

# “The simple thing. So hard to achieve.”

July 24, 2022



Uri Weltmann, is the national field organiser for Omdim be'Yachad-Naqef Ma'an (Standing Together), and a member of its national leadership. Standing Together is a Jewish-Arab social movement active in Israel, organising against racism and occupation, and for equality and social justice.

Daniel Randall is a trade unionist and socialist based in London. He is the author of *Confronting Antisemitism on the Left: Arguments for Socialists*.

They discussed the political situation in Israel and the prospects for the left.

**DR: Can you give an overview of the political situation in Israel, as it approaches new elections?**

UW: Israel will soon hold its fifth parliamentary elections in four years, which expresses the political crisis in which the Israeli establishment finds itself. The crisis is evidenced by the inability of the existing parties to form a stable government, which is linked to and deepened by the various social and economic crises that followed the Covid pandemic.

Following 30 years of neoliberal austerity, welfare and public services were not able to meet the needs of the pandemic. Healthcare has been slowly privatised since the mid-1980s, social services are weak. There was a major strike of the social workers' union, around three months into the pandemic. The education system has been partially privatised. Schools are underfunded, classrooms are overcrowded. [Former prime minister] Netanyahu found himself presiding over a social and economic crisis. Unemployment rose to 1.4m, including people who lost their jobs due to cuts and closures during the pandemic, and people on long-term furlough, who, whilst not formally

unemployed, were effectively out of work.

In comparison to other countries in the world, including those with right-wing governments, such as Boris Johnson's UK, the Netanyahu government gave very little in terms of benefits to either workers or small businesses during the pandemic. We saw waves of strikes - by doctors, teachers, and others - and growing social unrest. This found a sort of political expression in anti-corruption protests against Netanyahu, which were the political backdrop against which last year's election took place, in which Netanyahu was unable to form a government and was finally forced to leave office.

The government that emerged was highly contradictory. It included the anti-Netanyahu right, including Avigdor Lieberman, centrist parties, and the two traditional parties of the left - Labor, which is a traditional social-democratic party, now quite right-wing even in terms of mainstream social democracy, and Meretz, which occupies a position similar to the Greens in many European countries, with a base mostly amongst the liberal middle class and students, with a focus on feminism, LGBT rights, and environmentalism. For the first time, an Arab-Palestinian party participated in a coalition government - the United Arab List (UAL), linked to the Islamic Movement.

The coalition's only glue was its opposition to Netanyahu. Its contradictions have ultimately led to downfall. All parties of the coalition, except the UAL, draw their main electoral support from upper-middle-class layers. The popular strata in Jewish-Israeli society, lower-middle-class and working-class layers, largely vote for parties of the right, including the religious right. The only non-right-wing party in the opposition to orient to these popular strata and win some votes from them is the Joint List, a coalition of Arab-Palestinian parties which includes, and is led by, the electoral front of the Communist Party, which is historically a binational party. The Joint List remained in opposition.

According to polls looking ahead to the next election, the right and far-right, Likud and the Religious Zionist parties, are doing well. The centrist Yesh Atid, led by Yair Lapid, who will serve as Prime Minister until the new elections, is also growing, but by drawing votes away from the left rather than the right.

### **What can you say about the participation of Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel in the formal politics of the country?**

The rate of abstention amongst Arab-Palestinians is expected to be high. There is a growing feeling that, having been through the experience of an Arab party joining a coalition government, Palestinians are not able to influence Israeli politics.

Arab-Palestinian citizens have been represented in the Knesset ever since formation of state of Israel. Broadly, there have been three main political currents: an Islamic current, an Arab-nationalist current, and a current represented by the Communist Party (CP), which traditionally defines itself as binational, Jewish and Arab. The CP's Influence amongst Jewish Israelis has declined, and the majority of its voter base and membership is now drawn from Arab-Palestinian minority.

Prior to the 2015 elections, the electoral threshold required for parties to secure representation in

the Knesset was raised from 2% to 3.25%. In response, four existing parties representing Palestinians united in the Joint List. This was seen with some optimism by many Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel, as, for the first time, all three main political currents were united into a single electoral coalition. After the 2015 elections, the Joint List was the third largest bloc in the Knesset. In the elections of March 2020, it won a record high of 15 seats, out of a total of 120.

