

Class and National Struggles in Palestine

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IN spite of the obstacles which British Imperialism puts in the way of the development of the country, capitalism nevertheless is making progress. The character of agriculture is slowly but surely changing; the number of plantations in the country is increasing. The development of agriculture is causing a considerable increase in the number of agricultural workers employed.

But parallel with the increase in the demand for labour power there is also an increase in the supply. A rapid process of class differentiation is taking place in the rural districts. The upper strata of the peasantry are adopting more intensive forms of cultivation, while the lower classes are becoming more and more impoverished and are being compelled to seek employment on the big Arabian and Jewish plantations. Thousands migrate into the towns and increase the army of unemployed there. In the towns the number of Arab workshops and factories is increasing and a transition from hand manufacture to factory production is to be observed.

Since 1925 the country has been experiencing a severe economic crisis. At bottom this is a crisis in the Zionist speculative enterprises, and the general crisis is but a reflection of this. Consequently, the effects of the crisis are experienced more severely by the Jewish workers than by the Arab workers. Of the 32,000 registered Jewish workers 8,000 are totally unemployed, and the majority of these have been unemployed for over a year. The number working short-time is 4,000.

Unemployment

The workers who suffer most from unemployment are those of the building trades. The number of unemployed Arab workers is not less than 10,000. Several thousand refugees fled from Syria owing to the suppression of the revolution there, have further increased the number of unemployed.

Although the government takes over £1,000,000 from the population of Palestine it does not spend a farthing for the relief of unemployment.

The prolonged slump in the labour market has led to a very serious deterioration in the conditions of labour. From August 1925 to 1926 wages have been reduced to one-third and even one-fourth. The wages of the Arab workers have also dropped from 20 to 50 per cent. Formerly the Jewish workers used to earn considerably more than the Arab workers, but now the wages of both categories have become more nearly equal.

To a considerable degree this is due to the fact that the Jewish trade unions, affiliated to the Amsterdam International, refused to carry on work among the Arab workers. The equalisation of wages took place not as a result of the wages of the Arab workers being raised but because there was a bigger drop in the wages of the Jewish workers than in those of the Arab workers. Until recently the working day of the Arab workers ranged from 10 to 14 hours; now the Jewish urban workers have been compelled to sacrifice the 8-hour day and work from 10 to 12 hours a day.

Wages Halved

This is the situation in the towns. In the "colonies," however, where the Zionists have artificially concentrated 10,000 Jewish workers, the wages of the Jewish workers have in many cases dropped below the level of the wages of the Arab workers (6-8-10 piastres per day). In order to intensify competition among the workers and to cause wages to fall still lower the Jewish farmer employers employ Bedouins from remote districts, who are content to accept from 3 to 4 piastres per day.

After the steady depression of the economic conditions of the workers the bourgeoisie have been carrying on an attack, for the past few months against the political rights of the workers. In a number of factories organised workers are dismissed and unorganised workers are taken on in their stead. The property owners' and farmers' organisations are striving, not without success, to deprive the workers of the right to vote in local self-government bodies.

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Nothing has been done to promote measures for the social defence of the workers. A labour protection law has been passed, for example, according to which the worker who meets with an accident receives compensation—but only on the following conditions: (1) if he has been employed by the same employer for not less than three years; (2) if it has been established by the court that the accident occurred while he was fulfilling his duty for the employer. This law does not apply to agricultural workers, or to workers employed in small enterprises, or to office workers—not even to railway employees (the latter have been declared to be “casual” workers).

No Factory Laws

The law does not provide for factory legislation, and this alone nullifies the whole act. At the same time another law was passed prohibiting picketing or any attempt to influence strike-breakers; in a word, depriving the workers of the possibility of striking.

It is not surprising that the rapid deterioration of the conditions of the workers is causing considerable emigration from the country, particularly among the Jews. In the first quarter of 1925 9,000 immigrants arrived in the country and 800 left, whereas in the fourth quarter 2,551 persons arrived in the country and 2,570 emigrated.

Owing to deterioration in the conditions of the Jewish workers, a process of class differentiation is taking place within the Jewish community similar to that taking place among the Arabs. The causes of this process are as follows: Capital employing methods of frank exploitation has taken the place of nationalist-philanthropic capital which concealed the process of exploitation of the workers. The growth of capital has relieved the Zionist organisations of the necessity for supporting the “Socialistic” experiments of the Histadrut, the Jewish Labour organisation. The following figures excellently illustrate this fact. In 1923 the membership of urban Labour “collectives” (producing co-operative groups) was 1,522 whereas in 1925 it had dropped to 1,140. The situation with regard to rural “collectives” is no better. In 1925 43 per cent. of the agricultural workers in the country were organised in communes, and 25 per cent. were organised on co-operative societies—68 per cent. in all. The number of wage workers was then only 32 per cent. In 1926 the total membership of all collectives was only 63 per cent.

