**The Professionals and the Political Right and Center-Right: A Socio-Political Alliance during the 1956 Academic Middle-Class Strike**

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**ABSTRACT**: (100-130 WORDS)

 **KEYWORDS** (6-8)

Different and occasionally conflicting trends in research literature, and especially in Israeli political sociology, depict Israel’s first decade as characterized by a deep dichotomy between new, oriental immigrants from Muslim countries and Ashkenazi (European) veterans. In the process of nation building, oriental immigrants were pushed down the social ladder and were forced to become manual workers, while the Ashkenazi veterans climbed up that ladder and filled the ranks of the developing Israeli middle-class. Gradually the new Ashkenazi immigrants joined the veterans, attaining their social status. Thus, a rigid ethnic and inter-generational dichotomy was formed.

 In this commonly accepted dichotomous frame of reference, Mapai’s government and the Histadrut (the main Israeli labor federation) under Mapai were perceived as the most important tools in the hands of the Ashkenazi veterans used to absorb the vast wave of immigration which doubled Israel’s population in 1948–1951 and the renewed wave of immigrants from North-Africa from 1954 onward. The Ashkenazi ‘absorbers’ were commonly addressed as a relatively consolidated collective under Mapai leadership . The closing remark of prominent functionalist sociologist, Moshe Lissak, in his important book *The Mass Immigration in the Fifties: The Failure of the Melting Pot Policy*, reflects this attitude:

The encounter between the veterans, who constructed a relatively modern social system of institutions, and the oriental immigrants, … did not take place on the basis of equal and symmetric relations. The tendency of the absorbers to paternalism and their striving to dominance and hegemony, were the prominent characteristics of the time of the great immigration of the 1950s (Lissak 1999: 135).

The terms ‘veterans’ and ‘absorbers’ refer here to the Ashkenazi public as a whole, under the leadership of the government and Mapai, even though the author acknowledges the diversity which characterized this public. This dichotomy between the ‘absorbers’ as a relatively consolidated political collective and the ‘absorbed’ was shared by other important functionalist sociologists like Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (1989: xiii-xiv, 140, 241–247), Dan Horowitz (Horowitz and Lissak 1990: 113–114), and Eliezer Ben-Rafael (1989: 89–90). But it was shared also by other Israeli sociologists, from rival conflictual or Marxist schools, like Sammy Smooha (1978), Shlomo Svirsky and Devorah Bernstein (1995), Baruch Kimmerling (1990: 282–336) and Michael Shalev (1992: chapter 4).

 The various schools in research literature either saw the Mapai government as the center of authority of the Ashkenazi absorbers, with achievements and failures in its function of absorbing, or as some sort of an ‘acting committee’ on behalf of the Ashkenazi group in its struggle for hegemony. Either way, this common conception places the government (and the Histadrut under Mapai) clearly and unequivocally on one side of the dichotomy, ascribing minimal importance, if any, to right and center-right forces in the political arena vis-a-vis the ethnic relations which developed in 1950s Israel. We adopt here a different point of view. We assume, firstly, that the government, the Histadrut and Mapai assumed an intermediate position – situating themselves between the Ashkenazi public and the oriental immigrants. This assumption is based on the theoretical approach that ascribes to the state a measure of autonomy (Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skotchpol 1985; Domhoff 1996; Nordlinger 1981). Secondly, we assume that the right and center-right public forces, like the General Zionists and Herut parties and the influential newspaper *Ha’aretz*, played significant roles in the evolution of ethnic relations in the 1950s and influenced the political orientation of the developing Ashkenazi middle-class. We will examine these assumptions by considering the role played by the right and center-right and by the Mapai government during a continuing conflict over wage-gaps between the Ashkenazi academic middle-class and the government during mid-1950s. The conflict centered around the proper wage-gaps between the new Ashkenazi academic middle-class and the new oriental proletariat.

**Growing Unrest**

The beginning of February 1956 saw the outbreak of a comprehensive strike among white-collar workers in Israel’s public sector. The strike was a significant juncture in the gradual polarization between middle-class professionals and the Mapai government and Histadrut.[[1]](#endnote-2)

The white-collar workers’ trade unions and their supporters in the political center and on the right – the Progressive Party, General Zionists, and Herut – heavily criticized both the government and the Histadrut for the ongoing wage restrictions inflicted on white-collar professionals, as opposed to skilled and unskilled manual workers, in light of the wage policy and egalitarian tax practices of the time. The government and Histadrut claimed that governmental intervention was necessary for mitigating deepening cleavages between immigrants and veteran citizens.[[2]](#endnote-3) The white-collar workers and their advocates on the right and center, however, believed the egalitarian rhetoric underscoring the authorities’ unjust wage policy was meant to veil the ruling party’s objective: to maintain dominance among the trade unions and voters of the predominantly Mizrachi proletariat.

The February 1956 strike was the climax of an ongoing labor dispute that began in 1954 with a basic-wage freeze across the entire public sector. The white-collar workers, led by physicians and engineers in the civil service, were engaged in a prolonged confrontation with Mapai over wage erosion during 1954-1955, triggered mainly by the narrowed gap between their pay and that of other public sector workers. They contended that during the first years of statehood, the Mapai-led government utilized its wage and tax policies to erode their wages relative to those of skilled and unskilled workers, with a uniform, limited, low ceiling cost of living adjustment as sole compensation. The Secretary General of the Israeli Medical Association (IMA) outlined their contentions as follows: Between April 1950 and March 1955, the gap between physicians’ basic wage and entry-level clerks’ basic wage, was eroded from 1:10 (12 IL versus 118 IL) to 1:6.25 (32 IL versus 200 IL).[[3]](#endnote-4) Government representatives did not dispute the validity of this data.

