

CLASS STRUGGLE IN PALESTINE

By Eliahu Goshanski

PALESTINE experienced a very significant capitalist development during the war years. Industrial production, as well as the number of workers, more than doubled. Foreign monopolies increased their control. Workers found a new field of employment in the military camps which employed about 45,000 of them, second in size only to industrial production which employed about 60,000. The government has thus become the largest single employer. The larger of the local industrial concerns have united in cartels tied up with British and American monopolies. They are very often transformed into subsidiaries of foreign concerns. The workers changed during this process of concentration of capital from a decentralized group working in small shops into a more concentrated group, a working class of factory centers, of oil refineries and of military camps.

The government supported "free" speculation by tolerating and in actuality supporting the black market; by helping the employers reduce real wages with the aid of a fictitious price-index (the official index shows an increase of 270 per cent when it is in reality up 400 per cent). This index-politics aided the colonial administration as an employer. It also helped carry out the administration's general imperialist plan of raising the prices of products, raw materials, and transport, in order to establish profitable markets and to assure a more favorable competitive basis for its own industrial production and exports. As a result of such policies, the poverty of the masses increased in proportion to the profits of the capitalists, and of necessity led to a constant sharpening of the class contradictions and antagonisms in the country.

Figures on the strikes during the war years give a very clear picture of the development of the class struggle. The war naturally made for fewer strikes. The workers understood their responsibilities. In those shops which produced materials for the front, there were hardly any strikes at all. But the government, as well as local profiteers, advanced their own black market and speculative interests by taking

advantage of the readiness of workers to sacrifice their interests for the sake of winning the war. This, too, helped strengthen class contradictions.

As the capitalist development increased, strikes began to take place more regularly and the class consciousness behind these strikes deepened. In 1941, 64 per cent of the strikes were for wage increases. Only 36 per cent carried the demand for collective bargaining, and for the improvement of social and sanitary conditions. In 1944, however, 60 per cent of the strikes carried these latter demands. And in 1946, 100 per cent, in other words, all of the strikes tied up their wage increase demands with social demands.

Basis for Political Struggle

The importance of the demands for collective bargaining and for better social conditions lies in the fact that they create a precedent and a basis of struggle for social legislation, and prepare the working class for struggle for highly important political changes in the life of the country. If we add to this the fact that in the last strike of 35,000 government workers, the first demand of the railway workers was for social legislation, we can already draw the conclusion that this development is becoming more than ripe. The working class in Palestine has reached a new and higher level of class consciousness and class struggle. This creates a new situation in relation to the political struggle. The struggle for labor and social legislation is one of the most important problems of our working class.

During the war years, the working class of Palestine had very little understanding of the necessity of tying up its economic demands with political ones. In contrast to this, the government understood quite well the relationship between the two and in practice acted upon it by issuing reactionary laws directed against the working class. An example was its law prohibiting strikes. But despite this law, hundreds of strikes in non-war industries took place, none of which, however, put forward the political demand for the abolition of this law.

In a colonial country, in an environment where imperialism constantly incites hatred between peoples, in a country of national and social oppression of both Jews and Arabs,

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it is particularly important for the workers to struggle for a minimum wage, for decent working conditions and for social rights. The imperialist government and its allies both among the Jewish capitalists and the Arab feudal clique have learned very well how to use the "divide and rule" technique as a method of oppression of the working class. Their plan consisted of dividing one section of the working class from the other in order to prevent labor unity and united struggle of the working class as a whole against the system of imperialist and capitalist oppression. The reactionary orientation of the Histadruth (Jewish Federation of Labor) caused this organization to put forth a program of *Kibush Avodah* (conquering the spheres of labor for Jewish workers alone) and *Totzeret Ivrit* (the campaign to "buy Jewish goods") instead of putting forward the slogan of Arab-Jewish unity. On the other hand, the reactionary leaders of a section of the Arab trade union movement put forward the same type of program through its campaign to boycott Jewish goods. These policies of competition and factional struggle instead of united action against the government and the capitalists made possible the rejection by the reactionary forces of demands for decent social conditions and for social legislation, and the maintenance of low wages, free speculation and a blooming black market.

Conditions of Palestine Working Class

The conditions of the working class in our country after the war can best be illustrated by the following figures: The basic wage in the factories rose by 26 per cent in comparison with the prosperity year of 1935, and by 50 per cent in comparison with the crisis year of 1937. Together with the special increases granted during the course of the war, the increase amounted to 300 per cent in comparison with 1937. If, however, we take into account the actual price-index which, as we pointed out before, stood at 400 per cent, it means that the standard of living of the workers was actually lowered. But to this must be added another fact, namely, that the nominal increase in wages did not come by itself. It came as a result of long and bitter strikes which at times lasted for a half year or more.

