

Israel: One third of Holocaust survivors live in poverty

By Bill Van Auken
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Israel marked its annual Holocaust Remembrance Day Monday not only with the traditional wailing of air raid sirens, but also with protests over the government neglect and right-wing social policies that have left one-third of the country's Holocaust survivors living in poverty, with little or no assistance.

A number of organizations, including the Israeli pensioners rights group Ken Lazaken, boycotted the official Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremonies to call attention to the plight of more than 80,000 survivors living below the poverty line, which in Israel is set at 2,000 shekels (486 dollars) a month for a single person.

Approximately 1,000 Holocaust survivors, students and others joined in a demonstration and "March of the Living" Monday that went from the Israeli Knesset to the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial, the site of the official proceedings, to protest these conditions.

Some of the protesters referred to "Israel's denial of its Holocaust survivors."

On the eve of the annual day of remembrance for the millions slaughtered by the Nazi regime, various government agencies and advocacy groups prepared reports spelling out the deepening poverty that tens of thousands of survivors confront in Israel.

According to figures presented by the National Insurance Institute and other Israeli agencies, out of the 250,000 Holocaust survivors living in Israel, 20,000 receive reparations from Germany and another 40,000 are paid stipends by the state. The overwhelming majority, however, receive no support whatsoever.

Thousands of the survivors die annually, with 70 percent of them older than 76, and 20 percent older than 86.

The state stipends themselves amount to barely \$300 a month, not enough to pay for basic necessities.

"Those fortunate enough to receive this meager sum must decide whether to buy food or get the medicine necessary for their survival," said Colette Avital, a Member of the Knesset, who has advocated for Holocaust survivors.

"We keep being very critical of those people who have not admitted guilt or deny that there was a Holocaust, but here we are ignoring the people who are living in dire poverty," Avital added.

"I feel deeply ashamed, the situation we're faced with in terms of the conditions Holocaust survivors are living in is completely absurd," Israeli Social Affairs Minister Isaac Herzog said on Sunday in response to the reports.

Under Israeli law, those survivors who arrived in Israel after 1953 are ineligible for government benefits. The Israeli government believes that a large share of the survivors living in poverty is made up of more recent immigrants from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Some of the Holocaust survivors themselves vented their anger at government callousness and neglect at a Knesset hearing held April 10, accusing government officials of deliberately humiliating those seeking medical care and other assistance.

Those survivors seeking disability benefits must go before a medical committee and prove that their disability stems from persecution by the Nazis.

The Israeli daily *Haaretz* quoted Tova Pedens as saying that state functionaries had urged her to feign insanity to improve her chances of getting state aid.

Abraham Berkowitz, a survivor who immigrated to Israel from Romania, came to a medical committee because of dental problems. The panel told him he could "receive money only for teeth he lost in the Holocaust."

Rachel Biyale, another survivor, declared, “Hannah Arendt wrote of Adolf Eichmann’s Banality of Evil. The [Israeli] treasury adopts a banality of deception.”

In essence, the conditions confronting tens of thousands of Holocaust survivors reflect the deepening impoverishment of large sections of the Israeli population and growing social inequality resulting from Israel’s militarized economy and successive cuts to social spending.

A record 1.6 million Israelis—nearly a quarter of the population—now live below the poverty line. Child poverty is even worse, standing at 35.2 percent, worse than in any advanced capitalist country.

Government agencies recently reported that some 200,000 Israeli families—11 percent of the population—depend upon soup kitchens for their daily meals.

At the same time, government policies have generated substantially more wealth for Israel’s class of super rich, leading to an ever wider gap between wealth and poverty.

It is under these conditions that the plight of the impoverished Holocaust survivors has captured the attention of the Israeli public. The government and the political establishment as a whole are clearly apprehensive about the political implications of the exposure of the conditions facing this layer of Israeli society, whose fate has been invoked for decades as a principal justification for the creation of the Zionist state.

That they too are subjected to poverty and neglect can only contribute to the growing social and political discontent among broad layers of Israel’s working class.

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