Under the leadership of Palestinian socialist Ayman Odeh, who is from the CP, the Joint List was seen as a real player in Israeli politics because Odeh showed a willingness to support an anti-Netanyahu bloc in the Knesset which could remove Netanyahu from power. This resonated with people from the Arab-Palestinian community who wanted to influence Israeli politics and be part of political life in Israel. The Joint List recommended that Benny Gantz, the then leader of the centrist bloc, form a government. But the centre failed the Arab-Palestinian minority, with some of its MKs refusing to be part of a government that relied on the Joint List for its power, so Netanyahu remained in office at that time.

In early 2021, the Joint List split, with the UAL breaking away. There are major differences between the UAL and other parties in the Joint List. The UAL is conservative-Islamist, and focuses only on Muslim Palestinians, ignoring the substantial Christian minority as well as the Druze community. The Joint List is eclectic, containing some conservative but also more liberal and progressive elements. A Joint List MK, Aida Touma-Suleiman, from the CP, heads the Knesset's gender equality commission.

The UAL approached the last elections saying they'd play the political game and were ready to join a coalition government, even one led by Netanyahu. The Joint List refuses to join a government, but says it might support an anti-Netanyahu, centre-left government on a confidence-and-supply basis.

### **What's your view on the participation of the left parties in the coalition?**

Labor and Meretz had been out of power for a long time. Labor had not participated in a government since 2011; for Meretz it was 2000. So those parties saw joining the coalition as an opportunity to rebuild after a long period of marginalisation.

However, it became clear very quickly that the left had little power within the coalition and, rather than imposing its policies on the right, it was being dictated to. Political challenges always ended with the left parties capitulating to the right. This was typified by the vote to renew the citizenship law, which has a clause prohibiting Palestinian citizens of Israel who marry Palestinians from the occupied territories from bringing their spouse to live with them. This is a racist law which tears Palestinian families apart. The legislation was up for renewal and, despite longstanding opposition to the law, the parties of the left accepted the discipline of the coalition and voted to renew it, in order to preserve the coalition.

The left has similarly capitulated when it comes to settlement building. Under the coalition government, several new settlements which are illegal even by the definition the Israeli state itself

uses have been built, such as Evyatar, have been built. The government was faced with a clear question: will it take action against these settlements, which are clearly criminal under Israeli law? Although some MKs from the left parties participated in protests against Evyatar, organized by peace organizations, the two left parties in the coalition nonetheless acquiesced to the government's policy of "legalizing" the settlement, rather than demolishing its buildings.

The economic policy of the coalition has been one of neoliberal austerity, under the far-right Avigdor Lieberman as minister of finance. It suspended furlough payments, tried to reduce overtime payments, and raised the retirement age for women workers. No left-wing, pro-working-class policy was passed. Labor leader Merav Michaeli has been minister of transport, but her tenure has been marked by a campaign of industrial action by bus workers over wages and working conditions, including safety issues, to which she has been entirely indifferent. In fact she has accused their strikes of being "politically motivated" to target her.

Similarly, Meretz leader Nitan Horowitz has been health minister in the coalition. His tenure has seen strikes by doctors and other health workers, including the continuation of a campaign by junior doctors for reduced working hours which began under the previous government. He was initially completely indifferent, unwilling to even meet with the junior doctors' union, which protested outside his Tel Aviv residence. But after ongoing demonstrations and industrial actions, a meeting did take place. He then shifted his position, saying that the problem lay with the ministry of finance. The union was unimpressed, and continued to stage protests against him.

The left, then, has been incapable of making any impact on politics as part of the coalition — neither on issues of racism and the occupation, or on socio-economic issues. It has been a very negative experience. Despite their formal affinity with social democracy, in practice Labor and Meretz pursue neoliberal policies. Research suggests they draw their electoral support from the upper 30% of Israeli society. They are not under any pressure from their base to pursue pro-working-class policies.

### **Clearly, the situation in terms of the electoral left is bleak. What about the extra-parliamentary left?**

I'm an activist with Standing Together. I see our work as the main source of optimism on the Israeli political scene.

We're a relatively young movement, formed around seven years ago. We have grown significantly in the past three years. Prior to the consecutive election cycles from 2019, we had 600 members. Now we have around 3,300. We organise both Jewish and Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel – against the occupation and for peace, against racism and for equality, and for workers' rights and social and environmental justice. We have led a number of campaigns from this class perspective.

Our most recent campaign, which has had some success, has been to increase the minimum wage. Israel has a particularly high percentage of low-paid workers relative to other OECD countries. The minimum wage has not been increased since 2017, and currently stands at ₪29.12 NIS per hour, around ₪5,300 per month. This is insufficient to meet very high rents and a rising cost-of-living. In the last year, food prices went up almost 20%, and housing costs went up more than 15%. Almost half of the salaried workforce in Israel is paid less than ₪40 per hour.