 On 12 April 1954, Israel’s physicians shut down public medical facilities for one day, and this strike roused other public sector unions. On 19 April they shut down the public medical system for three days, and threatened to declare a comprehensive strike. The basic-wage freeze persisted nonetheless. Physicians in the civil service began slowdown strikes at the outset of December 1954, but these did not produce significant results either. During the first half of 1955, leading up to that year’s summer elections, a fierce dispute developed between the Mapai government and Histadrut, on one side, and the physicians on the other, along with an expanding group of additional white-collar trade unions.[[4]](#endnote-5)

 The first ‘class-inclusive’ coordination committee of white-collar trade unions was established in January 1955, one year prior to the strike, positioning the unions on an intensifying collision course with the Histadrut. This escalated into an ongoing, systemic labor dispute with significant political implications, as white-collar workers also enjoyed the support of various coalition and right and left wing opposition parties.[[5]](#endnote-6) In response, the government appointed a committee to investigate wages and ranking in the public sector, headed by Yisrael Guri, Chair of the Knesset Finance Committee, former head of the workers’ educational division, and one of Mapai’s most prominent public figures. The ruling party had an incentive to appease the white-collar workers before the impending 26 June 1955 elections, but the Sharett government’s decision to accept a limited version of the Guri recommendations did not suffice. The electoral price was clear to Ben-Gurion for one, who blamed the “fury of the working intelligentsia” as one reason for Herut’s growing strength in the general elections of summer 1955.[[6]](#endnote-7)

 The Guri Committee did not submit its conclusions to the caretaker government until after the 1955 elections.[[7]](#endnote-8) It recommended amending the 125 IL cost-of-living adjustmentceiling in order to limit the future erosion of high public sector salaries in relation to blue-collar salaries, most of which did not exceed the 125 IL ceiling. However, it did not recommend increasing white-collar workers’ and senior executives’ basic wages in order to compensate for previous erosion, nor did it recommend setting a wage-gap between the high and low paygrades. The Committee did not suggest any reform in tax policy, which was an instrument of wage-gap restriction in the labor market. The Committee’s recommended wage increase would create a maximum wage-gap of 1:3.2, which considerably diverged from strikers’ demand that physicians’ wages be doubled.[[8]](#endnote-9) Furthermore, the Guri Committee suggested that the wage increase be implemented after July 1 1955.[[9]](#endnote-10)

 In response to the Committee’s conclusions, the civil service physicians threatened to collectively resign (“State Physicians” 1955; “Too Little Too Late” 1955) and began fighting to significantly improve the recommendations, along with representatives of senior executives and engineers (“Physicians Decided to Wait” 1955). The caretaker government under Sharett did not acquiesce, but rather appointed an additional committee, headed by Minister without portfolio Zalman Aran, to evaluate the Guri Committee’s recommendations.[[10]](#endnote-11) The white-collar workers’ opposition gradually receded, and in September 1955 they accepted the Committee’s original recommendations (“The Physicians Have Resumed” 1955; “The Engineers Have Resumed” 1955).

 As early as the two final months of 1955, however, it seemed the new Ben-Gurion government, established on November 3, would revoke even the partial compliance with the Guri Committee recommendations. The incoming prime minister summarized the demands of Kupat Holim physicians in his diary after receiving a report from the head of the Trade-Unions Division, Aharon Becker: “Kupat Holim physicians want three things: 1) To work little, 2) To enjoy a private practice, 3) To receive an excessive salary.”[[11]](#endnote-12)

 To physicians and their fellow white-collar workers, the Guri Committee recommendations were already a measly revision of the public sector basic-wage freeze and drastic wage-gap reduction policies. Now, it seemed that Ben-Gurion’s government would retreat even from this minuscule revision. In the midst of forming the new government’s coalition, Ben-Gurion, who held the Defense portfolio as well, summoned IMA Chairman Dr. Zalman Avigdori to a meeting and informed him that the new government intended to prevent any wage increase.[[12]](#endnote-13) In early January 1956, after prolonged internal debate, Mapai government ministers and the leaders of the Histadrut decided to retract their promise to implement the Guri Committee recommendations.[[13]](#endnote-14) The white-collar public sector workers responded with a comprehensive strike.

**The Outbreak of Conflict**

Eight thousand physicians, engineers, jurists, academic faculty from Hebrew University and the Technion, pharmacists, clinical psychologists, archaeologists, geologists, microbiologists, economists, and statisticians employed in State and public institutions, joined in a comprehensive strike on Tuesday, 7 February (“8,000 White-Collar Workers” 1956). Hebrew University faculty asked the institution’s administration to set a separate wage ranking for them in order to “fight for the University’s independence pertaining to its academic employees’ wages” (“University Faculty Joined” 1956). The national engineers’ assembly decided to declare a strike, contrary to the position of the Engineers’ Association, which was affiliated with the Histadrut(“The National Engineers Assembly” 1956).

