How can we win? Popular classes as a key factor in the struggle against the deportation of asylum seekers in Israel

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Summary

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This analysis in totally up to date in present times when an aggressive political right is growing all over, basing itself on gaining support from popular classes, inter alia through politics of nationalistic intimidation. And as Marx has shown, the key to overcome it is not through a strategy of defending the pre-existing social order, but rather through a strategy of building a progressive alternative that can engage the popular classes.

Analyzing the recent struggle against the deportation of asylum seekers in Israel we shall demonstrate the difference between these two strategies and show the advantage of the second one.

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In 2018, Marx's ***Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*** is highly topical. With Donald Trump as the president of the USA the analysis of a grotesque comical figure becoming leader of a big state, like Louis Bonaparte in France back in the mid 19th century, understandably gets most of the attention.

Our point of departure will be the other side of the problem: the fact that this reactionary adventurer was able to be elected – exactly as Trump did – due to widespread support from among the popular classes.

This is how Marx sums up the issue in ***The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte:***

…Bonaparte represented a class, and the most numerous class of French society at that, the small-holding peasants. Just as the Bourbons were the dynasty of the big landed property and the Orleans the dynasty of money, so the Bonapartes are the dynasty of the peasants, that is, the French masses. The chosen of the peasantry is not the Bonaparte who submitted to the bourgeois parliament but the Bonaparte who dismissed the bourgeois parliament…

…[The peasants] cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, an unlimited governmental

power which protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above…

…Bonaparte knows how to pose at the same time as the representative of the peasants and of the people in general, as a man who wants to make the lower classes happy within the framework of bourgeois society… But above all, Bonaparte knows how to pose as… the representative of the lumpen proletariat to which he himself, his entourage, his government, and his army belong, and whose main object is to benefit itself and draw California lottery prizes from the state treasury. And he confirms himself… with decrees, without decrees, and despite decrees.

(Marx, 1852)

The scornful attitude of the established classes towards the popular support of the populist leader back in the 19ᵗʰ century, can remind us of similar attitudes today. In Marx's words:

…This same bourgeoisie now cries out against the stupidity of the masses, the vile multitude that betrayed it to Bonaparte. The bourgeoisie itself has violently strengthened the imperialism of the peasant class; it has preserved the conditions that form the birthplaces of this species of peasant religion. The bourgeoisie, in truth, is bound to fear the stupidity of the masses so long as they remain conservative, and the insight of the masses as soon as they become revolutionary.

(Marx, 1852)

However' as Marx put it:

Obviously the bourgeoisie now had no choice but to elect Bonaparte. When the Puritans of the Council of Constance [1414-18] complained of the dissolute lives of the popes and wailed about the necessity for moral reform, Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly thundered at them: "Only the devil in person can still save the Catholic Church, and you ask for angels." Similarly, after the coup d'état the French bourgeoisie cried out:… Only theft can still save property; only perjury [can save] religion; bastardy [can save] the family; disorder [can save] order!

(Marx, 1852)

The point we would like to make, before setting aside Marx's text and turning to a concrete contemporary analysis, is that the popular support given to the reactionary leader is far from being pre-given. Marx wrote:

The Bonaparte dynasty represents not the revolutionary, but the conservative peasant; not the peasant who strikes out beyond the condition of his social existence, the small holding, but rather one who wants to consolidate his holding; not the country folk who in alliance with the towns want to overthrow the old order through their own energies, but on the contrary those who, in solid seclusion within this old order, want to see themselves and their small holdings saved and favored by the ghost of the Empire. It represents not the enlightenment but the superstition of the peasant; not his judgment but his prejudice; not his future but his past; not his modern Cevennes [A peasant uprising in the Cevennes mountains in 1702-1705] but his modern Vendée. [A peasant-backed uprising against the French Revolution in the French province of Vendée, in 1793]

(Marx, 1852)

We would like to apply this analysis to a concrete contemporary struggle being waged in Israel, our home country. But before dealing with the struggle, let us briefly introduce the general political context surrounding it.

General Political Situation

In his famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach, Marx stressed the importance of actually changing the world, rather than merely observing it and giving meaning to what we see. True to this legacy, Marxists around the globe were the driving motor behind the big movements for change in the 20th century, and went on to play an important role in those emerging new forces of the 21st century, who seek to replace oppression, injustice and inequality with the promise of a better world.