This great strike wave brought about a very decided change in the relations between the workers and the employers. The system of arbitration as the dominant method of deciding labor problems was liquidated. In contrast to 1940, when the majority of the conflicts were turned over to arbitration, in 1944 only 17 per cent of the disputes were turned over to arbitration. In 85 cases out of a hundred, the workers went out on strike. It is also important to note that whereas in the arbitration cases 65 per cent of them were decided in favor of the employers, 92 per cent of the man days spent on strike brought victory for the workers. This helped to destroy the faith of the workers in arbitration.

The workers drew proper lessons from these experiences. Thus, for example, the workers in the diamond industry carried through six general and more than one hundred

local strikes in the last six years. That is why they are the only ones in Palestine to have an industry-wide collective agreement and their wages are higher than in any other industry. The same results are being approximated in the textile industry. Where strikes have taken place conditions have become much better. These experiences have taught the working class many lessons and have led them on the path of class struggle in the trade union movement.

The situation among the government workers was a much more difficult one. Among the workers in military camps and in the foreign monopolies wages did not change. The war increases were tied to the official index. The workers in the military camps did not receive their full war increase even on the basis of the official index until 1945, while other government workers have to date not yet received their full increase. In these places the "divide and rule" principles and the isolationist position of the Histadruth and of the right wing of the Arab trade unions have dominated for many years. A classic example of this is the strike of the workers in the military camps in 1943 which was broken because of the separatist approach of the Jewish and Arab working class leaders. Because of this defeat, the struggles of the military camps and government workers have been set back many years.

In the long run, the really basic and common interests of the Jewish and Arab workers had to defeat the imperialist intrigues and the separatist ideologies of the opportunistic Jewish and Arab working class leaders. The tremendous needs of the government workers; the example of the industrial workers; the new winds which began to blow across the country after the anti-fascist struggle; the strike wave in the United States, in England, in India, in Syria and in Egypt; the creation of the new world trade union federation with the participation of the Soviet trade unions—all these led to important changes in the consciousness of the masses. After the joint strike of the Jewish and Arab railway workers and postal workers in 1944 and the workers of the military camps near Tel Aviv, there took place in 1945 the tremendous general strike of government workers—of the ports, railways, telephone, telegraph and radio.

Rise of Arab-Jewish Unity

In our country, 1946 began as a year of increased class struggle. The first months of the year brought a number of big strikes: the Arab workers of the "Nur" factory, workers in the city administration of Tel Aviv and the huge strike of government workers. The Palestine working class during the first four months of the year recorded strikes for over a half million man days, double the whole year of 1944, which up until now was the record year.

Three things are characteristic of the new developments in the strike wave of 1946:

1. The spread of the strike wave from the factories to government installations, thus developing a more general country-wide character.
2. The demand not only for wage increases and for better social conditions, but also for labor legislation. As a result,

there is beginning to develop the proper synthesis between economic and political demands.

3. Jewish and Arab workers striking together against the colonial administration. The strikes are being supported by the broad masses of both the Jewish and the Arab peoples. As a result, this strike-wave is being turned into the vanguard movement of the anti-imperialist struggle.

In order to correctly estimate the significance of the latest strike it is important to consider the political situation in our country.

The Anglo-American Commission, under the pretext of investigating and solving the refugee question, really came to help realize the imperialist aim of transforming Palestine into a military base of British and American imperialism, directed against the independence movement from Egypt to India, as well as against the Soviet Union. This Commission did everything in its power to prove the impossibility of peaceful relations between Jews and Arabs, and the necessity for Anglo-American military might to "keep the peace" in the old imperialist way. The Commission did everything it could with the aid of the Arab and Jewish

chauvinist leadership to spread national hatred. Both David Ben Gurion, head of the Histadruth, and Jamal Hussein, head of the Arab Higher Committee, declared that there was deep-rooted antagonisms between Arabs and Jews.

United Action

At that very moment, 35,000 Arab and Jewish workers were out on strike and were marching through the streets of Haifa with the slogan, "United we will win." Under the same slogan, Jewish and Arab workers demonstrated in Jerusalem and were warmly greeted by both the Jewish and Arab communities. A delegation of the demonstrators turned over to the government a list of demands which included the demand for labor legislation. The demonstrations were carried on under the slogan, "Long live the unity of the Jewish and Arab workers!"

In Tel Aviv, in Histadruth House, at a meeting of Arab postal workers a storm of applause greeted the declaration, "Our enemy is one—imperialism, which wishes to split our ranks. But if we will be united, we will win!"