 The IMA, the strike’s leading institution and strongest union, announced via the mainstream newspapers that, over the past year, the government had breached an explicit agreement and revoked its 1955 decision to implement the Guri Committee’s recommendations to Sharett’s provisional government. According to them, the original commitment was made following comprehensive discussions that took security and economic circumstances into consideration. The government had agreed, despite these circumstances, to raise workers’ wages by a net of approximately IL 50 million IL, with physicians’ new wages totaling roughly IL 3 million. They claimed the government’s new proposal would “decrease wages that have already been approved and implemented” – and, as aforementioned, the approved wage increase was already far from satisfactory compared to their original demands (“Why the Physicians Strike” 1956).

 Mapai stood virtually alone in opposition to the white-collar workers and senior executives’ demands for wage-gaps. Its closest coalition ally, the Progressive Party, showed unwavering support for the strikers and threatened to withdraw from the coalition if their demands were not met.[[14]](#endnote-17) According to Gershom Shocken, choosing not to set wage-gaps between white-collar and non-academic public sector workers would greatly jeopardize the quality of executives in the technical and scientific domains, and that of the national services as well.[[15]](#endnote-18) This approach eventually drove Party Chairman Rosen to resign from the government (“Pinchas Rosen Resigned” 1956).

 Finance Minister Eshkol announced the government’s official position at the 6 February 1956 Knesset plenary session. He asserted that the wage issue affected national security and that fulfilling the obligation to white-collar workers and executives would damage national economic stability at a time of emergency, which required funds for military and civil defense reinforcements, stockpiling resources, and securing the water and electrical supply (“Pinchas Rosen Resigned” 1956)

 Eshkol asked the low-earning workers on the other side of wage-gaps be kept in mind. More than 180,000 workers with ‘frozen’ wages earned a basic-wage under IL 80 per month, said Eshkol, adding, “can we say with utmost confidence and nonchalance that ‘come what may, this specific type of worker may not get a pay raise?’”[[16]](#endnote-19) While workers of another kind enjoy pay raises, these workers should be restricted from making demands? He said that the wage increase offered to white-collar workers and executives would set a gap of 1:13 between pay raises for the low and high ranks.[[17]](#endnote-20) Eshkol’s aversion to significant wage-gaps was also clearly articulated in his 14 February 1956 budget proposal to the Knesset during the strike.[[18]](#endnote-21)

According to the strikers’ Coordinating Committee, participation in the strike had exceeded expectations, especially among physicians, who shut down every public medical facility across the nation, considering the intense pressure brought to bear on workers by the Histadrut and Mapai. The Coordinating Committee claimed that, aside from a few individuals, all physicians, jurists, statisticians, and Hebrew University faculty members had participated in the strike. It also reported they had been joined by the majority of senior executives and economists, aside from those in ministries run by Mapai members (“The White-Collar Strike Begun” 1956).

 Conversely, *Davar* newspaper, the Mapai organ, reported that the strike, which had been meant to destabilize the Histadrut’s authority, was neither comprehensive nor impactful, aside from impeding medical care facilities. It announced that the vast majority of engineers in the Jewish Agency and Histadrut institutions had continued work as usual. Management at the industrial Histadrut concern Koor and the Koor Workers’ Association threatened that striking engineers who refused to resume work immediately would be deemed to have resigned(“The Anti-Histadrut Strike” 1956).

 As mentioned, Justice Minister and Progressive Party Chairman Pinchas Rosen had resigned from the government, along with his party, after the commitment to white-collar workers had been revoked. *Davar* criticized the resignation. In its ‘letters to the editor’ section, Avraham Haft (1956) of Kibbutz Degania Bet asked the resigning minister whether he would have acted similarly had the government broken its promise to workers of the railroad, food, metal, or military industries? Dr. B. Cohen (1956) of Tel-Aviv lashed out at the white-collar workers for lacking patriotism and impairing national security, and suggested they listen to the smug reports on the strike aired by Cairo’s radio, coupled with claims rearding Israeli society’s escalating instability. Letters of this nature, which depicted strikers as deliberately endangering the public, persisted throughout the strike.[[19]](#endnote-22)

 The general white-collar workers’ strike in the public sector was the MOST prominent political event of early 1956, along with the escalating threat of Egypt’s military forces. The newspaper articles, political discourse, and impassioned ideological essays that accompanied the strike portrayed a broad political event with multiple implications, rather than a mere socio-economic dispute limited to its direct purview. We will later revisit the strike’s progression and conclusion, but will now change our focus to discuss the right-wing discourse that supported the strike and imbued it with far-reaching significance.

***Ha’aretz*’s Critique of Socialist Republicanism**

As noted above, *Ha’aretz* was an important supporter of the strikers and of their demand for a higher socio-economic status. The strike even gave *Ha’aretz* writers the opportunity to harshly criticize the socialist-republican (*mamlachti*) agendas championed by Ben-Gurion, Mapai, and the Histadrut. Its close kinship with Mapai’s ally the Progressive Party, sheds light on an important characteristic of the white-collar workers’ strike and its political-ideological significance: the strike was a declaration of defiance against socialist republicanism, which was in no small measure a fundamental internal defiance, from within the establishment itself.