In August 2021, we launched a campaign called "Minimum 40", around the simple demand to raise the minimum wage to ₪40 per hour. The demand resonated across diverse layers of the working class in Israel. We saw grassroots action taken as part of this campaign in major urban centres such

as Tel Aviv, but also in the periphery, in small towns in the north of Israel, even in ultra-Orthodox towns such as Bnei Brak. This was especially significant because the formal political life in these towns is dominated by the right.

The campaign was able to do something which we think is key in order to transform Israeli society, which is to bring people together from various communities to struggle around a shared class interest. As a consequence of this campaign, we have had ultra-Orthodox people joining Standing Together. We first engaged with and mobilised them around the issue of the minimum wage, but we have been able to persuade some of them of our broader perspectives and they have now joined the movement. Similarly, we have young Arab-Palestinians, previously anti-political, become politicised through the campaign and join the movement. These are people who are not traditional leftist. This is not to say, of course, that everyone who engaged in the campaign became a socialist, but a certain percentage of those who initially came part of the way with us have been convinced to go more of the way.

To transform Israel, including in its relationship to the Palestinians, we need a left that is heterogenous and can mobilise workers from across diverse communities within Israel, both in Jewish Israeli society and amongst Arab-Palestinian citizens. This means building a left that is able to mobilise in ultra-Orthodox communities, for example.

Minimum 40 also had a parliamentary element, and a bill was drafted and cosponsored by 47 MKs, from across the political spectrum, including both Jewish and Palestinian MKs. This is a very high number considering the level of polarisation in the current Knesset. On 8 June, we succeeded in forcing a preliminary vote, and the bill was passed. Three coalition factions defied government discipline on this vote - two by refusing to vote against the bill, and one by voting for it. We saw this as a big victory after 10 months of campaigning — canvassing, petitioning, leafleting — throughout the country. We translated this campaigning energy into pressure on the political establishment. The end result is that a bill was passed that, simply, they did not want to be passed.

The government has now broken up before we could follow through on this success, and proceed with putting the bill into law. In the last few days before the breakup, some indirect talks took place between finance ministry officials and representatives from Standing Together, to discuss drafting legislation to increase the minimum wage. The Labor party acted as the mediator here, presumably looking to gain political prestige for itself if the minimum wage was eventually raised. Minister of finance Lieberman ultimately blocked this, unwilling to see popular legislation passed in the final days of the government. Despite this, we see this campaign as a tremendous win and a vindication of our approach. It showed people that if you organise and struggle, you can make gains.

**The dominant thinking on much of the far left about Israel is that it is simply a settler society, a reactionary and illegitimate implantation in the region. Some may even see successes over economic struggles in Israel as reactionary, as they entrench the privilege of Jewish Israeli workers over occupied Palestinians. Many international leftists argue that the focus should solely be on supporting Palestinian struggle against Israel, and that any focus on struggle within Israel itself is, at best, a distraction. How would you respond to these views?**

Looking at Israeli society from the outside, it might seem like one homogeneous, reactionary, bloc. But a closer look reveals a more nuanced reality. Like any society, Israel has its progressives and its reactionaries. And, most fundamentally, it is a class society: it has one class of people which lives by selling its labour power, and another which lives principally by exploiting that labour. Ignoring these tensions and contradictions, and writing them off as potential sites of transformative struggle, leads to bad political conclusions.

Israel is a rich country with poor people. There are huge amounts of wealth in Israel's tech industry, in its biomedical industry. Why, then, such inequality, such poverty, such a gap between rich and poor? One of the answers I would give is: the occupation. A huge portion of the Israeli state budget goes to maintaining the apparatus of the occupation — buying nuclear submarines from Germany rather than funding hospitals, buying bombs from the US rather than funding schools.

The funding to maintain a military occupation over Palestine, funding a ritualistic war on Gaza every few years, funding to build up military capacity for a potential future war with Syria or Iran, funding the settlement project in the West Bank and East Jerusalem — all of these are directly linked to why people in Israeli society, both Jewish Israelis and Arab-Palestinians, find themselves living in poverty.

So Israeli workers have a direct, material interest in ending the occupation. The existing state of affairs greatly undermines the wellbeing and security of Jewish Israelis. So for me, as a Jewish Israeli, as the father of two small children, it would greatly benefit me and my family to end the occupation, to dismantle the settlement project, to prevent future wars. It is in our interest to change that state of affairs. This is not to say class struggle in Israel should only be viewed instrumentally, in terms of its relationship to the occupation. Victories for labour over capital are good things in themselves. But in the Israeli context, there is also a connection to the question of Israel's policy towards the Palestinians.

