

# The Strategy behind Israel's Migrant Labor Policies

By Yonatan Preminger

**A**s an increasing number of people feel the grip of the global financial crisis, Israel's familiar bugbear has been wheeled out yet again: deport the foreign workers! True to form, the newly appointed Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz has decided that the deportation of 100,000 migrant laborers will improve the economic situation.

We've been here before. In 2003, Israel launched its first major campaign to reduce the number of "foreign workers," as they are known in Hebrew (*ovdim zarim*). Now the workers are preparing themselves for another round of brutal operations by the infamous immigration police.

In Israel's labor market, deportations of "foreign workers" are followed by imports of others to take their place. Yet, Israel has an abundant supply of local workers – why does it still prefer the migrant laborers? Because they are not Arabs.

There are about 250,000 migrant laborers in Israel, mostly from the Philippines and Thailand, working mainly in agriculture, nursing and construction. For a country of just under 7.4 million citizens, this is an enormous number. More than half are considered illegal – some have overstayed their allotted time, some are victims of fraud, and some have violated the terms of their employment, often through no fault of their own. With unemployment rising again, it seems logical to employ Israel's citizens before turning to outside labor, but, as usual, the picture is more complicated.

The truth is, Israel is confused. Since the 1980s, when the country began a process of deregulation with the aim of hitching its markets to the global economy, Israel has been torn between the myth of Jewish solidarity and the Zionist enterprise on the one hand, and the demands of the growing economic elite on the other. Bluntly put, it wants to keep the country open to Jews only but have access to workers willing to do the dirty work for peanuts.

In the past, Israel employed Arabs as cheap labor – both Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinians from

the Occupied Territories (who have no Israeli citizenship). Then, in the 1990s, as Israelis opened their eyes to the Oslo Accords, watched their economy grow, and enjoyed the "quiet" that the promise of peace granted them, Palestinians from the Occupied Territories found themselves stuck, cut off from their source of livelihood in Israel by renewed policies of military closures around the Territories. Meanwhile, Palestinian Israelis watched their jobs disappear as factories were moved abroad and as they competed

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with a million newly arrived Russian *olim* (Jewish immigrants) for the remaining labor-intensive work.

Changing government priorities, the Intifada and globalisation opened the way for migrant laborers. Companies owned by the Histadrut (the General Federation of Labor), publicly owned enterprises, were sold off. State support for agriculture diminished as the long-declining ideology of working the land finally collapsed. The new owners of Histadrut companies, building contractors and farmers, sought sources of labor that would enable them to compete in the now unprotected market. Migrant labor fitted the bill.

Farmers and contractors explain their preference for foreign labor by claiming there is no local workforce. "Israelis aren't willing to do those kind of jobs," so the mantra goes. And it does, indeed, seem that few Israeli Jews are willing to do hard manual labor anymore. But there *are* Israelis willing to do those kinds of jobs – Israel's Palestinian citizens.

The "Arab sector," as it is known here, struggles against insufficient investment and inadequate infrastructure. Before

1948, the Palestinian Arab economy was mostly agrarian. Today, only about 4 per cent of the Palestinian Israeli population lives off agriculture, yet other options for earning a living are scarce. Few Arab towns have any significant industrial parks, and the primary industry that once employed Arabs – textiles – has been moved overseas.

According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2008 only 40 per cent of Arab men of working age participated in the workforce, compared with 56 per cent for Israel as a whole, and only 19 per cent of Arab women, compared with 56 per cent of Jewish women. Half of Israel's Arab citizens live below the poverty line. Many would jump at the opportunity to work, though a job in Israel today is not always a way of escaping the poverty cycle.

And, if these workers prove insufficient, there are thousands more on the other side of the "security fence." Israel has administered the West Bank and Gaza since 1967, flooding the Territories with its products, thereby – deliberately or otherwise – preventing the development of local industry and discouraging entrepreneurship. Residents of the Territories have also provided Israel with builders, cleaners and agricultural laborers for thirty years. The result is an underdeveloped Palestinian economy, entirely dependent on Israel, and a huge workforce eager to work in Israel.

