
Israeli trade unions - no help for Palestinian workers

The last edition carried articles on Palestinian trade unions. In this edition, MARTY ROSENBLUTH looks at the Israeli trade union federation Histadrut's attitudes towards Palestinian workers and their unions. ⁺

Two years ago, workers at the Berman Bakery in Jerusalem walked out in protest over poor pay and conditions. All 35 were from the West Bank and were registered with Israeli government labour exchanges. Some had been at the bakery for several years. Yet they were making one-third of the wages paid to an Israeli for the same job. They complained to the plant's workers' committee but the union did nothing. Haim Maman, spokesperson for the Histadrut, the General Federation of Workers in Israel, told them, "We have no commit-

ment to West Bank workers".

Legally, all workers in Israel, regardless of nationality, are covered by the contracts reached between the Histadrut federation and employers. All doing the same job should be paid the same wage. In reality, this rarely happens. According to Professor Michal Shaleve, a researcher at the Hebrew University, had the Palestinian workers at Berman's earned what was due to them under the legally binding collective agreement for the bakery industry, their wages would have risen three-fold.

⁺ This article is taken from *International Labour Reports/Issue 24/November-December 1987*

Taxation

Statements from the Histadrut on the status of workers from the Occupied Territories are contradictory. In a recent interview in 'Labour in Israel', the federations' English-language magazine largely aimed at foreign trade unions, General Secretary Israel Kessar tried to suggest that it is the Israeli government which stands in the way of the Histadrut organising workers from the Occupied Territories. A few years earlier, however, Kessar's predecessor Yerusham Meshel wrote in a letter to foreign trade unionists, "We have never attempted to formally organise these workers as Histadrut members in order to avoid the impression that we support the annexation of the administered (sic) territories".

Both these statements are misleading. All West Bank and Gaza workers who work through government labour exchanges pay a fee to the Histadrut. The government deducts an "organisation tax" of 1% from their wages and gives it to the Histadrut to provide "trade union protection". The Histadrut claims to be unable to

give such protection as it lacks access to the necessary records. The result is that collective agreements go unmonitored and employers benefit by paying discriminatory wages.

Without representation

Although they pay dues to the Histadrut, West Bank and Gazan workers are not entitled to vote in union elections, nor to take part in local workers' councils. They are even denied observer status on



Israeli troops versus the Palestinian people

plant workers' committees.

"We go to the labour office with a problem and they say that we should go to the Histadrut. We go to the Histadrut and they say we should go to the labour office", complains a worker from Gaza in a

food-processing factory near Tel Aviv. "We had a problem in our plant. Overtime hours weren't showing up on our wage receipts. The boss said the money was going for deductions. When we asked 'what deductions?', he said 'go and complain to the Histadrut". We went to the plant committee, to the regional works council and to the labour office. Nothing. Nobody helped us."

Histadrut organisations have supported, and sometimes been responsible, for outright hostility towards Palestinian workers. In 1984 when Jewish workers at the Dimona Textile factory were laid off, the Histadrut workers' council demanded that the company fire all the Palestinian workers before any Jews. Mordechai Amster, at the time head of both the Construction Workers' Union and the Histadrut committee formed to press the government into giving the union 'control' over the workers of the Occupied Territories, demanded that "building workers from the Territories will be the first to be fired".

In July of this year, the Histadrut Labour Concil in Kiryat Gat threatened a general strike when a Palestinian from Gaza tried to buy a building materials factory in the town. The Chairman of the factory's Histadrut workers' committee denied that the workers' motives were racist but said, "We will not allow a Jewish factory to come under ownership of an Arab from the Territories".

Millions a year

The Histadrut is making moves to organise Palestinian workers, but many believe this is only to get control of their wage deductions. Money worth millions of US dollars a year is taken from Palestinian wages by the Israeli Labour Ministry for pensions, insurance and other benefits. Shlomo Ben Yona, an Histadrut Executive Council member critical of his federation, says that shifts in industries like construction towards employing Palestinians, whose deductions go to the government, rather than Jewish workers, whose deductions go to the Histadrut, have put Histadrut pension funds into difficulties. "When the Histadrut talks about 'organising' Palestinian workers," Ben Yona says, "they only want to organise their money."