15 years ago, when the UK was an occupying force in Iraq, I could have said to a UK leftist: "Why should we bother talking about a struggle to save the NHS, or the struggle of Tube workers in London, when the UK is pursuing imperialist policies and occupying another country?" That person might reasonably see me as rather narrow-minded for refusing to look at how dynamics and contradictions within UK society could connect with a struggle to end the occupation of Iraq.

Look at the US: the US is the biggest military power in the world. Does that mean that we, as socialists, are indifferent to the struggles of US workers, and struggles in US society over issues such as reproductive freedom? All of these struggles are schools which teach US workers how to fight and win, how to build power, how to differentiate between their interests and the interests of the ruling class.

Social struggles are schools for class consciousness. They make us realise we are not in the same boat as our rulers. Israeli workers fighting to raise the minimum wage helps, not hinders, efforts to build a movement against occupation, by sharpening class contradictions within Israel. Of course, this is not an automatic or mechanical process. Raising the minimum wage in Israel won't lead to the evacuation of the settlements. Making those connections requires the active intervention of socialists into these struggles to draw those links, and persuade workers of a perspective that connects the struggle for social transformation within Israel with the Palestinian struggle for independence and equality.

### **How does Standing Together attempt to do that?**

In late March/early April, there was a wave of fatal attacks inside Israel. It began in Be'er Sheva, where an Isis-inspired terrorist attacked Jewish bystanders in the street. This caused shockwaves within Israeli society, as this was the first time there was an Isis-inspired attack inside Israel. This led to an increase in tensions, with right-wing politicians attempting to portray all Palestinians as potential Isis terrorists.

There were further attacks in the following days and weeks. It created an atmosphere of fear and terror, and an increase in racism against Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel. Within the Minimum 40 campaign, we felt it would be detached and abstracted from social reality for the campaign to simply continue with its basic messages without any reference to the mood that was present in the country.

So in response, we produced campaign materials that brought diverse voices, especially those of Arab-Palestinian workers, to the fore. We produced videos with Arab-Palestinian workers discussing the fear they felt — fear of racist mob attacks from Jewish Israelis, but also their own fears about the growth of Isis-style ideologies, which pose a clear threat to Palestinian society too. We foregrounded voices and stories of minimum-wage earners that reflected the diversity of the campaign: an ultra-Orthodox worker from Bnei Brak, a Palestinian worker from Jerusalem, a Jewish Israeli school worker from Haifa. All spoke about the fears they felt, and their desire for security, meaning both feeling safe to walk the streets, but also economic security, knowing they could make ends meet.

By emphasising the desire for safety and security as something felt across communities, we were able to counter the racist narratives of the right. By centring the voices of both Jewish and Palestinian workers who were organising around a shared class interest, we cut through the noise in that period and put out an anti-racist message which could be understood by people who were feeling tense and afraid. Of course it's not easy, and answers aren't always readymade, but I believe this shows how our approach of organising around shared class interests can create a framework to promote a politics of anti-racism and equality, even at times of tension.

When I speak with Palestine solidarity activists from abroad, I differentiate between my immediate responsibilities and theirs. I am not relating to Israeli society from outside; I am a part of it. The majority of the people I interact with every day are Jewish Israelis. I have a responsibility to intervene in that society and attempt to change the way my fellow Jewish Israelis think, to ask, “does Palestinian independence threaten us, or could it benefit us? Does settlement construction benefit us, or does it threaten us?”

Standing Together wants to build a new majority in our society. Our aim is to transform the society in which we live, and we think our vision, which is class-based and rooted in socialism, can provide the basis for doing that.

### **What can socialists internationally do to support Standing Together and its work?**

For me, the international movement for solidarity with the Palestinian people, and for a just peace in the Middle East, is not taken for granted. Speaking with veteran peace activists in Israel, who remember the political atmosphere locally and internationally after the 1967 war, I hear stories about how it was seen as common sense that Israel was a liberator, fighting for its self-defense, and not an aggressor. And I listened to hard-learned lessons about how anti-occupation Jewish Israelis and Arab-Palestinians had to swim against the current to make “the Palestinian issue” indeed an issue for the international left.

So the fact that now, in Europe, in North America, and elsewhere, there are so many partners who support the cause of ending the occupation and achieving independence and justice for the Palestinian people is something that warms the heart.