 The strike incited public discussion of the status of the Histadrut. In the midst of the dispute, Amos Eilon (1956), one of *Ha’aretz’*s most prominent journalists, wrote that the Histadrut had become the strongest, most expansive, wealthiest, and largest trade union in the West. By the end of 1955, it included almost 800,000 members, who constituted half of the state’s Jewish citizens. According to Eilon, no other organization in the Western world had managed to organize 90% of workers under its wing. One hundred forty-six thousand earners were employed solely by Histadrut industry, he asserted, adding that the Histadrut’s turnover was on the verge of exceeding one billion IL, and that more than a million citizens received health benefits from the Histadrut’s Kupat Holim. “The Histadrut provides working conditions unparalleled by any European trade union, as well as social benefits that accumulate to a world record of at least 30% of wages,” wrote Eilon.

 This seemingly flattering description, however, actually became the basis of a vehement attack on the organization, obviously stemming from the Histadrut’s attempt to thwart the white-collar strikers. Eilon even dared to call the Histadrut an “…organization reminiscent of Mussolini-era corporatism” – claiming that it regulated Israel’s labor relations using a fascist formula that prohibited strikes and shut-downs, “…just like the Histadrut factories do,” and imposed compulsory arbitration by the Histadrut’s Trade Unions Division. Eilon’s article also asserted that the Histadrut includes “…workers and proprietors, industry-giants, oil tycoons, and financiers… both paltry farmers and feudal lords…”

 Thus, in the heat of the class-centered polemic between *Ha’aretz* and the Histadrut during the strike, one of the newspaper’s most prominent writers charged it with both fascism and feudalism, alongside the more common accusation of its quasi-Bolshevik tendencies.[[20]](#endnote-23) Dr. Shlomo Gross, one of *Ha’aretz*’s senior writers (penname: ‘Poless’) presented a less aggressive and yet highly critical analysis. He published an article titled *‘Tafkid Manhigei Ha’poalim’* [the role of the workers’ leaders] that exposed the strike supporters’ ideological and class-centered elitist approach (Poless 1956). The strike’s impetus was wage-gaps, wrote Poless in his substantive, trenchant article, but its fundamental cause was the executive and academic elite’s struggle for status in national leadership. Poless argued that the pre-independence period had been characterized by a surplus of administrative and academically educated workers, which he believed allowed relative wage-equality within the small pre-independence public sector. Now, with the added responsibility of statehood, the demand for civil servants in the liberal professions had significantly increased, while their demographic percentage in the new immigrant population was negligible. According to Poless, the needs generated by the nation-building process and the mass absorption of immigrants with little resources or education, as well as the corollary to these needs, i.e. the growing demand for educated professionals and executives in the labor market, necessitated a “departure from egalitarian concepts” typical of the pre-independence period. Otherwise, “Professionals from scientific disciplines who do not receive sufficient compensation will seek a new place in the great big world.”

 Thus, Poless outlined the context of strikers’ demands: the extensive nation-building process provided structural advantages that the strikers now sought to claim or realize. Higher pay and social status for white-collar workers was a necessary condition for the potential success of the historic enterprise of absorbing the very immigrant population from which they sought to be socially distinct. This was the essence of the liberal-republicanist logic that substituted the socialist-republicanist logic; or in other words—*Ha’aretz’s* answer to the social aspect of Mapai’s socialist and Zionist melting pot (*Mizug Galu’yot*).

Opposite the white-collar workers and the professional middle-class are the blue-collar workers, noted *Ha’aretz’s* head publicist, who have the incentive to resist wage-gaps, and also possess superior political power. This power can help them not only prevent wage-gaps, but to increase blue-collar workers’ wages as well, which may cause an “economic collapse due to inflation.” Poless therefore asked the blue-collar workers’ leaders to understand both the danger of inflation and that of alienating and distancing “our intellectual assets.” They must “…explain to the [blue-collar] workers why they should accept the idea of gaps in public service work, and not raise their wages,” he wrote (Poless 1956).

 In terms of socio-economic strategy, his contentions linked strike supporters such as Poless with the relatively right wing faction within Mapai, which was at the helm of Eshkol’s Finance Ministry and the Bank of Israel headed by David Horowitz. He was aiming for an alliance between those in Mapai who insisted on an anti-inflation policy and those who wished to secure a superior socio-economic status for the ‘intelligentsia.’ In fact, a different alliance was developing, socialist in nature - between Ben-Gurion, Eshkol, and the Histadrut, an alliance that led to confrontation with the academic middle-class.

 A rhetorical ideological stance such as Eilon’s was more common than Gross-Poless’s honest approach. *Ha’aretz*’s *‘Ra’iti Shamati’* [I saw, I heard] column, for instance, stated that the need to escape from the Histadrut’s restraints was the strike’s main impetus:

The true struggle revolves around the status of the intelligentsia in Israeli society. The struggle is not just about wages, but also about freedom of thought, freedom of association, and mainly, the liberation of intellectuals, academics, and experts, from subjugation to uninformed political functionaries whose involvement in different professional domains since the State’s establishment has already caused severe damage (“A Struggle for Social Status” 1956).