Oppression, injustice and inequality continue to characterize our country, the State of Israel. For more than 50 years, Israel has occupied the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, where millions of Palestinians live under military rule, deprived of human and civil rights, and denied their right to national self determination in an independent state, alongside Israel, according to UN resolutions. The siege on Gaza, the land dispossessions and the construction of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, the extensive violence

used by the military and the settlers against the Palestinian civilian population - these have become the news that come out of Israel.

Added to this is the continuing discrimination of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel, who constitute around 20% of the citizens of Israel, and who are entitled to civil rights, including the right to vote. But rather than recognizing them as a national minority and securing them civil and national equality, the Israeli right-wing government recently pushed for the legislation of racist and discriminatory basic law, called the Nation-State Law, which further enshrines the status of the Arab minority within Israel as second class citizens.

A downward spiral, in which the continued occupation of Palestinian territories results in more and more limitations on democratic rights and freedoms within Israel itself. It has become a constant feature of the political life. Not limiting itself to attacks on the Arab minority and its political leadership, the Right-wing government of Israel is also bent on inciting against human rights NGOs; it narrows the space for criticism of government policies, and pursues a McCarthyite campaign to silence dissident voices in the universities and in the cultural sphere.

These dangerous developments did receive coverage in the world press, and progressives everywhere were alarmed.

But dangers and threats also, dialectically, create opportunities and openings. Israeli society is not one homogenous bloc, but – as other societies over the world - a stratified and contradictory class society. The majority of Israelis suffer under the existing conditions, and therefore have an objective interest in transforming the reality in which they live. With a huge military budget and ever-growing allocations of funds to the settlement project, Israeli citizens have been the victims of cutbacks in social expenditure for almost two decades. Among OECD countries, Israel has been ranked as one of the countries with the highest rates of child poverty, of poverty among senior citizens, and of economic inequality. A housing crisis narrows life opportunities for Israelis of all walks of life, the public health system is being deprived of funds and replaced with expensive private health services, and paying for early childhood education continues to be a burden for many families.

This reality is riddled with contradictions, which can enable a dynamic of change, such as the one we saw in the summer of 2011, when a mass social protest movement erupted in Israel. We want to focus on such a dynamic which occurred in early 2018, when a government plan to deport African asylum seekers from Israel was met with a broad public response. That response, when armed with a Socialist framework, was able to bend the arm of the government and score a victory.

Analyzing this case study will serve two purposes. First, to stress the point that even inside Israel - seen from the outside sometimes as an irreparable garrison state - progressive and Left forces can triumph over a seemingly powerful Right-wing government. And second, because the struggle over policies vis-a-vis refugees is becoming extremely important all over. Indeed, the issue of refugees and how this question is being taken up by the different political actors is becoming a central question in a series of countries.

Wars, economic crises, natural disasters and the effects of global climate change - all lead to shifting patterns of refugee and migration flows. Thus, the question of immigrants and refugees informs many of the current political debates, including in such powers as Germany and the United States of America.

Up until now, the Populist Right has proven itself successful in exploiting this political issue, whereas the Left was less so.

Therefore we believe that the case study we present from Israel can be of interest and also of value to Progressives and Socialists elsewhere.

Social Stratification: refugees and Mizrahis

But first, let us elaborate a little about the situation of refugees in Israel. Almost 40,000 African refugees and asylum seekers live in Israel; most of them have fled from the brutal dictatorship of Eritrea or from the civil war in Sudan. Several thousand of these men and women are survivors of torture camps, where they were held captive during their long and difficult escape route.

The aid organizations that assist the asylum seekers record the harsh realities which they face: Many live without a regulated status, without work permits and without access to

health and welfare services, legal aid or housing. Due to the uncertainty and lack of status and rights, the asylum seekers are wrestling with severe economic, physical and emotional predicaments. Their dread of what the future may bring and their constant fear of arrest or deportation, as well as the rigid restrictions imposed on them by the State, undermines their rehabilitation and recovery from the traumas of past events.

The arrival of African refugees to Israel has been an ongoing process for the past decade, yet the Israeli authorities did not begin to examine asylum applications until 2013. And whereas in West European and North American countries, more than 60% of the Sudanese asylum seekers have their requests accepted, and among Eritreans almost 90% have their asylum requests accepted in these countries, in Israel it is less than 20. No, not 20%, but rather - *less than 20 individual cases* where African asylum seekers have been granted refugee status.

