

“We’ll struggle like in Egypt”

How the recent movements in the Arab countries are affecting political consciousness in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories

The mass uprisings and protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and other Arab countries are inspiring workers worldwide and giving them confidence for their own struggles. In the Middle East, there is hardly a single spot in the region where the revolutionary surge is not having repercussions, including in Israel-Palestine, as reports **Shahar Ben-Khorin**, a member of Socialist Struggle Movement (Tnuat Maavak Sozialisti/Harakat Nidal Eshtaraki, the CWI - Committee for a Workers' International - in Israel).

WHO COULD deny that we're witnessing nothing short of the greatest changes in the Middle East in our generation?

The developments have significantly increased nervousness on the part of the Israeli ruling class, as well as among sections of the Palestinian elite. At the same time, the fingerprints of the Arab revolutionary process are evident now in almost any Palestinian protest and in any significant protest by Israeli Jewish working people and youth. This includes the ongoing 10,000-strong Jewish and Israeli-Palestinian social workers' strike for a wage increase.

Among the slogans of the social workers are: "We want some breathing air - just like in Tahrir Square" and "Given such a miserable wage - we'll struggle like in Libya" (which rhymes in Hebrew).

"Enough with privatisations! Enough with the tycoons! This is our Tahrir Square!" read a typical main banner on one of the small but significant demonstrations in recent weeks against rising prices of fuel, water and other basic products.

Concessions

SOCIALIST STRUGGLE Movement (CWI in Israel) participated in, and helped to organise, some of the series of protests against price rises and in solidarity with the Arab revolutions, with slogans such as: "Prices are sky-rocketing, we'll struggle like in Egypt" and "A general strike and demonstrations will stop the economic attacks."

Ofir Eym, the chairperson of the General Histadrut (the main trade union federation) had issued an empty threat to organise a mass demonstration in Tel Aviv, as an alleged step towards a general strike. The threat was withdrawn for the time being when the prime minister and finance minister promised some minor changes

to the planned attacks.

As part of the deal, the government conceded to the Histadrut's demand for a gradual increase of the minimum wage over the next couple of years and public sector workers were offered an additional percentage point wage increase.

Economic attacks

ISRAEL'S GDP (Gross Domestic Product - the total value of goods and services produced by workers in a year) reached an annualised growth rate of 7.8% in the last quarter of 2010 but this is not a sign of economic stability, especially if the decline in exports in recent months is taken into account.

Government budget cuts were introduced earlier this year under the pretext of preparing the home front for 'emergency situations' and now there are threats of new cuts to fund the small concessions. Inflation is currently 6% (annualised) and water prices have jumped a staggering 40% over two years.

No matter what concessions are given now, more economic attacks on workers will be introduced, either under a militarist pretext or to ease the effects of the crisis on capitalist firms. This will be in parallel with more attacks on organised labour, such as an attempt to ban the right of firefighters to strike.

It is not surprising therefore that public support for Israel's prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu is at an all time low of 32%. In the context of the yawning gap between the rich elite on the one side - dominated by just 18 capitalist families - and the quarter of the population officially under the poverty line on the other side, and with the background of the dramatic struggles unfolding in the region, social unrest will grow in Israel.

There are many Israeli workers and youth who are looking at the Arab

world now and asking: "Can such a thing happen here?" This groping is an embryonic indication of the potential struggles.

Last year, Socialist Struggle Movement produced a congress document titled 'The Middle East on the verge of explosion'. In it we referred to the potential of the gigantic struggles then taking place in Egypt. The Israeli government though was taken by surprise by the fall of the head of its top regional ally, as it considered the Egyptian regime to be the most 'stable' in the Arab world. It had tried to persuade other governments not to criticise Mubarak.

"Goodbye to the man of peace... Mubarak was, maybe, bad to his people... He was also not a 'lover of Zion', but... he was a man of peace in the previous 32 years... Therefore he deserves, as far as we're concerned, a big thanks" wrote a well-known columnist in the popular Israeli daily Yedioth Aharonoth on 11 February.

As well as its permanent war against the Palestinians, the Israeli capitalist regime has infamously accumulated a rich record of propping up military dictatorships and counter-revolutionary forces across the globe. These include a primary role in sustaining South African apartheid, the Shah in Iran, Pinochet in Chile, and the Argentinian military junta.

Brutal regimes everywhere enjoy Israeli weapons or help from former Israeli 'security specialists'. It would be no surprise if the allegations of Israeli involvement in recruiting mercenaries for Gaddafi are eventually verified.

'Stability'

"IN THE Middle East, stability is better than democracy," declared the former Israeli Defence Force (IDF) chief of staff at the recent end of his term. He moved on to warn that Israel should be prepared for an all-out war, implying not only Israel's 'cold war' with Iran, but for the expected general sharpening of the conflict between the Israeli regime and other states in the region under pressure of the mass movements.