 According to *Ha’aretz*, the confrontation was actually rooted in the white-collar workers’ demand to realize one of democracy’s fundamental rights – freedom of association. They wished to set their own working conditions without the supervision of a handful of commissars who imposed their opinions from the heights of the Histadrut. The true struggle was a response to the degradation and subjugation of the educated worker by the ignorant clerk. The Kupat Holim was a good example of this phenomenon, as it was not run by physicians, but rather by political functionaries who interfered in medical matters such as budgeting, medical service protocols, and more. The question at hand, therefore, was “Why are we witnessing this uprising only now, when the intellectuals’ subjugation to political functionaries has existed for years?” (“A Struggle for Social Status” 1956).

 Gross-Poless wisely attributed this to the high demand for educated workers, set against mass immigration absorption and nation building – his causative diagnosis exposing the new contours of the government’s relationship with the educated working class.

**The General Zionists’ Capitalist Alternative**

The General Zionists, an important right wing party, adopted a stance identical to that of strikers. The party was the Zionist Organization’s leading political faction before Mapai’s ascendance, and was considered the chief opposition party after its relative electoral victory in 1951, when it became the second largest party in the Second Knesset (20 mandates). This electoral victory, several years prior to the current dispute, and the General Zionists’ victory in the local elections that preceded it (November 1950), foreshadowed political tendencies similar to those underscoring the strike. These elections revealed pervasive right wing socio-economic tendencies within the veteran Ashkenazi public. During the 1951 elections, while the austerity policy dictated equal distribution of food and basic necessities due to shortages caused by the population doubling without sufficient production, the veteran Ashkenazi public exhibited its disdain for the Mapai-led socialist-republican agendas, which it considered excessively egalitarian, and toward the ‘flooding’ of the young State with the mass immigration wave of 1948-1952.

 However, the party’s two and a half years in Ben-Gurion’s and Sharett’s governments from December 1952 until June 1955, prevented it from being an effective systemic substitute for socialist republicanism, for which it was a natural candidate. The party represented the major business owners, tradesmen, manufacturers, land-owning farmers in the *moshavot*, grocers and shopkeepers, craftsmen,[[21]](#endnote-25) and workers in the liberal professions. The General Zionists party therefore saw itself as the strikers’ political representative. Alongside the municipal institutions of prominent cities such as Tel Aviv, Petach Tikva, Ramat Gan, and affiliated *moshavot*, the party’s frame of reference supported civil society associations related to the private economic sector: The Manufacturers’ Association, the Farmers’ Association, the Merchants’ Association, and other trade associations of various kinds. Therefore, it strove for some type of affiliation with middle-class trade unions. Their confrontation with Mapai government was a good opportunity at a convenient time, shortly after the party withdrew from the coalition at the end of Sharett’s short term as prime minister. The party’s leaders hoped to revive it as a capitalist, liberal alternative to Mapai rule and primarily, as an alternative to fostering the Histadrut economic sector in competition with the private sector, and to the organized labor that was restricting private business owners.

 The fierce class rivalry the General Zionists felt toward the Histadrut reverberated in the report of the party’s daily newspaper, *Ha’boker*, on the white-collar workers’ public sector strike. The report highlighted the harsh critique voiced by General Zionists in the Knesset regarding the confrontation between the Histadrut and Mapai and the strikers, and what they labelled outright discrimination against the working intelligentsia. In a Knesset discussion on the eve of the strike, an MK of the General Zionists, Dr. Ben-Zion Har’el, claimed the government was striving for “a false equality that never existed even among the pioneers decades ago.”[[22]](#endnote-27)

 According to *Ha’boker’s* interpretation, published 19 February 1956, thirteen days after the outbreak of the strike, government representatives had vehemently rejected all offers for settling the dispute, despite threats to intensify the strike by shutting down state hospitals, schools, courthouses, construction, and public services nationwide.[[23]](#endnote-28) *Ha’boker* reported that the government was treating white-collar workers with ‘impulsivity and rigidity,’ a result of its transformation into a pawn of the Histadrut, which sought to penalize white-collar workers for daring to rebel. “The Histadrut State” has taken over the State of Israel, proclaimed *Ha’boker* (Y.G. 1956).

 One of the white-collar workers’ notable representatives was Prof. Avraham Halevi Frenkel, former rector and one of the most prominent mathematicians at the Hebrew University. *Ha’boker* gave generous room to his comments on the academic faculty’s incentives for joining the strike. He stated that his fellow professors opposed strikes in principle, but joined in order to protest the crisis of morality and the government’s breach of obligations. Along with his complaints regarding morality, Frenkel protested the consistent erosion of faculty members’ wages since the pre-state period. When he began teaching at Hebrew University 27 years before, in 1929, the wage-gap between a regular worker and an academic worker was 9:1, an unthinkable ratio in the mid-1950s. On the other hand, explained the senior mathematician, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion was using every available platform to proclaim that building a state required scientific development. He asserted that conditions in Israel did not promote scientific research, and that egalitarian wages in the public sector were a major impediment to it. Prof. Frenkel believed government policy had driven away some of the state’s young scientists. “The government and the Histadrut force white-collar workers to accept a situation in which manual laborers and drivers make 50% more than educated workers,” he asserted (“Negotiations to End” 1956; “Resolution Not Reached” 1956).

