

Darkness and Light In Israel

by Wolf Ehrlich

Darkness has descended on Israel. The reactionary foreign and domestic policy of the Begin government makes life here most difficult for the people. The government relies on US imperialism and even on its most extreme and warlike representatives. It has become a junior partner to the US and its adventurous, aggressive policy in the Middle East, allowing the Pentagon to build vast, military (especially air) bases in the Negev desert. It has become the most willing tool for implementing the Camp David conception, namely, to unite Israeli and Arab reaction, under the American aegis, against national liberation movements, against anti-imperialist governments in the region, against the Soviet Union. This has resulted in an increased dependence by Israel on the stronger partner who may feel free to plan tactical moves without full regard to Israeli government wishes, while keeping the alliance firmly established.

The Israeli government has greatly accelerated settlement in occupied territories and increased terror and oppression against the Palestinian population there. It is strongly encouraging and supporting fascist pressure groups such as Gush Emunim. This not only hampers any progress towards a just peace; it also threatens the whole fabric of bourgeois democracy in this country.

This policy has estranged the Israeli government from its traditional friends among the ruling circles of Western Europe, has enhanced the opposition of Arab reactionary regimes to Camp David and is weakening Sadat's position in Egypt. The unanimous acceptance of resolution 465 on March 1 in the UN Security Council, rebuking Israel's settlement policy, exposes the international isolation of the Israeli government, whatever the acrobatics of the US administration.

The whole policy of keeping the newly-won colonial empire at whatever cost, political and economic, is bound to fail. The Palestinian Arabs in the occupied territories have united around the Palestine Liberation Organisation in their struggle for self-determination and an independent state alongside

Israel. The Israeli-Egyptian talks on the so-called autonomy scheme have not brought agreement nearer and in the last resort indicate the failure of the whole Camp David conception.

The economic situation is quickly deteriorating. In its class aspect, the economic policy of the Begin-Hurvitz government may not be very different from that of the Thatcher government in Britain, but the economic basis is much weaker in Israel, and the complete devotion of the Israeli government to militarism and war, to occupation and settlement, to continued interference in the internal affairs of Lebanon means an unbearable burden on the economy and the working people. Inflation in 1979 reached 111 percent. The policy of substantially lowering the living standard of the working people may achieve this aim, but it will be unable drastically to reduce the upward flight of prices or to cure economic ills.

Meanwhile, mass unemployment (which has been virtually absent so far, as a result of the stabilising effect of militarisation of the economy in its first phases) raises its ugly head. It has been predicted that by the end of the year there will be 80,000 to 100,000 unemployed. Already, more and more people live on or below the hunger line. Many foods are completely out of the reach of the working class families, not to mention flats for young couples or large families; private debts are accumulating. Drug-taking, crime and violence have become daily occurrences in Israeli society. Frustration and desperation are widespread. Many artisans and small businessmen go out of business and leave the country; young people are also leaving.

No hope is awakened by the prospect of Labour Alignment again grasping the reins of government, if and when a new Knesset is elected. Most people may vote for the Alignment, but without enthusiasm and even without illusions—only to get rid of Begin. On the basic issues (the general Zionist consensus on the Palestinian question) the Alignment would lead to a not too different policy from the Likud, even if somewhat less brutal.

Inside the darkness some rays of light are visible. The Israeli people, the Israeli working class in particular, has not yet basically changed, but it is on the move. Lenin taught that social classes should be seen not statically, but dynamically. While chauvinism, is, of course, still very strong, a process of action and clarification has set in.

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The popular opposition to the Likud government plays an important role. The disillusionment among those who voted for the Likud three years ago is widespread. A poll published on March 31, for whatever it is worth, gave the Likud only 18.6 per cent of the vote. The demand to move the election date, scheduled for November 1981, forward, first raised by the Communist Party in 1979, is gaining ground; a public petition to this effect is being circulated in the major towns. The opposition to Likud is not only directed against its unpopular economic measures, its extremism in foreign policy and its operational impotence. Some non-acceptance of the political line is unfolding, some feeling that there might be something wrong with the whole conception. While still far from consummate understanding, this feeling has started to express itself in distrust towards official propaganda in an almost complete indifference towards the officially highlighted achievements. For instance, the exchange of ambassadors with Egypt did not evoke any response amongst the Israeli public.