This pressure can be seen in Egypt now, where the former oil minister and other Mubarak cronies are being denounced for exploiting the country's natural gas and supplying it extremely cheaply to Israel. The gas stream to Israel has not been renewed since the Egyptian exporting pipe was blown up last month.

Netanyahu said that over the next two decades: "Security needs will increase and security budgets will be enlarged." The perceived threat to Israel's 'peace' agreements with Egypt and Jordan, which stems from the Israeli occupation, serves the Israeli ruling class in whipping up fear in



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Israel of the mass movements in the region.

It is only the unrest in Iran that hypocritically gets the explicit support of the Israeli capitalists, as they deem it can 'work for them' and potentially eliminate their primary geostrategic rival. The Iranian opposition movement could not hope for a worse endorsement!

As well as concern regarding what stance neighbouring Arab regimes will take towards Israel, the Israeli ruling class fears a renewed Palestinian mass struggle. Planned racist and anti-democratic legislation and the McCarthyist persecution of Palestinian political activists and Jewish anti-occupation activists are an expression of that fear (over 10,000 Jews and Palestinians, including CWI activists, demonstrated in Tel Aviv against such persecution on 15 January).

Palestinian liberation

A POLL by the Nablus An-Najah University on 24-26 February among Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, revealed that 70-90% of the Palestinians in the occupied territories support the new Arab revolutions and believe they will help towards ending the occupation.

At the same time, only a minority

(22-29%) at present considers a similar upheaval in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip to be possible.

However, with the grinding poverty and brutal repression endured by the Palestinians, a third Palestinian intifada is just a question of time. And with the background of the beginning of the new Arab revolution, there is significant potential for the re-growth of left and socialist forces in Palestinian politics.

Fatah and Hamas

THE PALESTINIAN youth groups organising and participating in the recent 'days of rage' demonstrations against the occupation do not currently call for replacing either of the parallel rival Palestinian governments, the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority or the Gaza-based Hamas government.

Nevertheless, those governments are alarmed by the regional revolutionary process, which they correctly fear could eventually settle accounts with them as well.

Therefore, although there was some lip-service to supporting the Arab uprisings, especially by Hamas leaders, both suppressed Palestinian solidarity protests with the Arab revolutions, under the astounding pretext of not

wanting "to intervene" in the affairs of other countries.

In Ramallah, the police allowed a small pro-Mubarak demo to take place in early February, but violently dispersed a larger anti-Mubarak demo at the same spot.

The Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas had already been the target of a sharp wave of Palestinian protests in October 2009, after he yielded to Israeli pressure to postpone a UN vote on the Goldstone Report which condemned some of the Israeli brutality in Gaza. Now he and his colleagues in Fatah are even more discredited following the Al Jazeera-Guardian leaking of documents in January from negotiations between the PA and Israel.

The documents exposed in specific terms not only Israel's intransigent stance but also just how corrupt and betraying is the role of the capitalist leaders of the increasingly autocratic Palestinian Authority.

After Mubarak and Ben-Ali, "God knows who might be next," said Abbas in a conference in Ramallah in mid-February. "Don't laugh, it may well be us," he added, showing his fear of the anger in the Palestinian streets.

The Hamas government, for its part, declared a full closure of the Egyptian border and the adjacent Rafah area

was defined a "closed military zone." Apparently Hamas feared losing control of the border and a scenario of massive crossings, as happened in January 2008 under the worsened siege conditions then. Hamas wants the border to reopen, but only in agreement with the Egyptian regime.

Celebration marches

FOLLOWING THE spectacular fall of Mubarak, the Egyptian loyal assistant of the occupation and siege of Gaza, both Hamas and Fatah officials eventually moved to utter blessings to the Egyptian people, as by that stage even imperialist leaders like Obama were forced to do.

Celebration marches were then organised and approved in both territories. Hamas officials declared "the beginning of the Egyptian revolution", "the fall of the regimes of exploitation and corruption", and "the beginning of the fall of the PA which participated with the former Egyptian regime in the siege on Gaza." Mubarak Hospital' in Rafah was renamed 'Tahrir Hospital'. The tone had changed. Later on, Gaddafi's acts of slaughter were sharply denounced.

These statements coincided with the worst military attacks by the IDF in the Strip since the Gaza war in 2009

- allegedly in response to projectiles launched by Islamic Jihad, though in reality a result of growing nervousness in the Israeli government about the overall situation.

In the West Bank, Fatah called a "day of rage" on 25 February, denouncing the US veto in the UN Security Council on the resolution against settlement construction. Only in Hebron though, where it coincided with the anniversary of the 1994 Cave of the Patriarchs massacre, was there a significant response, where over 1,000 protested against the Kahanist settlements in the city. There, the IDF was generously assisted by PA police in suppressing the protesters.