The Histadrut is currently arguing for a trial year in which its shopstewards and labour councils would collect the deductions from the legal workers, and try to organise the unregistered workers. As an Israeli journalist recently stated, "The issue is wrapped in some paternal socialist concern, but at its core are the enormous amounts of money which flow into the Israeli Finance Ministry's Treasury".

'Front organisations'

While the Histadrut denounces attacks on Solidarnosc in Poland

and unions in South Africa, it keeps silent about the severe harassment by the Israeli military authorities of Palestinian unions. In a recent letter to a British union which had enquired about the town arrest order imposed on Shehadeh al-Minawi, a prominent Palestinian union leader, the Histadrut claimed that such measures were justified because "trade unions in the West Bank have been 'trade unions' only as a cover for illicit activities against Israel".

The letter alleged that Minawi is coordinator for the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in Nablus.

In a briefing sent to all British unions, the Histadrut has charged the Palestinian unions are 'front' organisations "who do little if anything for the welfare of workers". The unions, it says, are "bases for hostile terrorist actions". No evidence to support these allegations is offered. Evidence of the welfare work done by Palestinian unions is ignored.

Histadrut - Israel's second largest employer

The Histadrut proudly boasts that it has never been "just another trade union federation". It is in fact the second largest employer in Israel after the government, employing almost a quarter of the total Israel workforce. Amongst others, the federation owns Israel's largest construction company, Solel Boneh, the Egged and Dan bus companies, and Koor Industrial Holding Company which has some 130 industrial companies in Israel and abroad, and trading offices in New York, Amsterdam and Hong Kong.

Two of Koor Industries subsidiaries are Soltam and Tadiran. Soltam produces sophisticated weapons of war such as cannons and mortars. Tadiran, jointly owned with US General Telephone and Electronics International, specialises in military electronics, including army communications and night-fighting equipment.

Koor and South Africa

Koor's Director-General, Yeshayahu Gavish, said in 1982: "Since we produce arms, we sell them to whoever will buy them." Koor customers are believed to include South Africa, Taiwan, Indonesia, Iran, and repressive regimes in South America such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Chile and Ecuador.

Koor maintains a permanent representative in South Africa. They

Critics

The Histadrut nevertheless manages to present a progressive image abroad. The Brussels-based International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and many of its affiliates for example, have continued to liaise with the Histadrut on violations of the rights of Palestinian workers and unions. This could be compared to addressing complaints of attacks against Solidanorsc to the

government-sponsored unions in Poland.

But the Histadrut is coming under criticism, at home and abroad, particularly for its relationship with South Africa. It claims to oppose apartheid and has recently announced it is cutting all commercial links with the Botha regime. However, the federation has built up such industrial and trading ties with the South African government (see box) that true disengagement

co-own Iskoor Steel with Iscor, which is controlled by the South African government. This factory, outside Tel Aviv in Israel, produces half of Israel's steel needs, using iron from South Africa. Some of the refined steel goes to European markets under the label 'Made in Israel', in order to beat sanctions.

Koor and the Palestinians

The Histadrut claims that it does not support the annexation of the West Bank and Gaza, but the Solel Boneh company and affiliates have been heavily involved in the construction of Jewish settlements there since the mid-1970s. According to Histadrut itself, Solel Boneh has built over one-quarter of the Jewish settlements on the West Bank. Such settlements are illegal under international laws governing occupation.

In 1983 a small group of Histadrut members tried to block further construction. They brought the issue to a vote in the Executive Committees of the Israeli Labour Party and the Histadrut, but were defeated. Histadrut leaders argued that if they did not build the settlements, someone else would. Government subsidies of the construction contracts in the territories were simply too lucrative for the federation to pass up.

While many Histadrut-owned industries are run as cooperatives, Palestinians are barred from being co-operative members and are employed only as day labourers.

would be extremely difficult.

The Histadrut has called on the South African government to "lift restrictions against Black African leaders" and free trade union detainees, but its closest relationship appears to be with Zulu leader Gatsha Buthelezi, recently hosted by Histadrut's Afro-Asian Institute. Many members of UWUSA, which is linked to Inkatha, have received training from the Histadrut.

The Histadrut has close links with rightwing US organisations and

has received grants from President Reagan's National Endowment for Democracy Fund for its Latin-America Centre's work abroad. But elsewhere in Britain for example, international support for the federation is weakening. Clearly, Palestinian unions hope that as more unions overseas learn about what Histadrut is doing in the Occupied Territories, support for the West Bank and Gaza trade unions will increase.