

# The Palestine Labor League

## *The Record of a Fight for Arab-Jewish Labor Cooperation*

by Abba Khushi

**T**HE FORMAL organizational framework for mutual relations between the two labor communities in Palestine is the Palestine Labor League. This was set up by the General Federation of Jewish Labor in Palestine (Histadrut) at its Conference in 1927.

The aims and objects of this League are formulated in its Statutes as follows:

To unite all workers of Palestine, regardless of religion, nationality or race, into one league for the purpose of improving their economic, social and cultural position.

The structure of the League is one of autonomous national sections.

The League is constituted of a number of separate trade unions, some of them purely Jewish, some purely Arab and some mixed. Any mixed union, however, may contain separate Jewish and Arab units, each of which has the right of affiliating itself with its own national section at will.

When the aims and objects of the League were formulated, the Jewish section was already in existence. It was the Histadrut, with unions in villages, settlements, and towns, the members of which were Jewish workers employed by private enterprises and foreign concerns operating in Palestine, as well as those in Government employ. There was no corresponding Arab institution, however. Nothing existed beyond certain initial tendencies towards union on the part of workers employed by Government and the foreign companies; tendencies which had been carefully nurtured by the Histadrut.

The Third Conference of the Railway, Post, Telephone, and Telegraph Workers, held in January, 1922, devoted a considerable part of its deliberations to the problem of organizing the Arab workers and referred the matter to the Executive Committee of the Histadrut. At the Histadrut Convention held during that year it was resolved to establish a general union of all Railway, Post, Telephone, and Telegraph workers, to be composed of national sections.

At the Fourth Conference of the Railway Workers' Union, held in 1924, it was decided to intensify organizational activity among Arab workers.

The Fifth Conference of the Railway Workers' Union was participated in for the first time by a number of Arab delegates, some of whom were

elected to the Joint Central Committee of Railway Workers. Since then contact between Jewish and Arab railway workers has been uninterrupted. At times Arab membership of the General Union amounted to many hundreds. In some branches, such as Kantara and Samakh, the membership was 100% Arab, while in others, such as Haifa, Lydda, and Jaffa-Tel Aviv, the hundreds of members included both Arab and Jewish workers.

Concrete proposals for the establishment of a General Labor League, to comprise all sections of the working population in Palestine, were made as far back as 1924, by David Ben-Gurion (the general secretary of the Histadrut, later chairman of the Executive of the Jewish Agency); and again in 1926, by Isaac Ben-Zvi (now chairman of the Jewish National Council).

In July 1925 the Haifa Labor Council opened a special club for Arab workers under the name of the "General Workers' Club."

In April 1926 the Histadrut began to publish, in Jerusalem, the *Itihad el Amal* (The United Worker) the first Arab labor newspaper in Palestine and in the entire Middle East.

The same year saw a carpenters' and tailors' strike in Haifa. This later developed into a general strike in those trades, involving some 120 carpenters and 25 tailors. The strike arose from resentment at the fourteen hour working day then demanded of Arab workers. This was the first time that Arab workers went on strike and it created a profound impression in the town. All local Arab employers joined forces, enlisting the help of the reactionary groups of the town. The strikers were denounced in mosques and churches, the speakers proclaiming that it was inconceivable for the Arab to work less than 14 hours or, in the time-honored terminology "from sunrise to sunset." The congregations were also told that even if this strike were to prove successful and the Arab working day were made the same as that of the Jewish workers, it would not be they but the Jewish workers alone who would benefit.

The strikers, however, did not allow themselves to be diverted from their objectives by all this talk; and thanks to the moral and material assistance of the

Haifa Labor Council they succeeded in holding out. After the strike had lasted for a fortnight the employers gave in, agreeing to a 9-hour working day and extra pay for overtime.

### Establishment of the League

The resolution to establish a General Palestine Labor League was adopted at the Third Convention of the Histadrut in the summer of 1927 but could not immediately be implemented because of the unemployment and economic crisis then prevailing in the country. This period passed but was followed by the disturbances of August, 1929. At first it seemed that it would be altogether impossible to execute the project and that even the inadequate joint Arab-Jewish labor activities which had been carried on before would have to be abandoned because of the hostility encountered among Arabs at the time of the bloody anti-Jewish riots in Hebron and Safad. But the project was not abandoned. A few weeks after the disturbances ceased, the Haifa Labor Council resumed activities among the Arab workers and reopened the General Workers' Club.