 Even after the strikers relinquished most of their demands and the strike ended, the General Zionists persisted with harsh critiques of the socialist republicanism at the core of the Mapai government’s confrontation with the strikers. During Knesset budget discussions on 22 February, one of the party’s prominent leaders, Knesset member and former Transportation Minister Yosef Sapir (later minister without portfolio on behalf of the Gahal party), spoke up against the government’s inequality prevention policy that was ‘trampling’ the middle-class.

Sapir went on to assert that it was necessary to turn away from the anachronistic manual workers and look toward the liberal professions, the entrepreneurs, the tradesmen, the industrialists. He expressed one of the strike’s most important characteristics: along with being a materialistic struggle, it was also a struggle for social superiority and prestige. “If we wish to promise the plebeian masses fair wages,” he said, “we must secure a just [i.e. higher] wage for the executive and educated workers.”[[24]](#endnote-29)

 The class orientation of the General Zionists was unmistakably clear. Their call to dismantle the Histadrut’s economic enterprises clashed with the socialist republicanism of Ben-Gurion and his colleagues based on a strong Histadrut, a point *Ha’boker* emphasized to its readers. It published an extensive account of Ben-Gurion’s vehement defense of the Histadrut and its social and national roles (Hilb 1956). *Ha’boker*therefore presented its readers with a precise account of socialist-republican ideology (left wing *mamlachti’yut*), in order to emphasize the contrast with its own liberal-republican ideology (right wing *mamlachti’yut*).

**Begin: The Fear of Mapai Leaders has Dissipated**

Herut, the other right wing party, reinstated as the largest force on the right in the summer elections of 1955,[[25]](#endnote-30) promoted an ideology that was fundamentally similar to the General Zionists’ liberal or right wing republicanism. Headed by Menachem Begin, the party was committed to republican centralization for the purposes of national and economic development on a capitalist, middle-class basis. Begin (1952) articulated this conception in a comprehensive ideological document, and a distinct capitalist orientation characterized Herut’s election platforms, though alongside their promotion of social services.[[26]](#endnote-32)

 This capitalist or right wing republicanism motivated Herut’s support of the strikers’ resistance to the Mapai government’s socialist republicanism, and their demands to set public sector wage-gaps in their favor. Like the General Zionists, Herut wove its support of the professional middle-class strike into a general attack on the Histadrut and Mapai in its publication. Even members of Herut’s small trade union (‘The National Histadrut’) like Eliezer Shostak (1956) and Avraham Axelrod (1956), who were meant to represent the party’s populist streak and promote ‘social justice,’ were supportive of the strikers’ demands for wage-gaps and social superiority over the Mizrachi manual workers. Herut as a whole, including its leader, Menachem Begin, was characterized by liberal-republicanism, which prompted its support of deepening social stratification via significant wage-gaps, far greater than those Mapai was willing to accept. When it came to this issue, there was no distinction between Herut’s position and that of the General Zionists.

 Herut leader Begin (1956) revealed his opinion of the strike’s political significance in an article published at its outset under the title “Rule over Substance and Spirit.” Begin believed the strike attested to the regime’s decline and loss of prestige and claimed that the authorities were finding themselves threatening devotees and even chastising them, but were still unable to stop the strike. He believed wage-gaps are both just and worthy. In a manner reminiscent of his mentor Jabotinsky’s critique of socialism, Begin attributed this injustice to an envy that “lowers the stature of human beings.”

 However, Begin wished to qualify his support of wage-gaps, as it placed him in an uncomfortable political position and contradicted his social justice platform. Therefore, alongside his support of wage-gaps, Begin pointed to the poor condition of immigrants in absorption camps—to whom his party appealed on election day—and the wealth of the Histadrut. But “the fear of Mapai leaders has dissipated,” declared Begin just when the Histadrut’s financial expansion had reached the point of “commercial socialism” (Begin 1956). He therefore used social rhetoric against the Histadrut in order to ease the contradiction between his support of social stratification and political appeal to Mizrachi voters.

**The End of the Strike**

The government, and the Histadrut in particular, showed superior organizational capacity in their struggle against the strikers. At a strikers’ assembly in Tel-Aviv’s Mugrabi hall with 600 in attendance, speakers focused on the government’s unilateral violation of the wage agreement, but the continuous pressure on strikers began to show, and one of their leaders claimed strikers were willing to cooperate with any reasonable compromise. At his party’s public assembly, the Progressive Party’s leader, Pinchas Rosen (1956), cautioned against intensifying the strike, stating efforts should be made to end it.

 After the senior executives’ withdrawal from the strikers’ Coordinating Committee, strikers began seeking to end the labor dispute. Their committee submitted written requests to the government, later published in the press, agreeing to have the designated portion of the wage increase promised in September 1955 to be allocated throughout 1957 rather than in 1956 (“The White Collar Workers Requested to Meet” 1956).

