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Jean Shaoul

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Israel's protest leaders enter talks to stabilise Netanyahu government

The day after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced he was “pausing” his plans to overhaul Israel’s judicial system—the only arm of the state that his far-right coalition does not control—to prevent “civil war,” opposition leaders Yair Lapid and Benny Gantz entered talks with his government.

While the media portray Lapid, Gantz and the host of former generals, intelligence and security chiefs, the Histadrut labour federation and heads of Israel’s tech sector as leading the movement against Netanyahu’s dictatorial legislation, they are acting swiftly to betray it. Their aim is to agree some cosmetic changes to the planned legislation that will demobilise the largest protest movement in Israel’s 75-year history and prop up the rule of Israel’s oligarchs against the people.



Likud Party leader Benjamin Netanyahu (left) far-right Israeli lawmaker Bezael Smotrich (right) and Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid (centre) and leaders of all Israel's political

parties pose for a group photo after the swearing-in ceremony for lawmakers at the Knesset, Israel's parliament, in Jerusalem, Tuesday, November 15, 2022. [AP Photo/Tsafir Abayov]

These leaders, many of whom have served in previous governments headed by Netanyahu, do not represent a progressive alternative. They have few fundamental policy differences with him. Equally committed to the Zionist project, Jewish supremacy and the suppression of the Palestinians within a system of apartheid rule—along with the enrichment of Israel's corporate elite—they fear his measures will destroy Israel's democratic fig leaf and endanger its relationship with the United States that is crucial for the country's economic and military security. To this end, these forces will readily swallow their dislike of Netanyahu and form a government of national unity, displacing his fascistic partners.

For three months, hundreds of thousands have taken to the streets in protest against Netanyahu's plans to give his coalition of fascists, racists and religious zealots dictatorial powers by neutering the judiciary.

According to a survey carried out before Netanyahu fired his Defence Minister Yoav Gallant for calling on him to abandon plans that threatened to destabilise the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), a majority of Israeli Jews are opposed to the plans, with 53 percent defining themselves as 'opposed to the reform.' All opinion polls show that the government would lose its majority in the Knesset if fresh elections were held.

As news of Gallant's sacking was announced Sunday, up to 600,000 turned out to protest and mass strikes broke out, closing universities, schools, workplaces and government operations and grounding flights and shutting ports.

The Histadrut, dedicated to the defence of the Jewish state, had repeatedly refused to call a general strike over the government's plans. It only did so when it became clear that workers had begun to act independently of the unions. As soon as Netanyahu announced Monday evening that he was "pausing" the legislation till May, Histadrut chief Arnon Bar-David called off the strike.

But Netanyahu, having come under enormous pressure from US President Joe Biden, who had sent several officials to Tel Aviv to urge him to make some concessions to the opposition movement, had to buy off his fascistic coalition partners to remain in power. In return for a short delay, he pledged to establish and fund a new National Guard under the control of the Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, head of Jewish Power and a leader of fascist settlers in the occupied West Bank. The paramilitary force will be allowed

to carry guns that will be used not just against Israel's Palestinian citizens but also against Israeli workers and youth.

Netanyahu insisted he was not abandoning the judicial overhaul and that if no compromise is found by the summer, he would go ahead with it anyway.

Speaking Tuesday, Biden said, "Like many strong supporters of Israel, I'm very concerned. And I'm concerned that they get this straight. They cannot continue down this road. And I've sort of made that clear. I — hopeful — hopefully, the prime minister will act in a way that he is going to try to work out some genuine compromise. But that remains to be seen."

Netanyahu rejected this mealy mouthed appeal, declaring Wednesday, "Israel is a sovereign country which makes its decisions by the will of its people and not based on pressures from abroad, including from the best of friends."

The day after Netanyahu announced his "pause," delegations from Lapid's Yesh Atid and Gantz's National Unity met representatives from Netanyahu's Likud party for talks chaired by Isaac Herzog, Israel's largely ceremonial president. The 90-minute discussions were conducted in "a positive atmosphere" focusing on the mechanisms for negotiations and were aimed at what TV Channel 12 described as fostering a friendly atmosphere.

On Wednesday, Herzog met with representatives from Israel's Arab parties, Ra'am and Hadash-Ta'al and the Labor Party. While Labor had refused to attend the previous day, it declared that 'precisely because it did not trust Netanyahu,' it would take part in the negotiations.

Gallant, Washington's favourite interlocutor within the Netanyahu government, is reportedly willing to apologise to Netanyahu over his speech on TV Saturday, when he called for the suspension of the government's planned judicial overhaul citing growing dissent among army reservists. With Netanyahu still to send him a formal letter dismissing him from office, Gantz urged him to keep Gallant in post for the sake of Israel's security.

But the protesters have vowed to continue their fight and weekly demonstrations until the government abandons its plans to overhaul the judiciary. Some gathered outside the talks. The Black Flags movement said, "There is no talking to a lying son of a liar," and "We are not ready to talk with the destroyers of democracy until the dictatorial legislation is completely abolished."

A group of 34 protest organisations wrote to Lapid and Gantz, urging them to pull out of the talks they said were a "deception" and condemned their agreement to hold talks as "shocking and outrageous." Netanyahu was using the "pause" as a ruse to diffuse the

massive protest movement and when the next Knesset session began in May, he would “immediately” resume his “dictatorship laws.” They insisted, “We will not fall for this deception and will continue to fight with all our strength.”

Ben-Gvir has encouraged his supporters, notorious for their attacks on Palestinians, to harass and intimidate the government’s opponents, leading to a series of violent incidents. *Ha’aretz* reported right-wing activists blocking vehicles amid cheering, deriding drivers as “leftists,” using homophobic slurs and mocking drivers.

To defeat Netanyahu and the self-proclaimed leaders of the protest movement, all of whom are working to shore up the Zionist state as it faces a political explosion, Israeli workers and youth must build their own independent political leadership and adopt a socialist strategy and the methods of the class struggle. They must appeal to Israel’s Palestinian citizens, the Palestinians in the occupied territories and workers in neighbouring countries.

There exists a powerful objective basis for such a movement. As well as the mass movement in Israel, teachers in the occupied West Bank have been on strike since the beginning of February, demanding the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) implement an agreement signed 18 months ago that agreed a pay rise, back pay and union elections. As striking teachers attempt to form their own union, independent of Fatah, the PA has threatened mass firings and arrests. Earlier this month, Palestinian security forces set up checkpoints and roadblocks on the way to Ramallah where a protest rally was to be held.

In Lebanon, there have been repeated strikes and protests over the spiralling economic crisis and plummeting national currency plunging 80 percent of the 6.7 million population into poverty. On Thursday, hundreds of protesters, mainly army retirees, again marched on Beirut’s central bank demanding increased pensions. Conditions are even worse in Syria. It is for this reason that the Arab media have barely reported the mass protests that threaten Israel’s political system.

It is impossible for Jewish workers to defend their democratic rights while Palestinian workers live under a military dictatorship and under the ever-present threat of settler and vigilante violence carried out under the protection of the Israeli army. The defence of democratic rights means taking up the struggle to unite Jewish and Arab workers in a common struggle to overthrow the Zionist state and the Arab bourgeois regimes through the building of a United Socialist States of the Middle East.

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