

HEALTHY FORCES IN ISRAEL

Wolf Ehrlich*

THE tripartite Sinai agreement of September 4, 1975 (US—Egypt—Israel) has not solved any of the problems facing Israel: it has sharpened the contradictions inside Israeli society. The US administration and the Israeli government know only too well that they will be unable for any long period to maintain the *status quo* in the Middle East. They needed a stop-gap agreement to show that there is no loss of momentum.

The agreement reached weakens the drive towards the Geneva Middle East conference; it introduces the US CIA-screened experts into sensitive points of the Middle East scene; it enhances imperialist positions in the region; and it weakens Arab anti-imperialist unity. Like the two disengagement agreements of 1974, the new agreement does not ban the war danger; it may even make more imminent the outbreak of hostilities.

The only positive aspect, from the point of view of progressive public opinion in Israel, is that Israeli forces will again be withdrawn from part of the occupied territories, thus lending weight to the argument that of necessity all paths lead to the withdrawal of Israeli forces from all territories occupied in June 1967. This is a point of educational or political impact, but it remains a minor point compared with the strongly negative aspects of the agreement.

Government and extreme right opposition have found it valuable to engage in a noisy sham fight over the issue of withdrawal according to the Sinai agreement. Extreme right agitators charge betrayal of national interests; government spokesmen point to the necessity to assist the United States in its drive against Soviet influence in the region, hinting that thereby Israel may play a part in weakening the trend towards detente in international relations.

One of the major results of the agreement is an unprecedented acceleration of the arms race in the region. US Secretary of State Kissinger bought the consent of both the Egyptian and the Israeli governments by promising delivery of the latest sophisticated weapons. And while Egypt will have to pay for most of it cash down (with the assistance of Arab oil-exporting countries), Israel's purchases will to a high degree be financed by US grants and loans.

The mad arms race is in obvious contradiction to the general development in the world after the final phase of the Helsinki

* Wolf Ehrlich is Chairman of the Central Control Commission of the Communist Party of Israel.

Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. It works against the drive towards a just peace settlement in the Middle East. It would make a new war, if it erupts, awfully destructive. It accentuates Israel's dependence on US imperialism and foreign capital. It increases the foreign debts of Israel to a threatening degree. And it sharply worsens the economic situation in Israel.

The military budget, together with the dollar payment for state debts (capital and interest) brought about by former wars, reaches some 60 per cent of an overall budget of some 56 milliards of Israeli pounds. This astronomical sum, earmarked for military purposes, excludes even such temporary solutions to economic problems as are attained by some other capitalist countries. The Israeli government balances its foreign payment accounts by taking increasingly big loans. It can avoid bankruptcy only by printing money. It is unable to slow the pace of inflation—about three times that of Western Europe.

It tries, as the governments of all capitalist countries do, but with undisguised sharpness, to relieve its difficulties by lowering the real wages of the workers. This is done by increased exploitation, pressure to keep nominal wages more or less constant, in spite of quickly rising prices, by increasing the tax burden on the working people, and by lowering social services. It proudly boasts of having substantially lowered what is called private consumption.

The Israeli working people have started actively to oppose this policy and to try and prevent a further lowering of their living standards. The strike movement has gained momentum from the workers of the Elat-Ashkalon pipeline, over the Ashdot port workers and various sections of El-Al workers, to librarians, teachers, nurses, workers in tinned goods and tyre workers, bank and income tax employees, workers of the Negev phosphate works, salaried bus drivers.

The demands of the strikers vary, as do the concrete forms of struggle, but all express the determination of different sections of the working people not to resign themselves to the results of government policy. While ministers and the media vie in attacking the trade unions, and the Knesset (parliament) is used to mobilise public opinion against the strikers, the result of the barrage remains weak. This shows that the impact of ideological and political manipulation has markedly decreased. The Histadrut (trade union) leadership shows the usual vacillating attitude, and in all essential questions sides with government.

More often than in the past government has recourse to police intervention, to labour courts and to criminal court procedures

against strike leaders. This only serves to accentuate the class struggle. And with government as the biggest employer in the country, economic struggles have great political significance—which is also partly reflected in the consciousness of the working people.

Unity among the peace forces is growing. While in former years it was the Communist Party of Israel alone that advocated a principled peace line in the interest of all the peoples and the states in the region, there are now various political parties and groups working together for peace, in the framework of the Committee for a Just Peace between Israel and the Arab countries. The Committee's programme is based on three points: withdrawal of Israeli forces to the June 4, 1967, lines; recognition of the rights of the Palestinian Arab people to self-determination, including the right to establish its own state alongside Israel; recognition of the security and sovereignty of the State of Israel, as of all the states in the region.

The Committee has in various ways demonstrated its aims and popularised its slogans. Its greatest manifestation was in August this year at Megiddo. Several thousands of Israelis, Jews and Arabs, went by car or bus to a point near the June 4, 1967, line and held a mass meeting in a eucalyptus grove, with some twelve personalities of different political colours as speakers. Afterwards, the participants symbolically marked the borderline between the State of Israel and the State of Palestine with great posters in Hebrew, Arabic and English—a ceremony that was well covered by the television networks.

Add the broad struggle against government terror in occupied territories, against mass arrests, persecution and torture. Add the unprecedented mass meeting held in October in Nazareth against the further colonisation threats in Galilee at the expense of Arab *fellaheen* and municipalities, made by government and Zionist leaders, bringing together a great number of Jewish and Arab personalities, including members of the Knesset, Communists and others. Add the highly successful report-back meetings of personalities and delegations to the Soviet Union.

All these developments together show that the political landscape in Israel is changing, and while there are signs causing anxiety, there are changes in a positive direction. The changes are reflected in contradictions appearing in the Histadrut leadership and within the Zionist parties.

The positive changes that will come about in the Middle East will not only be brought about by outside forces and the struggle of the Arab peoples. Healthy forces within Israel will have their say too.