The piece-work system introduced through the medium of the “Histadrut” enabled the employers to force down wages. The enormous number of unemployed still further accelerates the process of reducing wages. To this should be added also the increasing employment of female and child labour (11,000 working women and 6,000 children).

The Labour Movement

As a consequence of the worsening of conditions of labour the class struggle has become more intensified. Strikes are increasing both in frequency and in dimensions; severe economic conflicts are breaking out.

The development of economic conflicts in the principal cities, such as Jaffa, Jerusalem, Haifa, is seen from the following table:—

Year.	Number of Strikes.	Number of Strikers involved.	Number of days lost.
1919	1	40	560
1920	5	44	591
1921	9	253	3,775
1922	9	466	1,993
1923	27	634	6,044
1924	32	996	19,798
1925 (first half)...	30	1,334	18,873

The above table refers only to strikes that have taken place among the Jewish workers; there are no precise statistics of strikes among the Arab workers, but their number is increasing.

During recent years strikes have broken out which exclusively affected Arab workers. For example, there was the strike at the Vilanda brick and tile works, a strike of masons in Nablus, a builders' strike in Nazareth, a strike of carpenters in Haifa, of dock workers in Jaffa, and of agricultural labourers in Heder. Even this scanty information is sufficient to indicate the growth of class antagonisms among the Arabs and consequently of the class consciousness of the Arab workers. Side by side with this we observe an increase in their desire to organise.

In 1921-22 there was hardly a single organised Arab worker, but towards the end of 1926 400 Arab workers belonged to the Histadrut and over 1,000 Arab workers belong to various national unions.

Government Attitude

At first the government maintained an attitude of neutrality towards the economic struggle. The causes of this were (1) the struggle was very limited in scope; (2) the economic struggle did not seriously affect British interests for the reason that at that time there were no British enterprises in the country; (3) for political reasons the government adopted a condescending attitude towards the Histadrut. During the last two or three years, however, the situation has changed considerably. A number of British enterprises are already in operation and others are being established (the Haifa port, the Ruthenburg Electrical Company, the Jackson concession, the cement works, etc.). The political conditions of the country have also changed. Consequently the government has recently been intervening more and more in economic conflicts.

Arrests have taken place not only of revolutionary workers but also the extremely moderate representatives of the Histadrut. The police actively assist strike-breakers and disperse strikers. This kind of activity makes itself felt most particularly in connection with the efforts to organise the Arab workers. The government knows very well that if the Arab workers are organised successfully the whole character of the Labour movement in the country will be entirely changed. It was this that prompted the government to pass the Labour law already mentioned.

Up to 1925 the Histadrut was the only industrial organisation in the country (with the exception of the revolutionary Central Bureau of Trade Unions which was established in 1925, but was short-lived, and the organisation committees established in 1922). Since

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1925, however, several Arab Labour organisations have sprung up (Nablus, Haifa, Jerusalem, Jaffa, Nazareth and Bethlehem).

The Arab Labour organisations are as yet somewhat weak, but there is every prospect of their development. In connection with the beginning of a Labour movement among the Arab workers there is a marked tendency among the Jewish workers, even those who have formerly been entirely under the influence of the Zionist parties, towards international organisations.

The National Movement

Immediately after the war the national movement in Palestine increased considerably. In 1919 the first Arab congress was called; it put forward the demand for independence. The congress elected an executive committee with Musa Kaizim Pasha as chairman. Muslim-Christian clubs were established all over the country, the object of which was to organise the national movement against the British-Zionist occupation. In spite of the fact that the movement swept in large sections of the population and bore a revolutionary character, the majority of the leaders were large feudal landowners who sought to reach a compromise with the British, and therefore carried on their agitation among the masses not against the British, but against their Zionist agents. The same attitude was adopted by the delegation that was sent to Europe to seek support among British Conservative circles, as well as by the clubs and newspapers in Palestine. Hanging round on the doorsteps of British peers of course produced nothing.

The majority of the old leaders of the Palestine national movement are prepared to compromise with the British if they can obtain certain privileges for themselves. This is perfectly well understood by the British, and therefore their efforts are directed towards disrupting the national movement by making all sorts of "concessions" and by setting one group against the other.

Election Dope

At the present time the British are trying to disrupt the national movement through the medium of the municipal elections. Hitherto, the municipal commissions were appointed by the British. The establishment of municipal elections at the present time has a two-fold purpose; first, to distract the attention of the population from the demand for the establishment of a parliamentary regime in the country, and secondly to cause discord among the nationalist leaders in the fight to obtain seats on the municipal bodies. The right to vote is based on an extremely high qualification (so much so that in certain towns only a few hundred citizens have the right to vote), and the elections take place according to religious denominations. The British have achieved their object brilliantly.

The attention of the population is wholly absorbed in the elections, around which inter-tribal conflicts are taking place. The principal tribes: the Husseins, Nashishibi, Dazhani and others are fighting for seats and influence in the municipalities. The British and the Zionists, including the Zionist Socialist parties, are taking part in the election conflicts and support the Nashashibi tribe against the Husseins.

