

Israel's Tent Protests

Should the Left support the Israel's 'Tent Protests'? They began as an uprising of the middle classes – especially young people who have trouble finding affordable housing – and spread to the working class, the poor and the Arab communities as well, though not the religious as yet. Many of the working sectors have joined the three-week protest: doctors, single mothers, parents demanding free education, taxi drivers upset with the price of petrol, even the police. The Histadrut, Israel's general trade federation, and many municipalities have joined as well. On August 9th as many as 320,000 people into the streets.

However although there have been occasional chants of "Mubarak, Assad, Netanyahu", there is overwhelming pressure for the movement to remain "non-political," rooted squarely in the mainstream consensus.

Israel flags fly are everywhere and each rally ends with the national anthem ("A Jewish soul still yearns/To be a free people in our land/The Land of Zion and Jerusalem").

Pro Palestinian Israelis would love to shift the new movement in a progressive direction but Jeff Halper, the Director of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, writing in the radical US magazine Counterpunch (August 10, 2011), is sceptical. Though he doesn't say so clearly, Halper's main argument is that this protest is about the Zionist movement going back to its Jewish Labour roots to protect Jewish privileges on Arab land. A strong Jewish state, which co-opts the Jewish trade union movement, is the best way to guarantee those privileges. Privatisation and the application of IMF style neo liberal policies risks polarising Israeli society between rich and poor, driving Israeli living standards for the majority down to Arab levels.

When Halper and his comrades tried to link the issue of social equality and allocation of resources to the Occupation and the Israel's massive military budget (\$16 billion, or \$2,300 per person, the highest ratio of defense spending to GDP among the industrialized countries), they were resisted, especially by the Tel Aviv Students' Union that has taken on some of the amorphous leadership.

As Halper says,

'This is a kind of an Israeli code meaning that the protesters do not question the Zionist ideology that Israel should be a Jewish state and are not against the government. It simply means that they want specific economic reforms, not to challenge the existing political and ideological system.'

Dangerously, it is the settlers who are pushing the protest into taking a stand on the Occupation in the opposite direction. At first they opposed the protests, arguing that the movement is only a guise to weaken Netanyahu in anticipation of the Palestinians' call for statehood at the UN in September. But last week the extremely right-wing and racist settler youth set up tents at the protest site in Tel Aviv

(under the slogan "Tel Aviv is Jewish") to push the idea that the solution to the housing crisis is to build massively in the Occupied Territories. No attempt was made to stop them whereas Halper's comrades were warned not to raise pro Palestinian slogans. Forty-two Knesset members of the right have sent a letter to Netanyahu urging him to solve the housing problem by building massively in the West Bank.

At the tent city in Tel Aviv Halper encountered a seven-year veteran of the IDF who tried to convince him that Che Guevara (pictured on a poster with an X across his face) could not be a role model for revolution because he was violent. The former soldier, who saw himself as liberal and enlightened, simply could not grasp the connection between serving in the Israeli army – which falls under the rubric of the national "consensus" – and his non-violent beliefs.

‘ Without a will to finally break out of the Zionist Box, the protesters might get half-way, perhaps to a return to some form of a welfare state. But true inclusion, full equality and genuine democracy will evade them.’

Seraj Assis, writing for the Palestine Chronicle, asks about the Arab residents of Jaffa, on the edge of Tel Aviv, who took to the streets to protest a new 'Jews only' housing plan and were dismissed as undermining the state's Jewish character. Sadly, they have no place at Israel's tent city protests.

The test for the protests to shift left will come in September when the Palestinians of the Occupied Territories initiate massive protests around the UN vote. If the tent protests survive until then, will they link up with their Palestinian counterparts? Unfortunately the evidence thus far is not promising.