

In Israel, Zionism Prevents Working-Class Solidarity

BY

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Despite unionization rates more than twice that of the United States, many Israeli workers continue to be committed to apartheid and the racist ideology enabling it. The Zionist project is preventing Israeli workers from organizing alongside Palestinians.

Israel's snap election last month, the fourth in two years, again centered on long-standing prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's inability to coalesce a government in the face of multiple corruption scandals. In fact, since last May, protesters gather weekly at intersections across the country, waving black flags and Israeli flags, calling for his resignation, prosecution, and an end to government corruption.

But as a movement that seeks to speak for all Israelis across the political spectrum, it stops short of confronting or even acknowledging the greatest injustice in Israel: the occupation. The elections also reveal an all but collapsed Liberal Zionism. Once the cornerstone of the colonial project, the parties of Labor Zionism (HaAvoda) and Socialist Zionism (Meretz) commanded every sphere of Israeli society: the government, the military, most industries, labor, and the kibbutzim.

In the 2021 elections, they each scraped by the voter threshold to enter Israel's parliament, the Knesset, with 5.92 percent and 4.55 percent, respectively.

The biggest opposition parties to Netanyahu and his right-wing party Likud are the center-right Yesh Atid and Kahol Lavan. Right parties now completely dominate the Israeli political landscape, having secured over 100 of the 120 Knesset seats.

What remains of Zionist liberalism continues to pay lip service to a hollow two-state solution — a solution rejected by a clear majority of Israelis, who support full occupation, and which Israel rendered impossible with decades of settlement expansion. These parties undermined the Palestinian Joint List, a coalition of three political parties who represent the majority of Palestinian citizens of Israel. The Joint List is arguably the only real left-wing coalition within Israel's electoral arena. While they reject coalition with the Joint List, HaAvoda is perfectly willing to sit in government with Israel's far-right parties, because above all, these parties and their voting base continue to be committed to Zionism.

Outside the electoral sphere, a handful of small Left groups operate within Israeli society, and a still smaller number organize in the occupied West Bank and take their lead from Palestinians. Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem and the left-wing publication *+972 Magazine* recognize the reality of Israeli apartheid and the 1948 ethnic cleansing campaigns (the Nakba) — as do groups like the activists of Shministim, whose members refuse to serve in the Israeli military. But all these groups vary in their position on the right of return, a central tenet of the Palestinian struggle.

These defiant activists are mostly of middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds. Their support of the Palestinian cause is welcome, of course. But because these groups are not based in working-class activity and lack a connection to labor, they command little political power.

The Histadrut, Israel's largest trade union, was at the very heart of the Zionist movement in the 1920s, when it led campaigns pressuring businesses to hire Jews and boycott Palestinian labor. During the mass Palestinian general strike of 1936–1939, the Histadrut brought in Jewish strikebreakers to replace Palestinians and colluded with British forces to quell the uprising.

The Histadrut commanded the economy as union, boss, and health care provider for a majority of Jewish workers in Israel until the 1980s. After a wave of privatizations, it was largely defanged but still refused to build across national lines. Even as the Histadrut opened ranks to Palestinian communities who acquired Israeli citizenship in the 1960s, it explicitly did not organize workers from the West Bank.

Today, over 130,000 Palestinians (18 percent of the Palestinian workforce) are employed in Israel and its illegal settlements. Though Israeli law prohibits Palestinian trade unions from organizing in the settlements, the Histadrut refuses to represent non-Jewish workers in the settlements.

The next-largest union is the more right-wing Histadrut Leumit, affiliated with Netanyahu's Likud party. To the left, and the third largest, is Koach LaOvdim. Though Koach LaOvdim works to organize Palestinians within Israel, it does not recognize the occupation as the primary precondition of Palestinian workers' severe exploitation, a demand Palestinian trade unions have explicitly called for.

The only union to organize Palestinians from the West Bank is WAC-MAAN, which began unionizing Palestinians in 2008 and has won some unprecedented gains. Recently, they won the end of the fifty-year-long practice of the Histadrut collecting millions of dollars in dues from hundreds of thousands of Palestinian workers they weren't representing — a significant victory for a small union with only a couple thousand members.

Jewish Israeli union members keep the experience of fighting for workplace justice separate from the "national question." They continue to support Israel's settler-colonial project and, in many cases, participate in the violent subjugation of Palestinians through service in the Israeli military. This is why even WAC-MAAN has failed to shift the political leanings of its Jewish members who often vote Likud.

Compare this to labor movements elsewhere. Although the labor movement in the United States leaves much to be desired, diverse workers work alongside one another. They have shared interests, because lowering wages and worsening conditions in one workplace negatively impacts jobs in other locations.

A recent study showed that white workers in the United States who join a union become less racist, particularly in more rank-and-file driven unions. The study's authors, political scientists Jacob Grumbach and Paul Frymer, argue that this is both because people are organizing *together* for better conditions and because unions require a workforce willing to cut across racial lines to expand their membership. They argue that political education in unions, even if still minimal, plays an important role in organizing workers.

Not so in Israel. While unionization rates are more than twice that of the United States, Israeli workers continue to be committed to apartheid and the racist ideology enabling it. In fact, unions in Israel are pulled rightward by their Jewish members. In order to recruit, they must set aside the question of the occupation. Otherwise, they doom themselves to marginality.

This is the nature of labor in an apartheid economy. Almost complete separation means that, by design, Jews and Palestinians rarely work alongside one another as coworkers. Instead, they are segregated in ways that entrench racism and ensure that national loyalty trumps class consciousness. Three-quarters of Palestinians don't hold citizenship and never compete with Jews for employment, nor are they afforded the right to organize together for good union jobs.

Instead, Palestinians occupy the lowest rungs of the economy, making less than minimum wage with no benefits or pensions. Attempts by Palestinian workers to organize for better conditions are met with the threat of permit revocation. Undocumented workers are in even more precarious situations.

Desegregation of the Israeli labor market would mean competition for jobs, the return of stolen wealth, and potentially economic free fall for many Jewish Israeli workers. The end of occupation threatens these workers' material standing. This is why the majority of Israeli workers oppose democratic rights for all: Zionism prevents working-class solidarity.

The absence of a labor base for the Israeli left means the absence of a Left with the agency and leverage to drive change, not least of all change in the subordinate status of Palestinians. Building class solidarity would require significantly more social, civil, and political rights for Palestinians. Those who believe in building working-class struggle have to reckon with the many conditions that currently prevent Palestinians from organizing with Israeli workers. Colonialism is the underlying obstacle.

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