This renewed activity is described as follows in the 1929-30 Report of the Haifa Labor Council: "At first we used to meet in private dwellings and out-of-the-way cafes, talking to the Arab workers about the possibilities of renewing contact. It was still dangerous to engage in this work in the open, and no little courage was required by the Arab comrades, in those days which were rife with incitement and terrorism, to begin organizational work and renew ties of friendship and common activity with the Jewish workers and Federation. But little by little the number of members increased. Life in the town gradually returned to normal. With the help of the Executive Committee of the Histadrut we rented premises for a club in a public place at the suggestion of the Arab members."

The membership of the club reached 100 and more, mostly skilled workers, a considerable number being railway workers. Evening classes were organized in Arabic, Hebrew and English. Sports were organized with the help of "Hapoel." A loan fund for Arab workers was set up by the Kupat Milveh Vekhisakhon, with the help of the Jewish Agency; and Kupat Holim began to extend medical aid.

In 1931 trade union groups were formed, comprising carpenters, locksmiths, and drivers. Friendly contact with the Arab lightermen and stevedores was established early in 1932 when the first group of Jewish stevedores began working at the Haifa port. A trade union of Arab bakers employed in German bakeries was also formed.

In 1933 a beginning was made in organizing the workers at the Neshet quarries and also at the Arab-owned cigarette factory.

As soon as any new branch was organized, the

question of working conditions arose, and Arab workers joining the Palestine Labor League at once asked for aid in this matter. As in the case of all workers lacking organizational experience, the Arab worker thought that the tradition of long generations could be wiped out at a single stroke; and that everything could be achieved by merely setting forth demands and declaring a strike. More than once did the Palestine Labor League meet misunderstanding on the part of the workers when it counselled caution and patience, and warned them not to declare strikes impetuously and without careful preparation.

In most cases strikes were called before the League had been given an opportunity to investigate the situation. This was the case at the end of 1932, when the workers at the German bakery in Haifa declared a strike despite the warning of the League. The strike lasted a long time and ended in failure in spite of the efforts of the League, and the moral and material support of the Haifa Labor Council. A characteristic feature of this as of most other Arab strikes was its diversion from a trade to a racial and nationalist issue. In this case the situation was particularly complicated: the employer was a German, the strikers were Christian Arabs, and the strike-breakers were Moslems.

After the failure of the strike the workers were unwilling to return to their previous place of employment and other work had to be found for them. A cooperative bakery was established with the aid of the Histadrut. This bakery employed all the 21 strikers, and closed down only upon the outbreak of the disturbances in 1936.

In contrast to this unsuccessful strike, mention should be made of the strike by the workers of the cigarette factory, referred to above, which was declared after adequate preparation on the part of the Palestine Labor League. Over fifty workers were involved. Negotiations were conducted by the League jointly with the Strike Committee, and after ten days an agreement with the employer was reached. The results of the strike were: reduction of the working day from 11 to 8 hours; increase of wages from 110 to 150 mils (75 cents) for adult workers and from 50 to 80 mils (40 cents) for juveniles.

Towards the end of the same year, one of the largest Arab strikes broke out at Haifa among the Arabs employed by Arab contractors at the quarries of the Neshet Cement factory. The strikers, numbering about 130 men, were all of them from the rural districts of Palestine, and they received a wage of 100 mils (50 cents) for a working day of from 12 to 14 hours. In addition, they were compelled to buy all their provisions at the canteen owned by the contractors which supplied them with goods of inferior quality at higher than market prices. The attitude of the contractor and his foreman towards the workers was distinctly harsh and uncompromising. Immedi-

ately after the strike was declared, the strikers applied to the Haifa branch of the Palestine Labor League for guidance and help.

The League responded by supplying the strikers with food, provided for by funds raised by voluntary contribution from Jewish workers all over Palestine. The strike was ultimately settled in favor of the workers, and as a result their wages were raised by 25 mils per day and their hours of work reduced to nine. The strikers joined the Palestine Labor League *en bloc*, forming a trade union of quarry workers within it.