To add insult to injury, the government has been encouraging the majority of the asylum seekers who arrive to Israel to move into the poor, working-class neighborhoods of South Tel-Aviv. It has been common practice that after the asylum seekers illegally cross the border from Egypt, they are being detained for a short period, and then - put on a bus that literally dumps them in South Tel-Aviv. There, the Sudanese and the Eritrean refugee communities have emerged during the past decade.

It is not by chance that the government directed the majority of the asylum seekers into these neighborhoods. While Tel-Aviv is the richest and most developed city in Israel, for decades South Tel-Aviv has been its backyard.

The majority of the old-time residents of the South Tel-Aviv neighborhoods are poor *Mizrahi Jews* (sometimes called *Sephardic Jews*), that is - Jews whose families immigrated to Israel from Arab countries, such as Morocco, Iraq or Yemen, rather than from European countries, from where *Ashkenazi Jews* immigrated.

Mizrahi Jews in Israel have suffered from systematic discrimination - social, economic as well as cultural - with their rich cultural heritage denigrated, their children sent mostly to vocational schools that shut them out of higher education and push them into lower-paying

jobs, and their neighborhoods turned into slums. We know very well, that under Capitalism there is strong affinity between class exploitation and ethnic discrimination, and Israel is no exception to that rule.

The infrastructure in south Tel Aviv neighborhoods is crumbling. Housing - is of poor quality, and deteriorating. Schools - are underfunded and of lower quality. Allocation of municipal budgets for development or culture - is lacking. South Tel-Aviv neighborhoods have become a center of drug trafficking, prostitution and human trafficking. This has been the state of affairs in South Tel-Aviv for many years, even before the arrival of the African asylum seekers.

Right-Wing Campaigning

Therefore, when the African asylum seekers began to arrive to Israel, it was convenient for the authorities to have them sent to South Tel-Aviv, and turn an already severely disadvantaged and socially excluded part of the city into a far more difficult place to live. The political Right was quick to take advantage of this situation. Right-Extremist politicians turned to these neighborhoods to incite their local residents against the African refugees, and against the human-rights organizations who helped them. In a now famous case, a member of parliament from the ruling Likud Party, called Miri Regev, attended an anti-refugee rally in South Tel-Aviv, where she exclaimed to the crowd that "The Sudanese are a cancer in our body!". The rally then turned into a violent lynch mob, with people roaming the nearby streets in the search of Africans to attack. Miri Regev, by the way, is now the Minister of Culture in Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet.

Other Right-wing politicians, at the local and the national levels, have attempted to exploit the harsh realities faced by the old-time residents of South Tel-Aviv, and portray the source of their problem not in the government policies - but rather in the presence of the asylum seekers. For time this was extremely effective: to cast the Right-wing politicians - those who are the staunchest defenders of capitalist interests and those who promote the harshest austerity measures - as the defenders of the people. And who are the enemies of the people? Not those in power, who can actually take measures and direct budgets to change

the realities that the socially-excluded neighborhoods face, but rather - the human rights organizations, who help the refugees, and the liberal elites in the academia and in the media, who support their cause.

It is important to emphasize here, that more often than not, the liberal elites *have been turning a blind eye* to the suffering of the poor Mizrahi residents in South Tel-Aviv. This, of course, played into the hands of the Right-wing, who situated themselves not as the source of the problem, but as the solution. The fact that Liberal politics - almost in definition - is detached from the material conditions of life of the popular strata, is a fact that the Right-Populists exploit to their advantage in different circumstances.

Netanyahu played this game as well, and skillfully so. In late 2017, in a much publicized visit to South Tel-Aviv, he announced that "South Tel-Aviv will once again become part of the State of Israel". Netanyahu - who did not lift a finger during his ten years in office to change the social realities of South Tel-Aviv - was suddenly declaring himself to be the big savior. Soon it became known, that a government plan is underway to forcefully deport the asylum seekers to an undesignated African country, probably Uganda or Rwanda, whose government was negotiating a deal with Israel, of cash payment per deportee.

Liberal and Radical Protests

A moral outcry followed, with large number of Israelis - mostly young people, who were previously not engaged in politics - involved in dozens of efforts directed against the government's plan of deportation. A student initiative called "Stop the Deportation" joined the more veteran human rights organizations, aid and welfare NGOs who assisted the asylum seekers in the previous years. More and more people became involved in all sorts of activities. Small community colleges, where never before there was any kind of student activism, suddenly held film screenings about the refugees, invited asylum seekers to tell their stories, and initiated demonstrations - alongside faculty and activists. Small activist groups coalesced in many towns and villages throughout Israel, to leaflet and hold public events. Relying on Israel's particular history, many people put forward the moral argument that Jewish people - who during World War 2 and the Holocaust were themselves refugees,

attempting to flee the terror of the Nazi machine, but finding almost everywhere closed borders - have a special moral responsibility and obligation to provide refuge to those Africans who escaped from tyranny and war.

