

Thousands protest Israeli government's lack of COVID-19 economic aid

By Jean Shaoul
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More than 10,000 people took to the streets of Tel Aviv, Israel's commercial capital and most populous city, Saturday. It was the largest rally since the start of the pandemic, with protesters demanding economic aid to get them through the crisis.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his coronavirus emergency coalition government face a tidal wave of anger and criticism over its failure to make available promised economic aid. Polls indicate growing disapproval of Netanyahu as the Bank of Israel has forecast that the economy is set to shrink by 6 percent—the sharpest decline in the country's history.

Unemployment has risen to 21 percent, from 3.5 percent in February, while in the West Bank it has risen from 25 percent to 40 percent and in Gaza was more than 50 percent even before the pandemic. More layoffs are expected in the wake of new restrictions imposed since a dramatic rise in infections, thanks to Netanyahu's criminal return to work policy, announced late April, to restart the flow of profits to Israel's banks and corporations. A strict lockdown was only imposed early in March.

Healthcare experts have warned that the government has “lost control” of the virus, while public health director Professor Siegal Sadetzki has resigned over the reopening of the economy without adequate safeguards.

Just weeks after lifting the lockdown in May, the number of new cases has risen fivefold. More than 38,000 people have so far tested positive, with nearly 19,000 active cases, of whom 141 are in a serious condition, 49 are on ventilators, and 358 people have died. In the West Bank, there are 5,819 active cases and 34 people have died, while in Gaza, 72 people have been diagnosed with the virus and one person has died.

Many workers, self-employed and young people attended the rally, angry at government-imposed restrictions that have led to huge job losses, particularly in

the travel and hospitality sector on which Israel is dependent. Self-employed and small businesses were protesting over the government's failure to deliver the financial aid promised to them, while others said that what was on offer was totally inadequate.

Two days before Saturday's protest, a panicked Netanyahu and Finance Minister Yisrael Katz promised a \$29 billion rescue package, including an immediate bank transfer of \$2,150 for the self-employed. This is too little, too late, under conditions where the 18-month long political paralysis and the new coalition government have been unable to deliver a 2020 budget, in part at least due Netanyahu's machinations to find a pretext to dump the coalition and precipitate fresh elections.

University students also attended, as many young people have been forced out of work by the pandemic, as did performing arts groups from the hard-hit cultural, leisure and entertainment sectors, and retirees. One retiree, who had lost her part time job, said she had no income support because her predicament was not recognised, and Netanyahu should “remember that whoever put him there can also take him down.”

Demonstrators held up banners saying, “Let Us Breathe,” echoing the rallying call of the Black Lives Matter protests following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis in the US and voicing their opposition to the brutality of Israeli police towards the most impoverished layers—Ethiopian, Jews of Arab and North African descent, migrant workers, Israel's own Palestinian citizens, Bedouins, and Palestinians in the Occupied Territories.

Several politicians had asked to speak at the rally, but organizers said that they had asked them not to attend as they did not want the protest to be affiliated with any political factions.

The organisers stressed this was not meant to be a show of opposition to Netanyahu. Ronen Maili, head of the

Israel Bars and Clubs Association, one of the organisers, told the Kann public broadcaster, “This isn’t a political protest, it’s a protest of the people.”

He described Netanyahu’s financial aid package for small businesses as a “pretty presentation,” but insisted, “We want to see the money in the bank. The period of naivety is over.”

Protest organisers had declined Netanyahu’s invitation to discuss the situation on Thursday.

They called on attendees to observe social distancing measures so as not to give the police an opportunity to ban the rally, while demonstrators posted adverts on social media telling people not to bring their cell phones to avoid being tracked and required to quarantine if they were near a confirmed coronavirus patient.

After the rally, many protesters marched through the city’s main streets, while others sat down in the streets, blocking roads and junctions near Rabin Square. They chanted “Bibi [Netanyahu’s nickname] go home!” The government mobilised 300 police, some on horseback, resulting in a stand-off with protestors at one of Tel Aviv’s main junctions during which the police arrested 20, of whom 16 have been questioned and two are due in court regarding extending their detention. The police claimed that three police officers were slightly injured in the clashes.

Also protesting were thousands of demonstrators, rallying on 170 roads, bridges and junctions across the country, from the so-called Black Flag movement, formed in March by supporters of Gantz’s opposition Blue and White Party, angry at Netanyahu’s supporters’ attempts to thwart a Gantz-headed government of national unity. Gantz is now in coalition with Netanyahu.

They have held a series of rallies, attacking Netanyahu for his corruption, including his successful demand for tax breaks for himself, and turn to anti-democratic measures to shore up his position. Their rallies have met with considerable force from the police, who have arrested several people for public order offences, including Amir Haskel, a 66-year-old, former brigadier general in the Israeli Air Force and one of the organizers of their demonstrations.

In Jerusalem, hundreds of ultra-Orthodox clashed with police during protests against localized lockdowns of three neighbourhoods with high infection rates along with local lockdowns in four other towns and cities. They blocked junctions and threw stones, eggs and other objects at the police, leading to 10 arrests. Some protesters tore down the police barricades.

There were calls from Yisrael Eichler, a legislator from United Torah Judaism, for the two ultra-Orthodox parties—some of Netanyahu’s most loyal allies—to temporarily quit the government to protest what he called “selective” targeting of religious neighbourhoods for coronavirus lockdowns.

Saturday’s protests follow demonstrations in recent weeks against Netanyahu’s deeply controversial and illegal proposal to annex the settlements and the Jordan Valley in the occupied West Bank.

The widespread if disparate character of the demonstrations expresses the coalescence of the very legitimate anger, frustration, distress and anxiety of Israeli and Palestinian workers. But the resolution of their grievances cannot be left to the centre-left politicians of the Blue and White Party or leaders of small businesses, the impoverished ultra-Orthodox, and the Palestinians.

The self-employed, workers in the hospitality, travel and transportation sectors, the arts and cultural institutions, students, retirees and the unemployed—Israeli and Palestinian—face the same problems as the working class as a whole. The solution lies not in various schemes to tweak the failed status quo, but a united struggle to defend jobs, education, health, transport, culture, led by the working class.

All non-essential work must be shut down, with workers and the self-employed granted full pay. In essential sectors like health care, food and transport, emergency measures must be implemented to ensure workers’ safety and oppose all cuts, closures, and speed-ups. The fight for such essential policies will bring the working class into direct confrontation with all Israel’s political parties, posing for workers a struggle for state power to implement socialist policies.

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