For ten months following the settlement of the strike the contractor made various attempts to break the trade union of the League; one of these attempts was the employment of about 150 new men affiliated with the Palestine Arab Workers' Society. But all his attempts failed and in the end he locked out all the Arab workers who were members of the League. Seventy Jewish workers employed in a department of the Neshar Cement factory which worked in conjunction with the quarries, thereupon went on strike in sympathy, and the remaining 250 Jewish workers in the factory were also ready to join the strikers. The contractor then suggested that the whole matter should be brought for arbitration before the District Commissioner, who appointed one of the District Officers as arbitrator.

This Government arbitrator made an award in which he stated that many of the demands made by the workers were justified, and should be granted by the contractor. In spite of this, he failed to make it binding on the contractor to recognize the representatives of the Haifa branch of the League who were deputed by the workers to deal with him on their behalf. The workers concerned, as has already been mentioned, were all Arabs from the rural districts, and they were, therefore, inexperienced and ignorant of the means at their disposal for the safeguarding of their interests. The provisions of the award were, therefore, never enforced by the contractor, because the representatives of the League were denied the authority to deal with him on behalf of the workers. Neither did the Government take any steps to see that these provisions were carried out, despite the fact that the award in which they appeared had been drawn up by its own appointed arbitrator.

### Beginning of Activity in Jaffa

Towards the end of 1933 the League commenced activity in Jaffa and the vicinity, prompted by the strike of Arab workers in a leather factory near Jaffa. Twenty-seven out of forty-one workers went on strike. Working conditions at this factory were very bad as was the attitude adopted by the owners and foremen towards the workers. What actually led to the strike was the mistreatment of the workers by one of the owners, who went so far as to thrash the workers and dismiss some of them without justifica-

tion. The workers declared a strike and asked the Histadrut in Tel Aviv to come to their aid. This the Histadrut did, but the strike failed nevertheless on account of the great number of local strikebreakers. The Histadrut helped most of the strikers to find work elsewhere, and three of this factory's workers laid the foundations of a branch of the Palestine Labor League in Jaffa.

At about the same time several groups among the Arab workers at the Jaffa Port began to establish contact with the Executive Committee of the Histadrut. The first was a group of stevedores, who were followed by a group of lightermen. Working conditions at the Jaffa Port were very difficult. Lighter work was in the hands of a few owners, who exploited the boatmen shamefully. The same may be said about the stevedores. The workers turned to Government for aid, but in vain. They then turned to the Histadrut.

After these workers had appealed several times to the Histadrut for help, and a reliable nucleus was available, a branch of the League was established in Jaffa, and in the course of time several hundred workers registered as members. A club was opened, the Kupat Holim started to extend medical aid, first at its clinics in Tel Aviv and later through regular visits paid by a physician to the Club premises. Many canvassing and organizational meetings were also held.

The League's activities led various circles in Jaffa to take counter-measures to undermine the workers' organization. The employers at the Port, assisted by Arab nationalist circles and sympathetic Government officials, started on the one hand to exert pressure and threaten the workers and, on the other hand, to make empty promises. Many workers who were active in the League were discharged, and it proved difficult to find them other suitable employment in Jaffa.

Meanwhile the lawyer of the Histadrut won a case which he had brought on behalf of a port worker against his employer who had to pay the worker what was due to him as compensation for injury according to the law. The outcome of this trial awakened enthusiasm among the workers, and anger and resentment on the part of the employers.

One of the outstanding Arab leaders came or was induced to come from Jerusalem for the express purpose of "rescuing" the workers from the claws of the "Zionist Union"; but to no avail. In spite of the efforts made by influential circles in Jaffa to undermine the work of the League, Arab-Jewish cooperation continued for a considerable period. Some of the workers, on whom exceptionally great pressure was exerted, withdrew from the League; but others remained loyal, withstanding all pressure and maintaining contact with the League and the Histadrut until the outbreak of the disturbances in April, 1936.



## The Iraq Petroleum Company Strike

In 1935 there was a strike, unique in several respects, at the Iraq Petroleum Company's project in Haifa.