The proof of their willingness to work can be found at Israel's major intersections, where Palestinians from the West Bank wait each morning in the hope that some contractor will offer them work. Most of them have gone through hell to get around the checkpoints and across the separation wall, a dangerous – occasionally fatal – journey of many hours. Many sleep in makeshift camps such as abandoned building sites just minutes from Tel Aviv's chic boulevards, and return to the West Bank and their families only on the weekends.

It is difficult to estimate the number of West Bank residents working in Israel. According to the Workers Advice Centre, an NGO active mainly among agricultural and construction workers, in 2005 there were around 20,000 working legally (with a permit), in addition to at least that number working illegally. The difficulties involved in entering Israel enable employers to claim that Palestinians from

the West Bank are an unreliable labor force.

Police raids, a common nightmare for illegal Palestinian workers, aim to intimidate the workers and put on a show for Israelis, so fearful of “infiltrators.” The workers are deported and may lose whatever job they were lucky enough to find, but everyone knows that they will be back as soon as they have negotiated their way through the porous “security” system: work in Israel is in great demand.

Clearly, Israel has easy access to willing labor, so why does Israel maintain such a large migrant labor force? The principal reason has little to do with the lack of a local workforce. The migrant workers are simply cheaper and easier to exploit.

Most migrant laborers in Israel today are Thais, working primarily in agriculture, and Filipinos, working primarily as caregivers. Many arrive with huge debts after paying middlemen between \$6,000 and \$9,000 in mediation fees (through arrangements that are mostly illegal). However, their wages in Israel amount to less than the legal minimum because some of the long hours they work are not remunerated.

Their employers save money also by not paying any peripheral benefits such as pension fund payments, sick pay, annual leave or maternity leave. Migrant workers rarely receive dismissal compensation, seniority-based wage increases, or overtime pay. In addition, wages are often paid in arrears, obliging the worker to remain with the same employer for fear of losing earnings.

Migrant workers are legally subject to the collective agreements negotiated by the Histadrut, but law enforcement is minimal, and the state’s representatives almost invariably take the employers’ side in any dispute.

The Israeli and Thai governments have been in contact with the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) in the hope of controlling the black market in mediation fees and permits, but so far without results. In 2006, Israel’s Foreign Ministry refused to sign an agreement with the IOM, but in 2007 the IOM signed an agreement with Thailand that will facilitate supervision of recruitment of Thai workers destined for Israel. Also, since June 2008, only workers from countries that have bilateral agreements with Israel have been permitted to enter.

It remains to be seen whether these

agreements will reduce the exploitation of migrant labor. Unfortunately for the workers, there are interests vested in the current system: many agencies in Israel as well as in the workers’ countries of origin stand to lose an extremely lucrative business if mechanisms for control are put into place.

However, the issue of Israel’s labor preferences goes beyond economic calculations and concerns the identity of the workers themselves. In any discussion about the use of Palestinian labor, security concerns are invariably voiced: “When

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my father used to go to work in the fields with Arabs,” says E. from a kibbutz in the north, “he would take his pistol and be looking over his shoulder all the time. With the Thai workers he feels safe.”

Though not everyone feels the threat in quite this way, the government of PM Ariel Sharon decided in 2005 that, by 2008, Palestinians from the Occupied Territories would no longer be working within Israel. Keeping the Palestinian workers out, then, is part of a deliberate policy that borders on demagoguery, playing on the fears of Israeli Jews and strengthening the misleading consensus of “us here, them over there” – misleading, because Israel is “over there” too, with its ever-expanding settlements, and “they” are here in the form of Israel’s largely unseen Palestinian citizens.

But security, as always, tells only part of the story. After all, if workers can get into the country from the West Bank, so can others with more insidious objectives. The preference for migrant labor over Palestinian labor stems from something for which “security” serves as a fig leaf: Israel’s striving to reduce the Arab presence on this piece of land.

