

Israeli police deploy tear gas and water cannon against anti-Netanyahu demonstrators

By Jean Shaoul
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Thousands of people demonstrating against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's handling of the pandemic's economic fallout and calling for his resignation were brutally assaulted by Israeli police.

Around two thousand people protested outside Netanyahu's official residence in Jerusalem, Saturday, one of a series of increasingly angry demonstrations in the city over the past week demanding his resignation. They marched into the city, blocking nearby streets. The police blasted demonstrators with water cannon to disperse the crowds and arrested 15 people.

In Tel Aviv, the country's commercial centre and most populous city, several thousand self-employed workers rallied in Charles Clore Park before marching through the city to Habima Square. This demonstration was one of a series that have been held on Saturday evenings.

Protesters carried posters reading "Out of touch, you don't care," and chanted "Shame!" The rally was addressed by social activists and self-employed people, who described their plight.

Angry clashes broke out as police used mounted units and water cannon to disperse the protesters and arrested 13 people, detaining six.

The protests, held under the slogan, "Fighting for bread," were organized by several groups representing self-employed Israelis and members of the Black Flag movement, which has been demanding Netanyahu's resignation since his indictment on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three separate cases. It has also opposed Netanyahu's attacks on the attorney general, the media, law enforcement, and the judiciary amid claims that the charges against him are part of a left-wing plot.

Earlier in the week, the police had refused to allow the rally to take place in Rabin Square, claiming that the square and the surrounding area could hold no more than 1,800 people practicing social distancing.

Around 100 people demonstrated in Mitzpe Ramon in the

Negev, while thousands came out to protest at nearly 200 bridges and junctions throughout the country for the fourth week in succession.

The number of COVID-19 infections has skyrocketed, with Israel reporting almost 50,000 cases and over 400 deaths. The overwhelming majority of these have occurred since Netanyahu's criminal plans, announced on April 19, for a return to work and the reopening of schools to ensure the flow of profits to Israel's financial and corporate elite, without any measures to guard against or deal with a second wave. He ignored recommendations from a team of experts, headed by Professor Eli Waxman from the Weizman Institute of Science in Rehovot, calling for a contact-tracing body, a national information centre on the COVID-19 crisis, and a unit within the Ministry of Health to tackle emergency situations. Waxman blamed the increase in cases on the speedy and uncontrolled reopening of schools and the economy, and the government's failure to implement his team's recommendations, including reconsidering the decision to restart the economy if the daily number of infections rose above 200, just 10 percent of the current rate.

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.

According to a review by the Ministry of Defence, the government's procurement and supply of personal protective equipment for medical teams was just a fraction of the amount determined as necessary by health officials at the start of the pandemic. Dr. Daniel Trotsky, head of the emergency department at the Yitzhak Shamir Medical Center, said, "We use this equipment before any contact with a verified patient or with suspected patients. A shortage of protective equipment will result in multiple exposures of medical staff to the virus."

The review said that Israel's contact tracing system, with just a few hundred contact investigators, was "very

limited—at least 10 times smaller, and sometimes more than that, compared to Western countries.”

The lockdown and international flight bans have had a catastrophic impact on Israel’s tourism, hospitality and service sectors. Some 21 percent of the population are now unemployed, up from 3.5 percent in February, with many more layoffs expected in the light the Bank of Israel’s forecast of a six percent contraction in the economy.

With unemployment benefits only payable for a three-month period, opposition to Netanyahu’s indifference to the plight of so many families, even as he obtained Knesset approval for years of backdated tax relief for himself, has risen. His public approval ratings have fallen to 30 percent in the opinion polls.

Netanyahu and his coronavirus emergency coalition government face a tidal wave of anger and criticism over its failure to make available a promised \$580 million aid package for small and medium-sized businesses, which his critics say has come too little and too late if it ever arrives.

On Wednesday, Netanyahu announced a \$1.74 billion package, including payments of up to \$217 for every citizen over the age of 18, rising to nearly \$870 for those with three or more children, to boost spending and “get the economy moving faster.” More than 120,000 people with assets over \$1 million would also receive the handouts. Senior officials, including Netanyahu’s cabinet colleagues, spoke out vehemently against the proposals, saying the money should be targeted at the poorest citizens, while commentators attacked it as a bribe for the masses.

Such is the hardship that Channel 13’s crowdfunding campaign for people to donate their grants “to those who really are in need” raised nearly a million dollars overnight. Its staff wrote on the official Facebook page that it was for “People who do not receive assistance from the state at all. Children who are disgracefully hungry. Families whose electricity has been cut off. Let’s now pass on to them the grants we have received from the government.”

In the early hours of Friday morning, following a bitterly divided cabinet meeting, the government re-imposed the closures of restaurants, bars and leisure and entertainment facilities, limiting the size of gatherings to 10 people. It refused to order another full lockdown and said that children’s nurseries would remain open to facilitate the return to work. According to Treasury officials, every day of classes for kindergarten and primary school children is worth about \$73 million to the economy. The government was forced to delay the closure of restaurants, introduced without warning, until Tuesday, following angry protests from business.

Education Minister Yoav Galant has announced plans, based on different levels of economic lockdown, for the

reopening of schools on September 1. In the worst-case scenario, students from fifth grade and up would study only through distance learning, and lower grades and preschools would be divided into small groups.

His plans fly in the face of a recent Knesset report that the major sources of new infections were home and school transmissions. More than 100 schools were forced to close again after their reopening as hundreds of students became sick with the virus and dozens of staff tested positive. The government refused to order the closure of all schools. In Jerusalem, where many schools were affected, parents refused to send their children to school. It is unknown how many teachers have been infected, but on Friday, the funeral was held of a teacher, 64-year-old Shelve Zalfreind, who died from COVID-19.

Haim Bibas, who chairs the Federation of Local Authorities, pointed out that the implementation of Galant’s plans needed an extra \$1 billion. He said, “Without preparation and full and immediate funding, opening the school year is still uncertain.”

While the government had planned to extend the school year—without any extra payments to the teachers—by nearly two weeks over the summer to facilitate the return to work, a court case, brought by the teachers’ union, prevented it from doing so.

Thousands of social workers have been on strike for the last two weeks demanding higher wages and a reduction in their burgeoning case load. With more than 1,000 vacancies remaining unfilled, the government has authorized work visas for teachers from the Philippines and South Asia. Community nurses have also gone on strike, refusing to carry out all but emergency work. At the same time, nurses have started a nationwide strike over staff shortages, refusing to carry out all but emergency work, with 817 nurses in quarantine.

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