Following the strikers’ proposal, negotiations were held between representatives of physicians, university faculty, engineers, jurists, and economists, with Finance Minister Levi Eshkol, Health Minister Israel Barzilai, and Interior Minister Moshe Shapira, along with Histadrut representatives, including General Secretary Mordechai Namir and Chairman of the Trade Unions Division Aharon Becker.[[27]](#endnote-39) At 2am on 20 February 1956, the Prime Minister, the Histadrut, and the strikers finalized an agreement that ended the strike. The white-collar workers agreed to a 1/3 reduction of their 1956 pay raise, 6% less than the reduction that the government aspired. Thirteen percent of the reductions would be allocated at the beginning of 1957, and the remaining 20 percent in 1958.[[28]](#endnote-40) Following the agreement, the Progressive Party rejoined the coalition.[[29]](#endnote-41)

**Conclusion**

The white-collar workers’ mission did not fail completely, however. By striking, they expressed their aspiration for superiority in the public sector labor market – in fact in the entire public sphere - and their social vision, anchored in what we have termed ‘liberal republicanism,’ which contrasted Mapai’s socialist republicanism. Their demands won the widespread support of the right wing parties and the political center on the right side of Mapai. Herut’s leader Begin rightly diagnosed that common ‘liberal republicanism’ could be a basis for an alliance with the developing opposition among Mapai-affiliated factions. Over the next few years, the force discovered in the middle-class professionals’ strike progressively influenced Israeli society, and even the labor movement. However, it is important to observe that this was not the case for Mapai in the mid-1950s.

 The criticism of socialist-republican agendas by the two right wing parties was now reinforced by the significant support of the professional and academic Ashkenazi middle-class, led by physicians and engineers. Thus, the strike did reveal an ideological and potentially political alliance between the strikers and right wing and center-right parties. The strikers were not a politically and socially removed faction. Their critique of the authorities made their group an oppositional entity, but the strikers had also various, deep-rooted attachments to the ruling institutions. Therefore, they should be seen as an opposition from within the Ashkenazi establishment against Israel’s social regime during the 1950’s. The white-collar workers were affiliated with the authorities on an organizational, administrative, and ideological level. They were vital to the success of Mapai’s far-reaching development strategy, on one hand, and disruptive to the regime’s egalitarian agendas in the context of 1950s immigration absorption on the other.

 As the success of immigration absorption relied on development, the authorities found themselves in the throes of a complex dilemma but, nevertheless, decided against the white-collar workers and in favor of abating growing inequality in 1950s Israel. If we broaden the scope beyond the period discussed, the white-collar workers’ simultaneous affiliation with and distancing from Mapai, and their ideological alliance with the right and center-right parties, makes this case an indication of later processes namely, the expansion of the middle-class ethos into labor movement parties and its major institutions, and its subsequent transformation into one of the central political movements of Israel’s middle-class. The 1956 strike can serve as an early indication of the coming competition among the political left, right, and center over the representation of Israel’s growing middle-class.

 Opposition from within the Ashkenazi establishment to Mapai’s socialist-republican hegemony finally won over Mapai itself, transforming it into the upper middle-class Labor party we know today. This process took place after the period we discussed, beginning in the mid-1960s. From a socio-political point of view, the unemployment crisis during the second half of the 1960s (the ‘*Mitun*’) was initiated deliberately by the post-Ben-Gurion leadership of Mapai. It marked a turning point in the party’s class and ethnic orientation. Prime-Minister Levi Eshkol, Finance minister Pinhas Sapir and their colleagues did acknowledge that their policy went too far in its infliction of suffering upon the lower strata of society, especially poor, oriental families of the working class. They did manage to reverse the course of events and to end the crisis (Navon 2016). Nevertheless, their readiness to initiate such a policy is a mile stone in Mapai’s gradual abandonment of its socialist-republicanism.

 Eshkol’s political partners in the labor movement, the small Mapam and Ahdut Ha’avoda parties, were also his partners in implementing this socio-political policy. Like Mapai, they had undergone a process of transformation into political manifestations of the predominantly Ashkenazi middle-class in Israel. Eshkol’s rivals within the labor movement, the Rafi party and its leaders Moshe Dayan and Shim’on Peres under the remote leadership of the aging Ben-Gurion, did the same. Upon its creation, under the guidance of Peres, Rafi oriented itself toward those same circles of the Ashkenazi middle-class whose failed socio-political offensive was discussed in this article. This orientation was represented in Rafi by politicians like industrialist MK Yig’a’el Horowitz and MK Zalman Shoval, future participants in the establishment of the Likud party.

 One can discern a clear socio-political process in which the labor movement’s parties came closer to the right and center-right parties. During the period discussed in the article, Mapai stood in-between the Ashkenazi middle-class and the oriental proletariat, struggling to represent both sides and to gain their political support (Bareli forthcoming). Since the mid-1960s onward, this intermediate orientation was replaced by a clear orientation towards the Ashkenazi middle-class. They took over the labor movement from within. Therefore, in the 1965 elections Mapai, Rafi and Gahal (an alliance between Herut and the Liberals, the former General Zionists) competed for the votes of the middle-class. Gahal, the future core of the greater Likud party, managed to participate in this competition and still maintain progressively more successful political orientation toward the oriental population. The Likud managed to gain the intermediate position which Mapai held during its yeas of hegemony in the 1950s.

 In the years between the Six-Day War and the loss of power in 1977, the Labor Party, the heir of Mapai, Rafi and Ahdut Ha’avoda, initiated a policy of intensifying social services and molding the Israeli welfare state in much more universalistic patterns than before. But this policy did not help it regain the support of the oriental voters, who remembered the acute unemployment crisis of the mid-1960s and who, since the 1969 elections, tended more and more to support Gahal and later the Likud. On the other hand, the Labor Party’s universalistic welfare state policy gradually drove away part of its middle-class supporters. With no alternative within the Labor movement camp, they turned elsewhere. Some moved to support the Likud party during the 1970s, and some found a temporary political home in the short-lived Dash party during the 1977 elections, thereby contributing to Labor’s political defeat.