The employer was a powerful international company. Nearly 800 workers were involved; they were a very heterogeneous group comprising workers of different trades and different nationalities, with extremely varied interests and demands. In addition, the strike was conducted by two hostile organizations, the Palestine Labor League and the Palestine Arab Workers' Society; for the workers asked for the help of both unions.

The strikers' demands were as follows: withdrawal of a proposal to reduce the wage of workers who had been transferred from building to permanent employment in the plant; eight hour working day for drivers; seven days' annual leave; workers to receive up to thirty days' sick leave a year with half-pay; seven days' notice in the event of dismissal; better food for drivers working in the desert; the right of dismissal to be exercised only by the Employment Officer in charge of the work.

As its primary concern was to protect the professional interests of the strikers, the League exerted all its power in support of this strike. Over LP. 1,000 (\$5,000), obtained from the Histadrut and from the Jewish working public, was expended as aid to the strikers. The Palestine Arab Workers' Society, on the other hand, not only failed to contribute any money whatsoever, but missed no opportunity of exploiting nationalist factors in order to introduce dissension and animosity among the workers. From the very first it disregarded the real interests of the strikers and endeavored to sabotage the strike. Moreover, the skilled workers were incited to disassociate themselves from the unskilled peasants, whereby they would find it far more easy to gain their own end. This had the natural outcome of weakening the spirit of the organization and the resistance of the strikers.

At first only about a hundred of the workers were involved in the strike. Later, however, it spread to include some 600 (all the skilled workers and more especially the drivers). The Company's management began to treat the matter more seriously. Negotiations commenced and the Company appeared to be prepared to concede most of the workers' demands.

On the tenth day of the strike, however, the late Fakhri Nashashibi (one of the leaders of the Arab Opposition Party) came to Haifa and conducted secret negotiations with the Company's managers. While the Arab Palestine Workers' Society played the part of a passive spectator, he, together with a number of the strike leaders, signed an agreement with the Company. This he later produced at a meeting of the strikers which was held in a private cafe. He told the workers that the Company was ready to meet most of their demands provided no

outside organizations appeared on their behalf; and furthermore, that it was prepared to set up a Company Union. Part of the workers went back to work as a result of this while others held out for a few days longer. These, however, likewise soon returned to work, disheartened by their comrades' lack of determination and the behavior of the leaders of the Arab Workers' Society.

Not all the promises were kept. The Company adopted the policy of encouraging dissension and within a short time dissolved the workers' organization which was set up by the Arab Palestine Workers' Society. This Society proceeded to incite the workers against the Jews, in order to provide an outlet for the anger of the members at the treachery of the leaders. It must unhappily be recorded that not a few Arab workers who had been loyally helped by their Jewish colleagues permitted themselves to be influenced by this incitement.

Thus, despite the efforts of the Palestine Labor League and the Histadrut, this strike ended in failure from the organizational and moral point of view.

## The Disturbances (1936-39)

The Palestine Labor League continued its activities during the last disturbances, which lasted over three years. Even during the most difficult times it maintained the contacts which it had established with hundreds of Arab workers.

On May 1, 1936, a fortnight after the outbreak of the disturbances, when there were riots and shooting in other parts of Haifa, over 600 Arab workers participated in the Histadrut May Day gathering at the Amphitheatre. Similar instances, incomprehensible to some, occurred again and again. The May Day celebrations of 1937, 1938, and 1939 were again participated in by hundreds of Arab workers who came to the meetings, marched in the processions, and were present at other gatherings arranged by the Histadrut, despite threats against them.

More than a few Arab workers paid with their lives for their belief in the brotherhood of workers. After the May Day celebration of 1937 two active members of the League were murdered at Balad-esh-Sheikh, and after the 1938 celebration three members were kidnapped and taken away to the hills. Others, particularly port workers, were brought before terrorist tribunals, in the hills. Several of them were sentenced to death, while some were released upon the payment of large ransoms.

The time has not come to publish a detailed account of this involved and tragic period. Part of it, however, deserves special mention: namely, the story of the Haifa port during the disturbances.