In recent years events in Syria have influenced the national movement in Palestine, and the radical elements are increasing in influence. The latter are largely controlled by "Istiklal," the Arab revolutionary party.

The Communist Party

The Communist Party, which was first known as the Socialist Party of Palestine, was established in 1919. It was broken up by the authorities in 1921 and is now with great difficulty again gathering its forces. At the same time the Party is purging itself of all survivals of reformist and Jewish national ideology (Poale-Zion) as well as of the ultra-Left and anarchist elements. In 1924 it was accepted as a section of the Comintern and since then it has devoted considerable attention to work among the Arab toilers.

The Party has always devoted most of its attention to work among the organised workers. At the end of 1922, when the Congress of the Histadrut Haglalit—the General Workers' Union—was being held a special trade union body was formed known as the Labour group in the Histadrut. This Labour group had its representatives at the Congress, and when the Congress came to an end it carried on considerable propaganda work in spreading the principles of the R.I.L.U. Clubs were formed in all cities which carried on systematic work. A number of publications were issued both in the Jewish and Arab languages. The Labour group had a large following of Arab workers. Its influence grew and it began to represent a serious menace to the Histadrut leaders. In the spring of 1924 the Labour group was expelled from the Histadrut for "betraying the interests of the Jewish people and the proletariat of Palestine." Not only were the members of the Labour group, who were known to the Histadrut leaders, expelled, but it was also resolved "to expel in the future all those who share the views of the group and continue its activity in any shape or form." Up till now over 200 members of the group have been expelled.

Right Wing Treachery

The leaders of the Histadrut, after expelling the members of the Labour group, betrayed the latter to the police. Its clubs were closed down and the group declared to be an illegal body. Those who belong to it are liable to arrest in the same way as those belonging to the Communist Party.

In spite of all persecution, however, the Labour group continues to exist. It publishes literature (which is frequently confiscated by the authorities).

In 1925 the "Unity" movement sprang up. The platform of this movement is: national and international unity of the trade union movement. The Unity movement soon became a mass movement. For example, in spite of very strong intimidation over 2,500 signatures were obtained for a petition to the Executive Committee

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on the Histadrut (September, 1926) to withdraw the ban upon the Labour group. Three conferences were called, one in the Jaffa district, one in Haifa, and one national conference (in December, 1926). The latter conference was extremely successful, 80 delegates being present of whom 20 were Arabs, representing 2,000 workers.

This conference caused a commotion. The press devoted considerable attention to it, and mention was made of it even in the Syrian and Egyptian press.

The success of the Unity movement has attracted the attention of the leaders of the Histadrut as well as of the police. The leaders of the movement are already being threatened with expulsion; the Unity clubs are being closed down.

The idea of Unity is permeating the most conservative and hitherto most "patriotic" sections of the agricultural workers. A Histadrut "opposition" is springing up among them.

In spite of the fact that all "suspects" were deprived of votes, the opposition ticket at the elections of the Third Congress of the Histadrut, December, 1926, obtained 250 votes. The influence of the Party and the Unity movement is also permeating the independent Arab trade unions.

Police Terror

The Party has to work under most extremely difficult conditions. The police terror against the revolutionary movement in the country is increasing. The extent of this terror may be judged from the fact that during the first year in which the order declaring the Labour group to be an illegal body was in operation, 70 persons were arrested for belonging to the Communist Party or to the Labour group and the total sentences passed upon them amount to 20 years' imprisonment.

In addition to the British terror operating in the country, there is the public terror exercised against the

"Bolsheviks." In this are combined the Zionist bourgeoisie, the Socialists affiliated to the Second International, and the Mohammedan clerical reactionaries. Any weapon is regarded as good enough to use against the Communists, ranging from denunciations to the police to assassinations.

The most serious weapon employed against the Communists is the economic boycott. As soon as a worker earns the reputation of being a good Communist he is immediately discharged from his employment, and every measure is taken to prevent this "traitor" and "atheist" from obtaining employment elsewhere. There are many members of the Party who have not been able to obtain a single day's employment in the course of a whole year.

Party's Difficulties

"Factionalists" are removed from the registers of the Labour Exchanges and no unemployed or sick benefit is paid to them. The sick insurance authorities are even prohibited from rendering medical assistance to Communists and their families when they require it.

Another difficulty which the Communist Party has to encounter is that of the national antagonisms and diversity of the language. Since 1923 hardly a single month has passed but one of more persons have been killed in conflicts arising from national and religious antagonisms. All agitation for solidarity and joint organisation between the Jewish and Arab workers is regarded as "Bolshevism." In view of the numerous and diverse languages every campaign requires a disproportionately large number of workers and forces.

The country is not a large one, and the working class represents a small section of the population. It is sufficient for a working man to speak out once or twice in the opposition for him to become a marked man long before he joins the Party. All these difficulties create extremely complex circumstances for the Communist Party and compels it constantly to seek new paths and methods of Party work.

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