

# Arab Worker and the Histadrut

• by S. Zemach

WHEN a movement must endure what we are now living through in Palestine, it is only natural that the weak, the uncertain, the overwise and secretly malicious should step forward and begin to give advice, to propose reforms, to pick flaws, to insult us and give false information about us, and to steal a sidewise look at us, saying "Well, *we* (the wisecracks, who were never caught in error) foresaw this, we told you so." Into this confusion of feelings and thoughts, I should like to bring a bit of clarity and find some way for an understanding among all our friends in America who are called upon to defend what has been created and what is still to be created in Palestine.

The Histadrut is frequently attacked by the extreme left and the extreme right and even from within because it is so unyielding in demanding for itself all the Jewish work in the land. It is said that such a demand is un-Socialist, unjustified and politically unwise. "If you in Palestine fight against the Arab worker", they say, "and drive him away from his job by force, then you are really what your enemies call you—an ultra-nationalistic movement, and the Arabs are right in protesting and attacking you in order to defend themselves. They are struggling for the bit of bread which you want to tear away from them. You yourselves are to blame for a situation which has been created in the land. You squabble over a few days work in an orchard, post pickets, stir up trouble that is tactless, aggressive, petty and short-sighted. You give the impression of begrudging the miserable, hungry Arab his only chance to exist—the free access to work."

"And when at the same time you continually preach social justice, lofty humane ideals, what wonder that impartial public opinion hears you with suspicion? And what wonder that the Arabs do not trust you and regard you as enemies and dangerous competitors? You don't let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. You preach one thing and practice the reverse. You speak about proletarian solidarity and ask for the sympathy and support of international labor. But in your own home you post pickets against Arab workers and drive them out of their jobs. You have segregated yourself like a sect in your Histadrut and refuse to admit the Arab who asks the grace of working together with you in peaceful and friendly fashion. You are dishonest, and therefore do not be astonished if they fear you and fight against you. And this is only the beginning. Now you are still weak and few in number.

How will you be when you achieve your desire and exceed the Arabs, in number?"

A simple Jew listening to these charges loses himself. He begins to think the Arabs are right. "I would do the same in their place. If the Histadrut uses such methods, then there is a real danger. There must be something wrong in Palestine. We are acting unjustly there. We have gone a bit too far. We may be slightly hasty, or childish, or thoughtless, even incautious, but certainly not dishonest. We cannot and must not continue further in the same way."

Listening to this line of thought—like a song which begins with a false note and continues *crescendo*, rapidly becoming falser and falser, one stands by almost helpless. Just what has happened? How is it possible to distort and confuse so simple, logical and straightforward an idea? So plain and inevitable a necessity as our "conquest of labor?" Have the hundred thousand Jewish workers in Palestine really lost their senses? Have they then really embroiled themselves in a struggle with the Arab worker and segregated themselves in their Histadrut in opposition to all logic and justice?

Let us see just what "the conquest of labor" (*Kibbush Haavoda*) is?

It is the principle that all opportunities for work which are being created in the Jewish economy of Palestine by Jewish national energy must belong to the Jewish worker: these chances must be utilized for the single purpose of removing as many Jews as possible from the captivity of Poland, Germany and Roumania and making it economically possible for them to settle in Palestine. To interpret:

1. The principle has nothing to do with Arabs. It is concerned with new jobs which are created by Jewish Zionist activity.

2. The problem of the conquest of labor is an inner-Jewish problem. The discussion is between ourselves. We ask the following question: What should be the duty of Jewish capital and enterprise which enters Palestine? Should we consider this immigration a private matter which concerns the capitalist alone, or should the capitalist class of the Jewish people subordinate itself to the general Zionist aim, which is to increase and expand the productive and laboring Jewish community in Palestine?

