

Israel's Nation-State Law and the dead end of Zionism

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The passage on Thursday by the Israeli Knesset of the “Nation-State Law” enshrining Jewish supremacy as the legal foundation of the state marks a new stage in the crisis wracking Israel. It puts paid to the already discredited claim that Israel is “the only democracy” in the Middle East. With the enactment of this openly racist “basic law,” the legal foundation of the state is brought into alignment with the reality of a garrison state based on the brutal oppression of an entire people, the Palestinians.

The law declares that “The right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people.” It proclaims Jerusalem “complete and united” as Israel’s capital.

It sanctions state-supported segregation and the exclusion of Arabs from exclusively Jewish communities, declaring, “The state views the development of Jewish settlement as a national value and will act to encourage and promote its establishment and consolidation.” This is a green light for an explosion of ethnic cleansing and the dispossession of Palestinians within the borders of Israel itself.

The law makes no mention of non-Jewish citizens of Israel, who comprise over 20 percent of the population, nor of democracy and equality.

In the name of the supposed unity of the Jewish people, it removes Arabic as an official state language, granting this status to Hebrew alone. And it gives official and exclusive standing to Jewish symbols, including by declaring “Hatikva” the national anthem.

The attempt to assert Jewish national unity by elevating the Hebrew language and “Hatikva” only highlights the forced and artificial character of the entire Zionist project. Hatikva is the product of the reworking of an Italian folk song by the Bohemian composer Bedrich Smetna. Similarly, Hebrew, the supposed national language of the Jews, represents the resurrection of a dead liturgical language for a people whose actual native tongue was Yiddish.

There is widespread opposition to the enactment of the new law among Jews both within Israel and without. This opposition, however, could find no expression in the Knesset due to the cowardice and complicity of the

opposition Labour Party.

Reflecting the stunned anger of large sections of workers, youth and intellectuals, Bradley Burston wrote in *Haaretz*: “Look around. The country looks the same. But it doesn’t feel the same. Not even close.”

This week, he continued, “marks the week that this country, as we have known it, effectively ended... Gone is any mention of equality. In its place, directives that veer Israel toward genuine apartheid, including a downgrading of the status of the Arabic language and therefore of Arab citizens of Israel.”

Several thousand Israelis marched in the streets of Tel Aviv to protest the law. A group of 14 American Jewish organizations declared deep concerns about the bill, saying it would eliminate “the defining characteristic of a modern democracy—protecting rights for all.”

The European Union expressed “concern” over the law’s impact on the effectively moribund “two-state” solution to the crisis—which would condemn the Palestinians to an impoverished and militarily surrounded Bantustan-like mini-state. The EU stopped short of issuing an outright condemnation or suggesting any measure in retaliation.

It was impossible find any response on the website of the US State Department. However, the Trump administration, with the support of both major parties, paved the way for the law by moving the US embassy to Jerusalem in May and supporting the murder and wounding of thousands of unarmed Palestinian protesters at the Gaza-Israel border by the Israel Defense Forces.

The American corporate media signaled its tacit support by relegating the story to the back pages in most major newspapers and barely reporting it on the television news programs.

The *New York Times* ran a front-page story in its Friday print edition that sought to present the new law in the most favorable possible light, choosing as its headline “Israel Enshrines Rights For Jews.” This exercise in Orwellian newspeak was followed by a sympathetic account of the dilemma posed to the Israeli ruling class by the demographics of a growing Arab population in Israel and

the occupied territories, which will soon outstrip the size of the Jewish population.

The *Times* wrote: “Proponents of the new law cite continuing demographic threats. Some in Israel’s Arab minority are demanding collective rights and already form a majority in the northern Galilee district.”

The Israeli Nation-State Law is part of, and will further encourage, the rise of extreme nationalist governments and parties that promote the myths of nationality based on “race and blood.” The Netanyahu regime in Israel is allied with such forces in Eastern Europe and beyond.

The same day as the passage of the new law in the Knesset, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban paid a friendly visit to Netanyahu, where he faced popular protests against his embrace of the World War II dictator Admiral Milos Horthy, who collaborated with the Nazis in the extermination of Hungarian Jews.

Israel’s open turn to such politics will increase the precarious position of Jews outside of Israel. What is to prevent the same rationale that Israel uses against the Palestinians from being turned against Jews, who have been traditionally baited by fascists and extreme nationalists as “outsiders” and “cosmopolitans?”

Internally, the stepped-up attack on Palestinians will be accompanied by increased attacks on the social and democratic rights of all workers, Jewish and Palestinian alike. Netanyahu is already cracking down on oppositional media and seeking to criminalize political dissent.

For all the talk of Jewish unity, Israel is bitterly divided along class lines. A major factor in the passage of the Nation-State Law, along with Israel’s push for a military confrontation against Iran, in alliance with Saudi Arabia and the US, is the growth of working class opposition within the country. Israel is one of the most economically unequal countries in the world, with a poverty rate above 21 percent, the highest in the developed world. Recent months have seen a rise in working class protests and strikes, and the regime is seeking to contain this movement and channel it behind a policy of anti-Arab racism and Jewish chauvinism.

The open turn to racist policies is the product of two major factors: the acute crisis of the Zionist state and the logic of Zionism itself.

Zionism is a cruel mockery of the progressive and enlightened conceptions that have historically characterized the best elements of the Jewish population. Because of their persecution and enforced isolation, Jews typically strove to be accepted as full citizens on a par with Christians. They were inspired by the great achievements of European culture and its promotion of the universal and democratic. This drove them to make up a disproportionate section of the socialist movement.

Isaac Deutscher, in his “Message of the Non-Jewish Jew”, wrote: “The Jewish heretic who transcends Jewry belongs to a Jewish tradition ... They all went beyond the boundaries of Jewry. They all—Spinoza, Heine, Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky and Freud—found Jewry too narrow, too archaic, and too constricting. They all looked for ideals and fulfillment beyond it, and they represent the sum and substance of much that is greatest in modern thought, the sum and substance of the most profound upheavals that have taken place in philosophy, sociology, economics and politics in the last three centuries...

“They lived on the margins or in the nooks and crannies of their respective nations. They were each in society and yet not in it, of it and yet not of it. It was this that enabled them to rise in thought above their societies, above their nations, above their times and generations, and to strike out mentally into wide new horizons and far into the future.”

Israel is the result of the appropriation of a 19th century ethno-nationalist ideology based on exclusivist conceptions of racial, religious and linguistic hegemony to justify the establishment of a Jewish state through the violent dispossession of the indigenous Arab population. The tragic irony contained in the very origins of Israel is that the horrors of the Holocaust became the rationale for the oppression of another people.

The Nation-State Law marks the historic bankruptcy and reactionary culmination of the Zionist project and all such nationalist programs.

A new upsurge of the working class is beginning, pointing the way forward for the masses of Jewish and Arab workers alike in the form of a united struggle to overthrow and replace the Zionist state and the various Arab bourgeois regimes and forge the United Socialist States of the Middle East. This is the perspective of permanent revolution fought for by the International Committee of the Fourth International. Sections of the ICFI must be built in Israel and across the Middle East to provide the leadership necessary to conduct this struggle.

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