Immediately after Mubarak's fall, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) executive, controlled by Abbas and Fatah, declared that the long-postponed elections for the PA presidential office, the legislative council and the municipalities will be held by September 2011.

Additionally, the PLO negotiations department is to be reshuffled and the Ramallah-based cabinet, headed by Salam Fayyad - the former IMF and World Bank representative who was parachuted in by the US administration of George W Bush - has formally resigned, in order to be slightly reshuffled as well.

Diplomacy and struggle

FAYYAD IS not part of the corrupt and divided Fatah, but for many Palestinian workers and youth there is no real difference between him and Abbas, as both are seen as submissive agents of Western imperialism - representatives of a privileged Palestinian elite which offers the Palestinian masses merely a spectacle of diplomatic wrestling for prestige with the Israeli regime instead of a determined liberation struggle. At the same time they preside over methods of torture against their Palestinian opposition.

A probable UN Assembly resolution to formally recognise a Palestinian state towards the end of 2011 will be a humiliating blow to the prestige of the increasingly isolated Israeli regime, but it will not mean the establishment of a real, independent Palestinian state. Furthermore, no matter how restrained the current Israeli government might feel under such pressure, it has no intention of ending the occupation this year, nor the settlements and road blocks in the West Bank and dozens of excuses will be created to justify its position.

However, the demographic factor - with the Jewish population expected to become a minority in historic Palestine within approximately a decade - places on the agenda the spectre of a 'bi-national state' for the Israeli ruling class, in fact a threat to the entire Zionist project.

Maintaining the occupation is not a sustainable alternative and therefore the mainstream of the Israeli ruling class has adopted a 'two states' formula without intending to concede a genuine state to the Palestinians that would meet their aspirations.

"As far as we're concerned", explained Israeli vice-prime minister and former IDF chief of staff, Moshe

Yaalon (Likud party), "the intention is to leave the situation as it is, automatic management of their civil affairs, and if they want to call it a state, please let them, even if they want to call it an empire. We mean [to stick with] the current existing [situation] and let them name it whatever they like" (3 March, www.inn.co.il).

Precondition for peace

THERE WILL eventually be (not under the current government) more concessions than Yaalon and his colleagues might perceive now, as part of desperate manoeuvres attempting to make such a formal state seem 'viable'. This would be to try to placate the Palestinian masses and head off new movements towards realising their national and democratic aspirations.

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However, it is not capitalist diplomatic projects that will bring about real change in the lives of the Palestinian masses, but a renewed mass struggle - and the more determined it is, the more it will achieve.

The Palestinian mood for unity in struggle indicates the potential for mass action, linking up the ongoing village struggles against the Separation Wall in the West Bank, the East Jerusalem struggles against attacks and discrimination, the struggles against house demolitions inside Israel, and against anti-democratic and racist legislation.

The CWI has always counterposed the need for Palestinian democratically organised, mass defensive and offensive action, to the blind alley of individual armed actions. The potential

power of mass action was indicated in a recent article in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz (9/3/11) headed "IDF is preparing for mass civil uprising in West Bank" which said: "Senior officers now serving, or who once served, in the West Bank say they have long felt there is no way to effectively contend with a widespread, nonviolent civil uprising. 'There is nothing for it if something like what happened in Tunisia happens here', said one [serving] high-ranking officer'.

'Siege consciousness'

IN RECENT years a small but significant layer of Israeli Jewish youth have engaged in solidarity actions with Palestinian protests. An appeal by a mass Palestinian movement to Israeli Jewish working class people, to support a fight for absolutely equal rights of self-determination and for improved living standards for all working people, would find an echo. This is already indicated by the current effect of the Arab mass movements on the consciousness of the Israeli working class and middle layers.

This approach is key to cutting across the traditional trap of 'siege consciousness' in Israel, which will be countered further when in the future the Israeli working class manages to adopt an independent class approach to the struggles in the region, including the Palestinian struggle.

However, national, religious and ethnic conflicts in the region can intensify under the pressure of acute economic and social crisis whenever mass struggles don't manage to marginalise such divisions. The cycles of bloodshed will continue for as long as capitalism remains, but now with the difference that the road out is being shown by mass forces.

Aided by today's tools of mass communication, the dawn of reawakened mass movements in the region will become the growth engine for working class, socialist movements.

This will include the development of mass movements of Palestinians, and of Israeli-Jewish workers and youth, capable of totally uprooting all forms of national oppression, the obsolete capitalist system and imperialist rule, as part of a regional movement for socialism. This is a precondition for peace.



10,000 social workers in Israel have struck for better pay.



Demonstrating against the separation wall.

photo CWI Israel