3. We do not consider Jewish life in Palestine as forming a static closed society like, for instance, the Belgian or the German economy. We say that the economy of Eretz Israel is still being created,

and built, and that we Jews are the factor building all this with the express aim of founding a National Home for the working Jewish people. The Histadrut is the chief instrument, the greatest executive force in this national economic process. Its function is to productivize Jewish life in Palestine.

Accepting this point of view, the Histadrut has adopted a certain program whose purpose is to regulate its activity. The program deals with the Arab worker on the following terms:

"Considering the special functions which the Histadrut is called upon to perform in this country, it is necessary that Arab workers organize a separate national section and carry on their work autonomously and freely, in a manner suited to their special needs and interests."

The two national sections, the Jewish and Arab, are united in a common directing body (*Brit Poale Eretz Israel*). We should like to know how matters could be arranged in any other way. On the one hand there is a stable social organism, the Arab working class; on the other hand, there is a mobile, dynamic social organism, whose chief task is not to remain what it is but to become what it is not (to transform the Jewish masses and young people into laborers.) This organism has, then, pioneering tasks. How could these two very different social organisms be contained in one organization? Shall we send Arab workers to drain swamps for us in the Huleh Valley? The Histadrut will send its comrades there regardless of the difficult and dangerous conditions. Would it be proletarian and honest to send Arab workers there too? Would not such action, in time, take on the morally corrupt character of exploiting the primitive Arab worker, not for his own needs and uses, but for purposes in which he personally is only indirectly interested.

Let us take a second example:

In order to create new chances of work for Jews, the Histadrut established a society named "Yakhin". This organization recruits members outside of Palestine. Suppose that "Yakhin" has succeeded in organizing a group of members in America for this purpose and is about to plant 800 dunam of orchards for them. Thus jobs for 100 new workers are created. On this basis the Histadrut demands 100 new certificates of the Palestine government for its comrades in Poland, who have spent a number of years in *hakshara* (training farms) organized and directed by the Histadrut. At the same time, however, a number of soap factories in Nablus find themselves in a bad condition, a condition which we did not create. The factories are primitive and the goods are not fit to stand competition. For this reason 100 Arab workers lose their jobs in Nablus. Suppose Arab workers are in the same mixed union with us. They demand from "Yakhin" the hun-

dred jobs which have been created for a very definite purpose. We must satisfy the demand of our Arab comrades. We will not demand any certificates. Our comrades in the *hakshara* places won't come to Palestine. It is clear that the matter is no so simple. The policy has brought us to an absurd conclusion.

For we have made a mistake in principle. The Histadrut is not only a "union". To be sure, the Histadrut is a union too, but the duties of the Histadrut are much higher and broader than merely to improve conditions of labor. The Histadrut is the vanguard of the Jewish masses, of the luckless, desolate Jewish masses who must and will immigrate into the country in order to build themselves a free and productive life there. The Histadrut is not, therefore, merely a local organization. It is not only the Palestinian workers' organization. It is also, and especially, a *Jewish workers' organization in Palestine*. It has specifically Jewish interests; it has Zionist functions. Those who wish to change the form of the Histadrut and make it function as a purely unionizing organization—and this cannot be avoided if the Histadrut admits Arab workers—want to deprive it of its essence. They want to freeze it into the narrow confines of a professional union. They wish to deprive it of inner dynamism. If they should succeed, the Histadrut would become simply a trade union federation, that is, it would commit suicide.

One hundred thousand Jewish workers and one hundred thousand Arab workers in the same union—and then what? Then a halt and stagnation. Interestingly enough, this is what the Arab effendis also want. They are willing to have a few Jews to teach them how to plant good orchards, do good banking business and run industry. They are even inclined to work in partnership with Jews. Let the Jews help them develop. Those who wish to turn the Histadrut into an ordinary small union also speak continually of "developing the Arabs." To a certain extent they are both right. Jews develop Palestine and raise its standard. Just imagine this country without us. Arabs do learn from us how to plant orchards and run banks. The Jewish workers will certainly help awaken the class-consciousness of the Arab workers. This indeed is a clear part of the Histadrut program. And the Histadrut is active in organizing the Arab workers so far as objective circumstances permit it. But the central Histadrut activity is not found in this field; it is to be found in Jewish life. How can it be otherwise? It is therefore no accident and no political maneuver when the Histadrut says that Palestinian labor must be organized into two national sections. This is a vital question for the Histadrut, a central point. It expresses clearly and honestly where the Histadrut wishes to lead its members and