The so-called national consensus on the Palestinian question, existing at the level of leadership of the major parties, is slowly being eroded at the base. The absurd notion that there is no Palestinian Arab people has been widely abandoned. A big segment of public opinion no longer denies those national rights. Not a few ponder that the Palestinian question exists and that it cannot be solved without negotiations with its representatives. The further advance towards recognising the role of the Palestine Liberation Organisation in these negotiations is notably more difficult.

On a more concrete issue, the question of how to deal with the territories and the people under Israeli occupation, has led to a growing polarisation in political opinion. The Likud government has basically continued the line of the previous Labour governments; but its extremist measures and the strong outcry against them in the territories and all over the world have made their impact here, and the discussions for and against are sharply waged in the press and in the market place.

Many working people have started to connect political questions with economic ones. The government claims that it has no money to subsidise the price of milk or rice, no money to pay its employees the full cost of living allowance, no money to keep the health and education services at their present

levels. However, it finds many billions of Israeli pounds for its colonisation schemes in occupied territories. The people have started to see this contradiction; more than that, they have started to perceive the causal nexus between the money squandered for colonisation and the lack of funds available for social ends in Israel. The widespread slogan 'Money for the slum quarters—not for the settlements!' expresses this new understanding.

The 'Peace Now' movement succeeds in mobilising large numbers of people, demonstrating against the settlements; this activity converges with the struggle of the slum dwellers and other popular sections for directing funds for their needs rather than for colonisation.

At the same time, the class struggle is getting sharper. The continuous lowering of real wages and the growing threat of lay-offs led to the working people declaring strikes and sanctions with increasing intensity. At the end of January, some 100,000 workers in the twelve largest workplaces declared a one-day, warning strike. This included the ports, the airport, the Electricity Corporation, the Dead Sea Potash Company, postal services and industrial concentrations in various regions. Many organisations of salaried professionals led extensive struggles: hospital doctors, nurses and X-ray assistants, court of justice employees, librarians and—most significant—the teachers who, after a prolonged fight, achieved important successes. All the inhabitants of small places in the north and south of Israel—euphemistically called development townlets—vehemently demonstrated in the central squares against economic policy.

While the demands of the workers are mainly economic, these actions under present conditions acquire increased political significance, especially since in many cases the state is their employer. Speakers at strike meetings have not restricted themselves to demanding full compensation for steep price rises and similar claims, but also criticise the financial policy of the government in general.

While the social reformist leaders of the Histadrut (trade union federation) try to preserve class peace, they cannot be altogether deaf to the workers' demands.

The Arab population has taken up the battle against continuing discrimination, for example at municipal level, in employment, against the threat of

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further expropriation and eviction from their lands in Galilee and particularly against the brutal policy of evicting the bedouins and their herds from traditional pasture lands in the Negev, to make way for military bases, both American and Israeli ones. The Arab population has never been so united in its struggle, with a high level of consciousness reached as a result of the political line of the Communist Party of Israel. The four mass demonstrations on the Day of Land (March 30) have reaffirmed this unity. Almost the entire Arab population of Israel takes part in the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality, led by the Communist Party; at present it represents the most organised democratic force in Israeli society.

In many fields, the political, social and economic slogans and assessments of the CPI have been taken up by wide circles of the people. Anti-communism has lost much of its former appeal, and people in general are prepared to listen to Communists, even if they do not accept their views. Together with its allies in the Democratic Front and in co-operation with other forces on concrete issues, the Communist Party of Israel does everything to unite the various streams of progressive action, in order to create a force capable of changing the official political line in the direction of a policy of genuine peace, national independence, democracy, equality of rights and social progress. There is no other political alternative for historical progress, and its core at the present juncture is the achievement of a just, comprehensive and durable peace in the area. □