The terrorist leaders decided to starve out the country, or rather, the Jewish community; and with this end in view they tried to cut communications, both by land and by sea. Jaffa port was paralyzed,

and great efforts were made to paralyze the Haifa port as well. Delegations of Arab leaders came to Haifa four times (*the leader himself*—Haj Amin-el-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, participating in two such delegations), in order to persuade the port workers to stop working. Persuasion and threats were of no avail, however. The presence of large numbers of Jewish workers engaging in every port activity; the contacts that had been built up in the course of years; the educational and organizational work of the League and the Haifa Labor Council over a prolonged period; all these factors made the efforts of the Arab leaders unavailing. Work at the port was not suspended for a single day throughout the disturbances.

Not only were former contacts maintained, but new ones were actually established during the very period of the disturbances. The League then came into touch with the Druzes in Palestine and the neighboring countries. These contacts have since been developed and strengthened and promise to be even more valuable in the future.

During the worst days of the disturbances the League undertook the difficult task of keeping the Arab masses informed of the real state of affairs. The League issued a number of circulars and pamphlets informing the Arabs of the falsity of the nationalist propaganda, and the harm and suffering which were likely to fall upon the Arab community, the Arab worker, and the peasant through this unnecessary conflict between the two peoples inhabiting Palestine.

In March, 1937, at the very height of the riots, when things seemed to be at their blackest, the Histadrut commenced publication of the Arab newspaper *Hakikat-el-Am'r*. The aim of this organ was to pave the way towards an understanding and rapprochement between the workers of the two communities. The publication of an Arab newspaper at such a time and—what was even more difficult and vastly more dangerous—its distribution among the Arab workers in town and village, called for great devotion and faith in the righteousness and ultimate victory of that course. There were members who risked their lives more than once in order to distribute the paper, which reached the most remote and perilous spots.

In this same year (1937) the Jaffa Customs porters approached the Histadrut with a request to help them in their strike against their employer. This employer had been appointed by the Customs authorities and was responsible for the execution of the portage work in all the Customs offices in Palestine. All the Histadrut's efforts to obtain Government's agreement to the organization of these porters in a cooperative which would be responsible for the execution of the work were fruitless, in spite of the fact that the experience which the porters had

acquired during many years of teamwork in this place was adequate guarantee for the success of the cooperative.

### During the War

The outbreak of war and the cessation of the disturbances in Palestine brought about a change in the conditions governing work among the Arabs. The political situation altered and something like equanimity was restored. Even before the outbreak of war some of the agitators had been expelled from Palestine. Others now fled and found refuge in neighboring lands, while certain of them went into hiding in Palestine itself.

The second and third years of the war saw an improvement in local economic conditions. Camps for Jewish and Arab workmen were set up in connection with the large-scale works which had to be undertaken. Their life in proximity to one another led to the cementing of relations and offered new opportunities for close and constant cooperation. As a consequence the membership of the League increased. The number of active members in the Arab section is now 1,040; these include 669 unskilled workers, 310 skilled, 45 clerks and 16 women workers. Many of these, more particularly the clerks and skilled workers, are townfolk, the rest, mainly unskilled workers, are villagers who come to town for seasonal work, later returning to their villages and farms.

It would, however, be incorrect to assess the achievements of the Histadrut in this field solely on the basis of the number of Arab workers who have been organized. The activities of the Palestine Labor League are not confined to these 1,040 members alone. Its trade union activities encompass another 2,500-3,000 Arab workers in the Army camps in Haifa. The memorandum submitted to the military authorities in the summer of 1942, setting out the needs of the workers at the military camps as regards improvement of working conditions, increase of basic wages and payment of cost-of-living allowances, was signed by 2,100 Arab and 2,300 Jewish workers in the Haifa district. The Arab workers and their representatives take an active part in the General Meetings held at places of work, and in the conferences held by the committees of military camp workers. This also applies in other labor camps where Jews and Arabs work side by side.