This newly emerging social movement in defense of refugees was a welcomed and noteworthy development. But as long as the rhetoric it employed was a moralistic one, and as long as the perspective it advanced was a liberal one, it was very easy for the Right-wing to isolate it, and defeat it politically. In politics, whoever determines the question that is being asked - can often determine how the political field is arranged. If the question is posed as such - "Do you support your own people, the poor Mizrahi residents of South Tel-Aviv, and therefore you side with the deportation of African 'infiltrators'? Or are you an Ashkenazi, elitist snub, who love the Africans more than you love your own people?" - if this is how the question is posed, then the government will naturally win.

In order to defeat this we needed to rearrange the political field, by having a different question put to the center. By stating that we are not a force that stands outside of our people, but part of it. By insisting on the formula, that **it is not that the people are against the refugees, and yet we side with the refugees, but rather - it is the government who is against the people, and we are the people**.

But the Right-Populist equation could not be turned on its head, as long as the mainstream of the anti-deportation movement continued to ignore the actual problems of the poor residents of South Tel-Aviv, to ignore their actual fears, their real hardships. As long as the movement continued to view them all as a staunch bloc of reactionaries, rather than as **victims** of the existing reality; as long as every poor Mizrahi resident of South Tel-Aviv is cast into "the basket of deplorables", rather than seen as a real equal human being, whose life is of interest to us no less than that of the asylum seeker, and who can be a **potential ally** to our cause - then the movement is doomed to defeat, and the Right-Populists will prevail.

But the movement was not defeated. This time around, the Right-Populists did not prevail. An important key to our success this time was a new initiative coming from South Tel-Aviv,

spearheaded by Mizrahi-feminist women, who have been active in their neighborhoods for years. This initiative - called "South Tel-Aviv Against the Deportation" - was led by Shula Keshet, a veteran Mizrahi community activist. At the beginning it was a very small group, but it had a big message: They stood against the deportation of the African asylum seekers, recognizing the false demagogy of the government, and stating that their neighborhoods have been suffering from years of neglect and exclusion, well before the first refugee set foot in South Tel-Aviv. Not limiting themselves to solidarity with their African neighbors, with whom they live in these same streets and buildings, they pointed to the strong economic powers that were pushing for the deportation. South Tel-Aviv is undergoing a rapid gentrification process, with old buildings being emptied of their residents and torn down to make room to new luxury apartment buildings, affordable only to the rich. To make room for these high-rise luxury towers, a process of forced home evacuations and foreclosures is underway in many South Tel-Aviv neighborhoods, with the Mizrahi old-time residents being driven out by real-estate interests and market forces. The activists in the group "South Tel-Aviv Against the Deportation" stated that they stand against *all* deportations, both of asylum seekers as well as veteran residents. They recognized that their life in South Tel-Aviv would not be more secure, but would actually be further undermined, if the government's plan of deportation is implemented. An important aspect of the initiative "South Tel-Aviv Against the Deportation" was it's willingness to work alongside the refugee communities, that were themselves organizing against the deportation, and to partner with the leadership of the Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers.

‚Standing together'

The emergence of this small, but very important initiative had the potential to shift the conversation around the issue of deportation. But for this potential to be realized, what was needed was an organizational capacity and a political perspective which can together help make the transition in the orientation of the anti-deportation movement. These were provided by the grassroots movement called "Standing Together", whose role in this regard was central.

 "Standing Together" is a grassroots people's movement of Jewish and Arab activists, who organize locally and nationally in Israel, around campaigns for peace, equality and social

justice, in order to build power and transform Israeli society. Formed three years ago, the movement was behind some of the biggest mobilizations of the Israeli Left in this period. "Standing Together" frame reality through Socialist lens and is able therefore to see the interconnected nature of the various political questions in Israeli society - questions of occupation and peace, of racism and equality, of neo-liberal austerity and social justice.

