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Mass protests against police shooting of Ethiopian Israeli

Three days of angry demonstrations took place last week in towns and cities across Israel, as tens of thousands protested the shooting of an unarmed Ethiopian Jew by a policeman.

The protests started after the off-duty officer killed 18-year-old Solomon Teka Sunday evening in Kiryat Haim in the northern port city of Haifa. His killing has sparked outrage among Ethiopian Jews, who have long complained of persistent discrimination, intimidation and violence against their community.

A no less important factor was their frustration at the longstanding refusal of politicians and the authorities to implement their numerous promises to end institutionalised racism and improve conditions in the wake of similar protests.

This is not simply the cops against black youth, but the armed representatives of the capitalist state against the most impoverished sections of the working class, be they Ethiopian, Jews of Arab and North African descent, migrant workers, Israel's own Palestinian citizens, Bedouins, or the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories.

According to an eyewitness, the off-duty policeman was not in danger—as the officer claimed—when he opened fire. The policeman, who has not been named, said he was trying to break up a street fight but was attacked by three youths who hurled stones at him, endangering his life, and that he had fired at the ground, not at Tekah, with the bullet ricocheting upward and striking the young man.

The authorities arrested the officer before releasing him to house arrest in “protective custody,” further inflaming tensions. On Friday, it appeared that the authorities were likely to charge him only with a disciplinary offence, not manslaughter, let alone murder.

The police chief’s callous response was to call on the Ethiopian community to be “patient” and “show restraint” while they carried out an investigation into the killing.

Tebeka, an Ethiopian advocacy group, wrote to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan, calling on them to immediately fire the police officer involved in Tekah’s death.

The killing follows the police shooting earlier this year of 24-year-old Yehuda Biadga, a mentally disturbed man of Ethiopian origin whose mother had called for help, prompting huge demonstrations in Tel Aviv. Tekah is the 15th Israeli citizen to be shot dead by the police in the last five years: nine were Arab Israelis, four were Israelis of Arab or North African descent, and two were Ethiopian. None of those responsible faced any serious consequences. In 2015, a police officer was filmed beating Demas Fekadeh, a uniformed Ethiopian Israeli soldier, prompting the first major demonstration.

Last week, protesters shouted, “End the killing, and end the racism.” Some set fire to tires, blocking at least 15 highways across the country and leaving motorists tied up in massive traffic jams, with some even joining the protests. In Tel Aviv, protesters screamed at the police, saying, “You are murderers,” and “One of you will die today.” Some upended cars and set fire to them.

While Monday’s demonstrators against police brutality and racism were largely Israelis of Ethiopian origin, on Tuesday and Wednesday workers and especially youth across all communities, as well as migrant workers, who have long faced racism and discrimination, were protesting in solidarity. Since the 2008 financial crisis, conditions for the working class have worsened as well-paying jobs have been erased and replaced with low-wage labour and wages eroded by the soaring cost of living.

Angry clashes again broke out between the protesters and police, with demonstrators hurling stones and bottles, leading to more than 110 people being injured, including some police officers, and 196 arrests.

The courts later criticised the police for making arrests without adequate evidence. Many of those arrested were later denied proper legal representation and medical treatment.

Youth refused to speak to the press, which headlined the protests as “Anarchy” on Wednesday morning, alongside a photo of a car going up in flames.

On Wednesday, Tekah’s family called for a pause in the protests until after the traditional Jewish mourning period that ended on Sunday. However, Ethiopian-Israeli community leaders, meeting on Saturday night, announced they would resume demonstrations against racism and police violence today. They said, “But this protest isn’t about Solomon Tekah, it’s about the next Solomon Tekah.”

Netanyahu, whose successive governments and their economic and social policies have done so much to pauperise and splinter the Israeli working class, called for calm and convened a ministerial committee to discuss “all issues” affecting Israel’s Ethiopian community. “We will discuss all issues, but we will also discuss something that is unacceptable,” he said. “We are not prepared to either accept or tolerate the blocking of roads and the use of violence, including firebombs against our forces, the burning of cars or any other property of citizens.”

This is a policy that does not extend to settlers who vandalise Palestinian property or attack or kill Palestinians in the West Bank.

Netanyahu signalled that the Ethiopian Israelis and their supporters—not the police and the government—were responsible for the violence, with the media taking its cue from the government.

There are more than 140,000 Israelis of Ethiopian origin, most of whom are the children of immigrants who came to Israel in the 1980s and 1990s, following Israel’s recognition in 1975 of Ethiopia’s Jewish community, which had lived in Ethiopia for generations.

Most of the Ethiopian children grew up in poverty and struggled to integrate into Israeli society. They lag behind the general population on almost every social index, according to the Ethiopian National Project, with a higher poverty rate, a lower level of educational achievement, a lower employment rate, and lower average income.

Such is the discrimination against Ethiopian Jews that Israeli blood banks even rejected blood donated by Ethiopians, ostensibly in fear of AIDS contamination. In 2014, Avera Mengistu, an Ethiopian Israeli, crossed into Gaza and did not return, prompting the belief that he has been held prisoner there ever since. While the government frequently mention two Israeli soldiers whose remains are still in Gaza following the 2014 war on Gaza, they rarely if ever mention Mengistu.

A recent report by the Justice Ministry's Unit for Coordinating the Struggle Against Racism noted that it had received 230 complaints in 2018 (compared to 75 a year earlier), which related mainly to discrimination in employment and the receipt of services, racist remarks and publications, police conduct and the education system. Forty percent of these complaints were filed by citizens of Ethiopian origin, even more than the 32 percent filed by Israel's Arab citizens. Justice Emeritus Elyakim Rubinstein, head of the public council that works with the unit, wrote, "Racism exists in Israel and its establishment."

The police killing of Tekah occurred the same day as the cabinet agreed to far-right Transportation Minister Bezael Smotrich's request to delay the transfer of \$13.5 million from the Education Ministry earmarked for Ethiopian Israeli students, for teens at risk and for renovating youth villages and boarding schools so that he can use the money for "conversion institutes in crisis, resilience centres in Gaza border communities and in Judea and Samaria [settlements in the occupied West Bank], road safety and more."

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