what the Histadrut must do. The Histadrut has accepted the role of advance guard in the revival of a Jewish working people in Palestine. Let no one come and complain to us in a tone of wounded innocence that for the last ten years there may have been an application for membership in the Histadrut of some Arab worker, and that the Histadrut may have refused to admit him. The application may wait ten more years and the Histadrut will not be in a position to admit him. It acts in accordance with its constitution. Comrade Remez, a member of the Vaad Hapoel, cannot break the rules of the organization of which he is secretary. The paragraph concerning national sections is justified and well-founded. It is no secret. Would it not perhaps be more honest and more modest if, instead of preaching sermons to the Histadrut and giving it lectures in proletarian "law", the Arab comrade were to go to the Arab worker and enlighten *him*, organize *him*, and on the basis of the rules of the Histadrut demand the formation of the *Brit Poale Eretz Israel*? Is not this the correct and the only way for the Arab worker who really wants to ally himself and work in harmony with the Jewish worker?

In my illustration I supposed that one hundred workers in Nablus were left without jobs. "Yakhin", I said, cannot employ them. The Jewish economy is reserved for the Jewish *halutz*. But, it may be asked, what will become of the hundred unemployed Arabs? Is it not in our interest, is it not in our sacred duty to see that they are employed? There can be no two opinions about this, certainly. But, when the will is ethical and clean, reality is much wiser and more just than all the sophistries and preachments and wails of anguish of irresponsible demagogues. In reality Arab economy is so activated by Jewish labor and investment that it creates new jobs. I should like to cite some figures concerning the chief export article of Palestine—the orange:

In 1932 the Arabs had 74,000 dunam of orange groves and the Jews 84,000. In 1933 the Arabs had 84,000 and the Jews 120,000. In 1934, the Arabs 115,000 and Jews 150,000. In 1935, Arabs 135,000 and Jews 165,000. The meaning of these figures is quite clear and our aspirations and our way are quite obvious. *In the 165,000 dunam of Jewish orange groves, we demand work for the Jewish worker.* Here we wish to control the work, to dictate, to a certain extent, conditions of labor, and to regulate it for the sake of the Jewish masses who entered the land. We must force the Jewish economic sector even by picketing, if this will serve the purpose, to accommodate itself to the main function for which it was created. The new jobs which our activity has created in the Arab economy are open

to the Arab worker. We have no right to come there and discuss our national demands and desires. There the Arab worker must go. There he has the duty of organization. Our duty is simply to help him in the work.

In a land which is in the midst of development, and which is called upon to accept large masses of immigrants and large sums of capital (in the Palestine bank there are now 17,000,000 pounds of Jewish capital) it is absurd to talk of unemployment anyhow. In Palestine there must always be a demand for new workers. There is consequently no possibility in this field of ever coming into conflict with Arab workers. We come into conflicts, and bitter, stubborn conflicts, with the Jewish employer. Because we demand a certain control over his household, because we say that the Histadrut has a voice in the work in his enterprise, the Histadrut which represents millions of poverty-stricken Jews and Jews who are looking for work. The Histadrut will continue to carry on its internal Jewish battle with all its strength. *This battle is called the conquest of labor, not taking away work from the Arab, but winning, work from the Jewish employer.* Conquest of labor is a just and honest principle. It leads to our main purpose, to Aliya, to Jewish immigration, to the creation and building up of a Jewish working people in its historic land.



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