 Israeli politics of the 1960s, more so that of the 1970s and 1980s – and to a large degree also contemporary Israeli politics – is characterized by a clear political victory of the middle-class. Major changes occurred, of course within the broad phenomenon of the Israeli middle-class, and one of the most important ones is the incorporation of oriental Israelis into its ranks (Dahan 2013).[[30]](#endnote-44) The alliance of the Ashkenazi academic middle-class with the political right and center-right, its severe conflict with the ruling party Mapai and its defeat in this conflict – these were outcomes of the special socio-political relations of the 1950s and early 1960s. This was the last defeat of the Ashkenazi academic middle-class. Our analysis helps understanding the development of a counter-force within the dominant paradigm of socialist republicanism, before its victories, while it was striving to advance an alternative hegemonic paradigm, that of liberal and meritocratic republicanism.

**Brief bios**

**NOTES**

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1. For more on the crisis’ progression from 1954 to the outbreak of the strike see Bareli and Cohen (2008a; 2008b; 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. For a concise description of immigrant conditions in the 1950’s see Lissak (1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. “IMA Secretary General Dr. A. Druryan to the Lawyers” Association (erased) and “to Namir, for your information” added in handwriting, January 30, 1955 (Lavon Archive, 208 IV, Container 1347, Hebrew). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. For details on the crisis, see Bareli and Cohen (2008a; 2008b; 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. “Herut” Central Committee, 27.1.1956, Jabotinsky Institute Archives, 4/2-1; The Progressive Party’s Executive Committee along with Ha’oved Ha’tzioni, 10.3.1955, Massuah Archives, (AR-14-010-06) 10 6 m; Kaplinski (1954). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Ben-Gurion’s Diary, 30.7.1955, Ben-Gurion Archives (hereinafter BGA). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. For Guri Committee recommendations see LMA, IV-250-36-1-2328. For a discussion of its recommendations and their approval, please see government meetings on 12.6.55, 14.6.55, 11.8.55, 21.8.55, 21.8.55, 11.9.55, 19.9.55, SA. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Ibid. For more on this topic, see “The Guri Committee” (1955). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. LMA, IV-250-36-1-2328. For more on this topic see “Demanding New Wages” (1955). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Ben-Gurion Diary, 20.9.1955, BGA. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Ben-Gurion Diary, 20.9.1955 BGA. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Ben-Gurion Diary, 6.11.1955 BGA. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. See Mapai’s finance committee discussions on 21.11.55 (LMA 2-932-1955-109), and the limited committee discussions regarding wage policy on 25.10.54. The party’s position eventually determined the government’s position. For more on this topic see Ben-Gurion’s Diary, 13.12.1955 BGA; government meetings in the afternoon of 15.1.56 and 6.2.56 SA. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Party leader, Justice Minister Pinchas Rosen, reported to the Progressives’ leadership on January 25, 1956 that a letter with a threat of resignation was sent to Ben-Gurion that day. Massuah Archives, AR. M-009-06, section m, file no. 6, bin 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
15. Knesset minutes, vol. 19 (February 6, 1956), 968–969. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
16. Knesset minutes, vol. 19 (February 6, 1956), 971. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
17. Knesset minutes, vol. 19 (February 6, 1956), 971. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
18. Knesset minutes, vol. 20 (February 14, 1956), 1063. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
19. For another example out of many see (Lev 1956). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
20. For a discussion of the comparison to Soviet-Union, see Bareli (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
21. A tension, especially regarding taxation, existed between Mapai and the independent artisans and small-scale tradesmen. The General Zionists Party saw itself as their representative, while Mapai tried to compete for their support. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
22. Knesset minutes, vol. 19 (February 6, 1956), 968; “The Coalition Rejected Proposal” (1956). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
23. Compare with: Government meeting, 12.2.56, SA. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
24. Knesset minutes, vol. 20 (February 21, 1956), 1131–36. Quotes from “Y. Sapir in Budget Debate” (1956). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
25. Herut won 15 mandates during the 1955 elections (12.6%). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
26. See for instance, “The Herut Movement” (1951: clause 3). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
27. See Eshkol’s report of the negotiations at the government meeting on 6.2.56, SA. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
28. See the discussion and conclusions during the government meeting on 19.2.156, and the preemptive discussion on 12.2.56, SA; “The Strike Has Ended” (1956); “A Final Agreement” (1956). Hence, a hospital director, for instance, who earned 228 I£ and whose basic wage would increase to 490 I£ according to the government’s previous commitments, would only earn 402 I£ in 1956 according to the new agreement, allocated 421 I£ in four payments as of 1957, and 629 I£ in six payments during 1958. A first-rate engineer whose wage should have increased from 213 I£ to 415 I£, will earn 348 I£ in 1956 and receive 325 I£ in four payments during 1957, and 485 I£ in six payments during 1958. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
29. Government meeting on 22.2.56, SA; “The Progressives Have Decided” (1956). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
30. Cf. Cohen (1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)