However, the particular struggle I am involved in — shifting public opinion within Israeli society itself, building a new majority in Israel that would support an Israeli-Palestinian peace, ending the occupation, and advancing towards equality and social justice — is often neglected when discussing the region, even among left audiences and left media outlets. Indeed, the question of whether a political subject that can be part of a progressive transformation in the region even exists within Israeli society is contested in left circles internationally. I answer this question with a resounding “yes!”. Therefore, I ask that my fellow socialists abroad introduce into their political perspectives the lessons of how we mobilise, organise, and struggle inside Israel around the values that we all share.

By amplifying, in left circles, as well as in the mainstream media and public discussion in your respective countries, information and analysis about struggles for peace and justice being waged inside Israeli society, you are not only lending a hand to those who struggle here, you also counter the false narrative, which has unfortunately been reinforced in recent years, that criticising the policies of the Israeli government is automatically illegitimate or bigoted. We, Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel, are organising on the ground against the policies of our own government, just as socialists in the US or UK are doing against theirs.

Amplifying the voices of those who struggle for justice here, and educating the general public about the struggles being waged, can be a substantial contribution to our common cause of ending the occupation and achieving peace, justice and freedom for all those who live in this country.

**Many commentators now affirm that “the two state solution is dead”, with the implication that this opens up possibilities to fight for a single-state settlement of some kind. My own view is that the same trends which currently make a two-state framework unlikely also make any genuinely egalitarian single-state framework even less likely, and that the creation of an independent Palestinian state, alongside and with the same rights as Israel, remains the obviously implied “next step” in terms of resolving the inequality of national rights between the two peoples. What is your view on this issue, and does Standing Together have a formal policy on this question?**

Public opinion polls continue to show that the having an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel is the favored solution for both Palestinians and Israelis, although a majority of them remain pessimistic about the possibility of achieving it. The fact that anti-Palestinian racism is rampant inside Israeli society, that hawkish and pro-settlement parties remain powerful inside the Israeli political system, and that full support is given by the US administration to the continued occupation of Palestinian territories — all of these are pointed to as reasons why the status quo is supposedly bound to remain in place, and that no real advancement is likely to be made towards ending the occupation and having an Israeli-Palestinian peace.

This means that one of our main challenges is fighting despair and hopelessness, and showing people that when we organise and fight, we can also win. This is true regarding social, environmental and democratic issues inside Israeli society, but it can also be true vis-a-vis the



question of the occupied Palestinian territories.

The issue of “one state vs two states” might be seen as an issue worthy of discussion in a campus somewhere in Europe or North America, but here in Israel and Palestine it is entirely abstract. We are living in a reality in which Israel is in overall control of the whole territory, with a limited and crippled democracy within the 1967 borders and open military occupation or blockade in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. There is already a “one-state solution”: we already have a single state exercising its power over the whole territory. What is now needed is for Palestinians in the territories occupied in the 1967 war to achieve their national independence within a recognized and viable state, as stipulated by numerous UN resolutions.

I believe such an independent Palestinian state should exercise its sovereignty over the whole of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with the 4 June 1967 border (“The Green Line”) being the internationally recognized border between it and the state of Israel. East Jerusalem should be the capital of the Palestinian state, while West Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel. All of the settlements should be evacuated, all of the Palestinian prisoners inside Israel should be released, and the so-called “Separation Wall” built by Israel should be dismantled.

The problem of the Palestinian refugees should have a just and agreed-upon solution, according to all UN resolutions, including resolution 194, and Israel should strive to integrate in the region, including advancing towards peace with Syria, based on a withdrawal from the occupied Golan Heights, and Lebanon, based on a withdrawal from with the occupied Shebaa Farms. Furthermore, advancing towards a comprehensive peace in the region means Israel should advocate the cause of a Middle East free from nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, and the Israeli government must respect the international Non-Proliferation Treaty. This peace plan is, of course, bitterly opposed by the political establishment of Israel, bent on “managing the conflict”, that is - trying to maintain the status-quo as long as it’s possible.

Standing Together, as a movement, stands for an Israeli-Palestinian peace based on justice and independence for both peoples of this country, while knowing full well that the real problem lies with the unwillingness of the Israeli political establishment to advance towards such a solution. Therefore, we set as one of our key tasks to shift public opinion and build a new majority inside our own society, one that would favour the peaceful solution which we think is the bare minimum that is needed to secure the independence, wellbeing and security of both Jews and Palestinians. It is quite a challenge, but we are determined to address it. It can be described best by the words of the German communist poet, Bertold Brecht: “It is the simple thing. So hard to achieve.”