The movement "Standing Together" quickly came to realize that in order to turn the Right-Populist equation on its head, the initiative of "South Tel-Aviv Against the Deportation" should be at the forefront of the struggle. "Standing Together" convened large, open meetings in Tel-Aviv, Jerusalem and elsewhere, inviting the general public to become involved in a new campaign it launched, called "With South Tel-Aviv - Against the Deportation". These meetings, attended by hundreds of people, outlined the new strategy that "Standing Together" was suggesting: to pull the rug from the under the feet of the Right-wing, by breaking the seemingly natural connection between supporting the deportation and supporting South Tel-Aviv.

Hundreds of banners were hung from windows and balconies all across the South Tel Aviv neighborhoods, with the slogan "South Tel-Aviv Against the Deportation". Within a short period of time, the entire public sphere of South Tel-Aviv neighborhoods changed, with more and more of these signs springing up on balconies and homes of people. This had a tremendous impact. Whereas before, the most dominant feature of these streets were graffiti by the Right Extremists calling to deport all Africans, now the message was different. The public conversation began to shift. People - including in the media - began to realize that a big part of the residents of South Tel-Aviv were actually against the government plan to deport the Africans.

"Standing Together" also took upon itself to counter another argument by the Right-Populists, the one that claimed that everyone who opposed the deportation was necessarily an elitist, snobbish, rich Ashkenazi who lived in the more affluent neighborhoods of North Tel-Aviv, and who opposes the deportation both because of his disregard for the lives and interests of the poor, socially-excluded residents of South Tel-Aviv, and also because he

hypocritically 'loves' the Africans from afar, but does not have to actually live with them in the same neighborhoods.

"Standing Together" activists began canvassing in the North Tel-Aviv neighborhoods, knocking on doors and talking to people on the streets and in shopping centers. The activists signed them up on a public call in which they stated that they welcome refugees in their North Tel-Aviv neighborhoods, and that they demand that their own municipal taxes will go to repair the infrastructures and to develop the South Tel-Aviv neighborhoods. Thousands signed this public call, which received publicity and showed that contrary to the demagogy of the Right-wing, the real elite whose interest is against that of the people of South Tel-Aviv is not the middle-class or upper-middle-class people of North Tel-Aviv, nor the African asylum seekers, but rather - those in power, in the municipality and in the government, who have the capacity to change priorities and invest in South Tel-Aviv, but who couldn't care less about the lives of those who live there, and who choose incitement and whipping-up anti-refugee hysteria as a distraction from their anti-popular policies.

These efforts culminated in a rally of over 20,000 people in the heart of South Tel-Aviv. This was in sharp contrast to the pro-refugee rallies of previous years. Whereas they were held in the center of Tel-Aviv, this rally was held in the neighborhoods were both the refugees as well as the socially excluded old-time residents were living. Whereas before, the speakers on the stage were liberal academics or celebrities from film and theater who support human rights, this time it was people who lived in these neighborhoods - mostly women - including both refugees as well as Mizrahi activists. Whereas before, the rallies were organized by the professional human rights NGOs, this time around, the rally was led by the initiative "South Tel-Aviv Against the Deportation", with the organizational support of "Standing Together" and others.

Conclusion

Through the grassroots campaign, and through reframing both the strategy of the anti-deportation movement at-large as well as reframing how the mass media portrayed the question, the pillars of the government's deportation plan began to collapse. What was

supposed to be an easy win for Netanyahu, now turned out to be much more politically complicated, as the opposition to the deportation grew even among sectors of society he counted on to be on his side. Politicians from the center and center-left parties, that in the beginning were backing up Netanyahu, realized where the wind was blowing and came out against the deportation. Even inside Netanyahu's coalition there were cracks around this question. All this culminated in his capitulation in a press conference in early April 2018, where he announced the scrapping of the plan to forcefully deport the asylum seekers to Uganda and Rwanda. This was a complete 180 degrees reversal of his own position from a few months ago, and a huge victory for the anti-deportation campaign. Although pressure from the Extreme Right still prevent real solutions to the problematic of African refugees in Israel - the deportation plan was taken off the table, for the moment.

There are lessons to be learned from this experience. Instead of limiting ourselves to moral arguments of the elitist-liberal discourse, when we favor a left-wing socialist policy we were able to turn the table over the right wing populist plan.

Following Marx's analysis in ***The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonapart*** we chose, instead of yielding to the conservative tendencies of the popular classes, to engage the progressive potentials existing among them.

The analysis of Marx, and also the experience of the Socialist and Communist movements of the 20th century, teach us that creating politics that could mobilize wide strata of popular classes is still the key to success of progressives, all around the world.

Will we be able to implement this?

Reference

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