The ideology of separate economies for Jews and Arabs goes back to the days of Jewish settlement in Palestine, when it was feared that cheap Arab labor would discourage European Jews from immigrating. After 1948, freedom of movement for Arab citizens was restricted until 1966, when the military administration was finally lifted. After 1967, Palestinians from the Occupied Territories had the advantage of “disappearing” at the end of the workday, but they, too, were a constant reminder of the local population, which Israel was not ready to acknowledge.

Migrant workers, on the other hand, pose no “demographic threat,” particularly if the immigration police keep working. Though many have been here for years, and their children speak Hebrew just like Israeli children, they are deemed a temporary presence. The situation has plumbed new depths of absurdity: farmers consider the migrant Thais to be permanent workers and the local population – Arabs – as seasonal laborers who fill in during temporary labor shortages.

Israel has also succeeded in depoliticising the issue. The hiring of migrant labor is perceived simply as an economic necessity, while questions of identity, the closure of the Occupied Territories, the “security fence” and the “demographic threat” (not to mention workers’ rights) are held to be unrelated.

Thus, despite the economic crisis and associated rising unemployment, it is unlikely that Israel will wean its employers off cheap “foreign workers” in favor of opening more employment opportunities to the Arab sector or Palestinians from the Occupied Territories. The current situation is too convenient: migrant labor has enabled Israel to open its borders to the globalized economy without endangering its Jewish identity, while bolstering the myth that Israel can be a country for Jews alone.

In fact, Israel has finally succeeded in doing what it failed to do during the years it was still reliant on cheap Arab labor: it has taken the Arabs out of the market. CP

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search. The list of revelations, both current and years-old, is extensive and can be elaborated only in brief. In the 1990s, the litigation-averse *Los Angeles Times* killed an investigative report coauthored by Alexander Cockburn and former *Scientific American* editor Fred Gardner, in which evidence was presented linking Prozac to, among other things, domestic violence and tumor growth. Journalist Evelyn Pringle has, more recently, reported on the *CounterPunch* website that Janssen-Cilag's antipsychotic Risperdal (chemical name, risperidone; \$3.5 billion in sales in 2005) induced severe side effects, including strokes and death, in 1,207 children between 1993 and 2008. Two recent studies, conducted independently in the United States and Great Britain, have additionally revealed that newly released antipsychotics differ from their predecessors only in price, not in efficacy or safety.

But a question remains. What if, in some hypothetical future, a new generation of unambiguously safe and effective psychotropics could be developed? Would it become ethically acceptable to urge the depressed and the despondent to take drugs?

When psychiatrists lament that over half

of depressed people are "treatment-resistant," what they do not consider is this. It is not the "stigma" of being labeled mentally ill that discourages many people from seeking medical help; it is a strenuous aversion to being told that one's existential grievances are irrational, a mere result of a pathological neurochemical imbalance. It is the fear of being coerced into ingesting foreign substances, whether safe or dangerous. Since 1997, the National Alliance on Mental Illness has sought to expand a medication compliance program first developed in the 1970s, wherein mental health workers visit outpatients on a daily basis to confirm that they've taken their drugs, and to forcibly administer drugs if necessary.

We are at a strange point in history. It should come as no surprise that the exhausting and alienating conditions in which we live and labor are productive of myriad forms of psychological suffering. Yet, critics of biological psychiatry are commonly subjected to the fallacious accusation that, because we reject the equation of unhappiness with sickness, we must believe that it is a weakness. This is a false dichotomy. Is it so difficult to understand the pain engendered by life under neoliberal capitalism as something worthy of

dignified reflection, irreducible to either sickness or weakness? Is it so hard to grasp that to detrivialize the social conditions that give rise to despair or the ideologies that equate difference with disease is not to trivialize despair or difference?

Let's be candid. The drug barons' ongoing campaign to pathologize entirely natural emotional responses to hunger, humiliation, financial insecurity, racism, sexism, overwork and isolation is a mercenary tactic, designed to create markets, maximize profits and minimize dissidence. Whether intended or unintended, the consequence is that we have come to reflexively view ourselves – our bodies, brains, and genes – rather than our societal environment as pathogenic, against all evidence to the contrary. As the *DSM-V* looms, we have to explore the dire implications of this trend and continue to raise the alarm. **CP**

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