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THE HISTADRUT—ISRAEL'S GENERAL TRADE UNION FEDERATION

by Isaac Cohen

In Labor Center Reporter 120 (June 1984), Brauer analyzed the economic and collective bargaining aspects of the labor movement in Israel. This article covers social and historical aspects of Israel's trade union federation, and in particular looks at the treatment of Palestinian workers.

Early History—From 1920 to 1966, the Histadrut was called “The General Federation of Jewish Workers in the Land of Israel.” In 1966, the word “Jewish” was omitted from its official title. From the 1920s through the 1950s, Arab Palestinians were officially prohibited from joining the Histadrut. In 1959, Arab workers were admitted for the first time as full members of the Histadrut.

From the outset, the Histadrut made Zionist interests—the establishment of an exclusive Jewish state—its primary concern, while its trade union functions occupied a secondary place. In putting “Jewish interests” before “labor interests,” the Histadrut not only excluded Arab workers from its ranks but also engaged in a wide variety of non-union activities which were aimed at the objective of gaining Jewish monopolistic control over the economy as well as the land of Palestine. To do so the Histadrut carried on a bitter struggle for the “socialist Zionist” principle according to which Jewish firms and farms would hire only Jewish workers. Characteristically, Jewish employers who hired Arab workers were subject to extensive and often violent picketing by the Histadrut. Likewise, the Histadrut directed a massive campaign to promote the sale of “Jewish produce” (products of Jewish firms) by organizing boycotts of Arab goods.

To raise the funds necessary for implementing these policies, Histadrut members had to pay two compulsory levies: “For Jewish Labor,” and “For Jewish Produce.” Furthermore, through its control of the kibbutzim and moshavim (collective and cooperative settlements) the Histadrut actively participated in the “Conquest of the Land”—the principle according to which land purchased from Arab peasants and landowners would remain forever in Jewish hands. Finally, the Histadrut built up a network of enterprises that operated in all spheres of economic activity—marketing, commerce, construction, banking, insurance, and manufacturing—and provided social services such as health insurance, cooperative housing, training programs and so on. Since the Histadrut was not just a trade union, but was also the largest employer in Palestine, after the government, its actions greatly affected the labor market and economy.

After the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the Histadrut retained its central position as “a state within a state.” Despite the fact that about 160,000 Arab Palestinians had become Israeli citizens, they remained excluded from the Histadrut. In the 1950s, in order to preserve available jobs for new Jewish immigrants, the Histadrut restricted the entry of Arab workers into the labor market through its control of all Israel's labor exchanges, and through the use of lobbying, picketing and roadblocks. Typically, Histadrut officials would call for the dismissal of Arab workers claiming they constituted “unorganized labor.”

Treatment of Arab Workers—After the Histadrut opened its ranks to Arab members in 1959, many joined. Today Arab workers make up more than 10% of its membership. The Histadrut nonetheless continued to practice discrimination against Arabs in at least three areas.

1) The Histadrut does not deal with Arab workers directly but through a special “Arab Department.” According to a 1974 interview with the director of the Arab Department, the Histadrut leadership has rejected the industrialization of Arab populated areas within Israel, as a policy goal. Of the Histadrut's thousands of enterprises (which employ perhaps 25% of Israel's labor force), not a single one was located in an Arab village or town in 1977, and the situation today is very much the same.



2) It has been for some time the official policy of the Histadrut branch in Tel-Aviv to prevent the election of Arab members to local union offices (or "workers councils"). "They (Arab members) must receive full rights," reported a Histadrut representative in 1983, "but they cannot represent workers."

3) Some 90,000 non-citizen Arab Palestinians who come daily to work in Israel from the territories conquered by Israel in 1967 are subject to the worst forms of discrimination and ill treatment. For one thing, they are unorganized and the Histadrut--the only trade union body in Israel--does not deal with non-citizens. For another, they are deprived of social security, unemployment compensation and other insurance benefits. About 30,000 Palestinian workers from the occupied territories are now employed in construction within Israel, and their wages are 30% lower (not including benefits) than those of Jewish construction workers, who are all members of the Histadrut. With the rising unemployment rate in Israel, the Secretary of the Histadrut affiliated Union of Construction Workers announced recently that "just as 'guest workers' in Western Europe are first fired during times of crisis, so would be the case in Israel." But in Israel, unlike Europe, Palestinian workers from the occupied territories are not even guests. They are not permitted to spend the night in Israel. To save the cost of shipping workers back and forth, some employers, including the Histadrut, have kept them during the night locked behind barbed wire under armed guard in factory detention camps.

Labor relations, it should be clear, represent only one area of the Histadrut's activities. International trade relations is another field which deserves attention. Enterprises (especially the arms industry) owned by the Histadrut have conducted business deals in over forty countries which are close allies of Israel, including South Africa. The largest share of Israeli foreign trade with South Africa is in the hands of Koor --a Histadrut-controlled company. Koor annually carries out export deals in South Africa for tens of millions of dollars. For political reasons, however, ownership is registered to individuals, not to the firm's real name. Similarly, Sultan Enterprises which is owned by the Histadrut's Koor had been a major supplier of arms to the Shah of Iran. The Histadrut's giant construction company built roads and military installations in several Asian countries and carried out settlement projects in the occupied West Bank. Histadrut firms have recently operated stone quarries in Lebanon supplying cut stone to the Israeli occupying forces.

The Histadrut and the AFL-CIO--For the past few decades organized labor in this country has given Israel unqualified support partly because of close ties with the Histadrut, and partly because Israel has always been a strong U.S. ally. These two reasons, of course, are interrelated. To give a notable example, the Afro-Asian Institute formed by the Histadrut in 1960 to train union leaders in third world countries was financed by the AFL-CIO. Israel's role as a "third country" through which the Free World could channel aid to many African and Asian nations was highly appreciated by George Meany who said: "The Histadrut is a national center which has worked for the cause of democracy and liberty in the free world particularly in Asia and Africa, through the intermediary of its Afro-Asian Institute." Soon after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which caused massive destruction through the bombing of civilian populations and resulted in tens of thousands of casualties, the AFL-CIO announced: "THE AFL-CIO IS NOT NEUTRAL. WE SUPPORT ISRAEL." (*New York Times*, August 15, 1982). An Ad-Hoc Committee of Trade Unionists to Oppose the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon was formed three weeks later. In keeping with its longstanding policy, the AFL-CIO in its national convention in Miami last year reaffirmed its strong support of Israel, of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and, above all of the Histadrut.

The interests of the American labor movement lie in the establishment of a truly democratic and peaceful foreign policy, with justice and equal rights for all workers throughout the world. A condemnation of the Histadrut's discriminatory treatment of Arab workers and a call for an end to the Israeli union federation's support for settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, which inhibit the establishment of a Palestinian state, would be a good start on the road to such a policy. As a first step, the labor movement should at least be willing to sponsor discussion of the Arab-Israeli conflict with all points of view represented.

--Isaac Cohen

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