to strengthen both communities against the sabotage of Netanyahu and Lieberman. Avnery is of course right; they will do all they can to play the war/terrorism card to rally protesting Israelis firmly back to the side of their own rulers.

But that is precisely why all supporters of the Palestinian right to self-determination, an end to the siege of Gaza and an end to the settlements should be arguing for these things within the movement and for it to overtly link up with Palestinians, who are fighting against conditions worse than the Israeli Jewish population are suffering, but who in addition are denied their national rights and systematically subjected to a brutal foreign state repression.

Palestine?s struggle for recognition

If the young protesters can sympathise with those in Egypt and Tunisia, they can be won to building links with the Palestinians. They will not be won by so-called peaceniks exercising ?strenuous self-restraint?. This is simply gross opportunism and will fail quite simply because the Palestinian movement is about to erupt in a form similar to the movements in Egypt the protesters approve of.

On 20 September there will be a huge Palestinian march. It is the day before the Palestinian Authority and Arab countries will attempt to get the UN General Assembly to recognise Palestinian statehood. This will be something that Netanyahu and Lieberman will pull any trick in the book to prevent, ranging from provocations in Gaza and the West Bank to the recent ploy of offering to reopen discussion with the Palestinians on Obama?s plan. This latter manoeuvre is aimed at winning votes away from the Palestinians in the UN by claiming the vote will prevent them from negotiating.

The Palestinian leaderships in the West Bank and Gaza have called for the movement to be non-violent. In this situation they are wise, since it will best allow the whole people to take to the streets. But of course the real danger of violence and terrorism either side of the 1967 Green Line will be the Israeli government, the IDF, Mossad, etc. We can expect provocation and terrorist atrocities from them aimed at disrupting unity and mass mobilisation.

The present Israeli movement ? itself a product of the Arab revolutions ? can in turn greatly encourage Palestinians to mobilise in millions and expose and isolate the Zionists. The present Israeli youth movement should mobilise in their support, liberating themselves from their own fears and phobias, inculcated by the racist governments of their country over decades.

And workers and youth in Europe and North America, because their countries are Israel?s biggest backers and protectors, also need to declare a mass day of action on 20 September and an ongoing campaign to isolate Netanyahu and Lieberman.

Let?s make it a revolutionary autumn for Palestinian freedom and let?s solidarise with all progressive forces in Israeli society, especially the youth and the workers, fighting for their rights and willing to support the Palestinian cause. In this way the goal of a single united state ?from the river to the sea? for Palestinians and Israelis will turn from a distant hope to a real objective of struggle.

Socialists must also argue that only a workers' socialist state can provide the basis for equality, housing, work and education for all, common use of the natural resources of the land, everything that will make peace between the nationalities permanent and unbreakable.

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