But this in itself is not the whole story. The influence exerted by the League on tens of thousands of Arabs, workers and peasants, is far greater than can be indicated by any mere counting of heads or active members. The fact of the League's existence in spite of the tempests of animosity which have raged repeatedly in this country proves that the roots of Arab-Jewish labor cooperation have gone deep and are firmly set. The influence of the Palestine Labor League may not yet be immediately obvious but its very existence nevertheless encourages the infiltra-

tion and adoption of a new and, to Western eyes, fuller conception of life. For instance, the fact that 16 Arab women members already belong to this bi-national trade union is particularly noteworthy. It is the first time in the history of Palestine and maybe in that of the Arab world as a whole, that Arab women have dared to break the shackles of age-old tradition by participating in a largely male association; particularly one so dynamic in nature as a labor organization. There can be no better evidence of the influence which the League enjoys in unexpected quarters, and of the possibilities which it offers for the future unfolding of individuality in this country.

### Status of Arab Workers In and Outside Palestine

Anyone familiar with the status of Arab workers, knows the vast difference between the economic and social conditions of those in Palestine and those of the neighboring countries.

The *wage level* of the Arab worker in Palestine is far higher than that of the Arab worker in any neighboring country, not excluding wealthy Egypt. This is seen at a glance from the standard daily wage rate of Arab workers in these countries:

	UNSKILLED WORKER <i>Palestine mils</i>	SKILLED WORKER <i>Palestine mils</i>
Palestine .....	220-250	350-600
Egypt* .....	30- 50	70-200
Syria* .....	80-100	150-300
Iraq* .....	50	70-200

\* Adjusted to Palestine currency.

*Working Hours.* This daily wage in Palestine is calculated on a basis of an 8 hour day. In the other countries the working day is 10-14 hours. In Palestine workers receive pay for overtime but this is not the case in the neighboring countries where the eight hour day does not exist.

The above wage rates are those paid in wartime and are, of course, higher than pre-war rates on account of the rise in commodity prices. But the rise in the cost of living in Syria and Iraq has not been less than that in the Arab sector in Palestine, and for certain commodities has even been greater.

*Working Conditions.* Here too, there is a great difference between Arab workers in Palestine and in the neighboring countries. Thousands of Arab workers in Palestine, employed by the Railways, Post, and Telegraph, the Petroleum Companies, the municipalities of Haifa and Jerusalem, etc., receive 6-8 days' annual leave with pay and are entitled to 30 days'

sick leave a year on half pay; something not even dreamt of by Arab workers in the neighboring countries.

The beginnings of *Social Legislation* in Palestine (industrial accident insurance, protection of juvenile and women workers), while still far from satisfactory by Western standards, have come as a miracle to the Arab workers; nor a Heaven-sent miracle, however, but the outcome of years of effort invested by the Jewish workers and their Federation.

These are principally economic achievements. What is the social aspect? The social status of Arab workers in Palestine has undergone a radical change during the twenty-two years that the Histadrut has been in existence. It is no exaggeration to state that Arab workers in Palestine—the urban workers at least, have emerged from serfdom to liberty.

The Arab workers, particularly the artisans, have acquired standing in society during these years; they have begun to read and write and to participate in social and political life, in so far as the latter exists within the Arab community. It may be said that the Arab workers in Palestine, and particularly those living in a mixed town or in proximity to Jewish workers, have become aware of their value to society, and will no longer accept treatment as serfs.

This should be compared with the social status of Arab workers in the neighboring countries. In independent Iraq the workers are described as "coolies," a nickname which is indicative of their economic position and social standing. Nor are the effendis, the employers and the contractors alone in regarding the workers as "coolies." The workers themselves are reconciled to the name and to all it implies, and have not yet realized that it is possible for them to take steps to improve their position.

In Egypt, the position of the Arab workers (except within certain parts of Alexandria) is scarcely better than in Iraq. And the same is largely true of Syria.

In the Lebanon and particularly in Beirut, the status of certain workers is somewhat better from the social point of view. But here too, this applies only to a small group of workers, including employees of the electric company and the tramways, drivers, and waiters. The status even of these "fortunate" ones, however, is by no means comparable to the position which has already been attained by average Arab workers in Palestine.

The influence of the Histadrut on the position and the life of the Arab workers in Palestine was aptly expressed by a veteran member of the Palestine Labor League who declared at a meeting of Arab workers: "Just as the sun, unbidden, spreads light and warmth so the Histadrut has spread light and warmth to the Arab workers by the very fact of its existence."