

Soldiers' Letter Sparks Israeli Peace Movement

by Dean Andromidas

An unexpected 10,000-strong peace demonstration in Tel Aviv on Feb. 9, called by the smaller Israeli peace organizations, showed opposition rapidly growing to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's combination of 18 months' bloody conflict in Palestine, and Israeli economic collapse. Under the slogan "The Occupation Is Killing Us All," the demonstration was organized in support of the 230 Israeli reserve officers and soldiers who signed a letter of refusal to serve in the occupied territories in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The next day, Feb. 10, European Union Foreign Ministers confronted Sharon by adopting France's policy of Palestinian elections for a state and Presidency with UN recognition and membership, and an immediate Israeli military pullback. With growing international opposition to Sharon's fascist occupation tactics and threats to start a general Mideast war, the soldiers' public letter has sparked a fundamental debate in Israel over the occupation and its moral impact on the nation.

The 28 organizations that sponsored the demonstration, which did not include the main Peace Now movement, were expecting only a few hundred people, due to the deep demoralization felt in the peace camp since the election of Sharon. This had been worsened by the Labor Party's joining the "national unity" government, only to sit in the Cabinet subservient to some of Israel's most hawkish political leaders.

Reservists' Resistance Gaining Support

On the eve of the demonstration, several large paid advertisements from peace movements appeared in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz*. One was addressed to Foreign Minister Shimon Peres of the Labor Party, which is under increasing pressure to leave the Sharon government coalition. "Peres, you are a collaborator in war-crimes," said the ad. Another declared, "Do not say 'we did not see, we did not know' the price for keeping the territories." Also Feb. 8, the daily *Yediot Ahronot* published a survey showing that 26% of the Israeli public

sympathizes with the reserve soldiers' refusal to serve in the territories; this, despite the controversy surrounding their action, even in the peace camp.

Well-known Israeli peace activists addressed the demonstration. Uri Avnery told the crowd, "I once disagreed with refusal to serve in the army, but today I salute those who will not serve. Refusal is the beginning of the end of occupation." Others included Shulamit Aloni, former government minister and former head of the Meretz Party, who declared to the demonstrators, "You will set an example of morality. We shall clean out the crimes of this country and fill it with peace."

The most warmly received speaker was Yishai Rosenzvi, an Orthodox Jew and a tank corps sergeant in the reserves who had spent time in prison for his refusal to serve in the territories. He described how he and the other soldiers came to act: "I want to tell how people come to take this act of refusal. . . . A soldier gets to the territories and is confronted with a terrible situation. Thousands upon thousands of people sunk in deep misery, poverty, humiliation. And then you get your orders and find out what your job is. Your job is to push these people deeper into misery and poverty and humiliation, to keep them caged in towns and villages, not to let them get out, not to let them earn a living, not to let them live a normal life. And then two things happen. First you look around in disbelief, you take your head into your hands and ask: G-d, can this be true, is this really what I am supposed to do, how did I get here, how did I come to get such orders, to be asked to do such things? And then the second thing is that you cry out, 'I've been cheated!' All the propaganda arguments collapse—that we are a peace-loving people, that the war was imposed on us, that we do what we must in order to fight terrorism. Everything collapses, all these specious arguments, collapse like a house of cards. . . . There are things a decent person just does not do. A decent person does not starve people, and does not humiliate people, and does not treat people

'Sickout' Hit Sharon's U.S. Appearances

In the ten days prior to Ariel Sharon's meeting with President George W. Bush, Lyndon LaRouche's Presidential campaign saturated the Washington and New York areas with nearly 500,000 copies of LaRouche's "Götterdämmerung in Palestine" statement, against the adoption of openly fascist precedents in the Occupation under Sharon. They also intervened in dozens of feeder events for the visit by Sharon and his Labor Party Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer.

Under pressure internationally, and immediately from this shockwave intervention, Sharon's team seemed virtually in hiding in the United States.

- President Bush, after a 45-minute meeting with Sharon in the Oval Office, held a press availability with only a handful of vetted reporters.

- Ben-Eliezer, after meeting with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, cancelled a press conference scheduled at the Pentagon after the meeting.

- Sharon cancelled his pre-announced interview on National Public Radio's evening news program.

- In New York City, Sharon and Ben-Eliezer cancelled all public appearances scheduled. Sharon, reported sick with a cold or the flu, cancelled a joint press conference with Sir Henry Kissinger at a New York City hotel, and failed to appear at another public event open to the press.

- Ben-Eliezer cancelled a high-profile visit to "Ground Zero" in New York, giving no reason.

—Scott Thompson

as if they were dirt. A decent person *just does not do that.*"

The famous Zionist song "Ein li erez Aheret" was sung, in both the Hebrew and Arab languages. The words are simple: "I have no other country to go to. And even if the land is burning under my feet, this is my home."

Sharon Has Again Split the Nation

Galvanized by the Feb. 9 surprise, the Peace Coalition announced a second demonstration for Feb. 16, and included among the speakers Dr. Sari Susseibeh, the Palestinian representative in Jerusalem. This coalition embraces Peace Now, the Meretz Party, the peace faction of the Labor Party and several other organizations. And 130 of the 225 or so signators of the soldiers' letter met on Feb. 12, to map out how to expand their campaign. The soldiers' spokesman, Amit Mashiah, said, "We will continue to encourage the social discourse on the intolerable price we pay for staying in the territories."

According to one reserve officer, the soldiers are waiting to see what the army will do when the next group of reservists is called up for service, and refuses to go to the territories. If the army command decides to jail them, this would provoke the group to take action, including their own demonstrations or going to the international media, something they have so far refrained from doing. Should senior reserve officers next begin to join this resistance, its impact will grow rapidly. The Israeli press reports that for every reservist who has signed the letter, another ten are finding other "legal" ways not to serve.

In the last weeks, a deepening shift in the Israeli population has been fueled by the growing realization that Sharon's dead-end policy has brought neither peace nor security. This has only been made worse by the collapse of the Israeli economy. The Israeli currency, the shekel, has collapsed by 10% in the last two months, with recurrent linkage between each escalation in the military-security situation, and a succession

of economic disasters.

Polls show that Sharon's approval ratings have dropped in a few months from 70% to 48%. His coalition government lost one of its partners the same week as the peace demonstration: the One Nation party left the government in protest over the passing of the annual budget, which it charged was "anti-social" because of massive cuts in social services. Although the party is small, its leader, Amir Peretz, is the head of the Histadrut, Israel's largest trade union federation.

Opposition is taking hold within the Labor Party rank-and-file, to remaining in the Sharon government, as the policies of Foreign Minister Peres are being seen at best as opportunistic, at worst as Sharon's means to continue his hard-line policies. This opposition is also directed at the Labor Party's new chairman, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, who is currently Defense Minister.

Knesset speaker Avraham Burg leads the Labor Party faction which is now demanding withdrawal from the government. In the second week of February, Burg won the support of the majority of his party's Knesset members, to accept an invitation to speak before the Palestinian Legislative Council, in an attempt to get political talks started. Ben-Eliezer, like Sharon and the right wing, bitterly opposes Burg's visit, but he is undeterred. "How is it possible for me to send my son to fight in Ramallah," Burg declared, "but for me not to be prepared to risk my life if I believe it could bring peace?"

This ferment arose just as Sharon returns from his meeting with President George W. Bush on Feb. 7, and their apparent agreement on what one Israeli commentator called "a rhetorically violent Washington-Jerusalem axis." The European Union took its action against Sharon at that same moment that he was in Washington. The growing ferment against Sharon's fascism, inside and outside Israel, carries a potential for change in the global strategic situation.