

# Histadrut and Arab Labor

• by Marie Syrkin

**I**N ADDITION to the familiar charges about Zionist "imperialism" and the "landless Arab"—phantoms to be laid only to rise again—we now hear about the "boycott" of Arab labor. A statement of Ben-Gurion's is widely misquoted; horror-stricken champions of Arab rights point to the picketing of "Arab labor". Presumably responsible journals carry information to the effect that the chief purpose of the Jewish Federation of Labor is to keep work from the hungry Arab masses. In short, a mixture of ignorance and wilful misrepresentation is combining to create a far from flattering picture of the Palestinian labor movement. From some sources the public is getting a view of the Histadrut as a group, which having gotten a stranglehold of the Palestinian labor market, is determined to defend this indecent monopoly at all costs. Honest Arab toilers, seeking to earn their daily bread, are kept from work by the vigilant egoism of the organized Jewish workers of Palestine.

The fact that these charges are false will not prevent their regular repetition in certain quarters; nevertheless, the uninformed should know the exact position of the Histadrut in regard to Arab-Jewish relations. What truth is there behind the barrage of malicious phrases calculated to wring the sympathies of a liberal public?

In the first place, no one realizes better than the Palestinian labor movement that the interests of the Jewish masses cannot be divorced from the interests of the Arab masses. In view of the libellous propaganda about the Histadrut's attitude towards the Arab worker now prevalent, it is important to note the official declaration of the Palestinian Labor movement on this crucial question. In 1928, the General Federation of Jewish Labor in Palestine and the Zionist Socialist Labor Party submitted a joint statement on this and allied problems to the British Commonwealth Labor

Conference. These are the words of the document: "The Jewish labor movement considers the Arab population as an integral element of this country. It is not to be thought of that Jewish settlers should displace this population, nor establish themselves at its expense. This would not only be impossible both from the political and the economic stand-point, but it would run counter to the moral conception lying at the root of the Zionist movement. Jewish immigrants who come to this country to live by their own labor regard the Arab working man as their compatriot and fellow worker, whose needs are their needs and whose future, their future. The realization of Zionism is therefore envisaged as the creation of a new economy, not to replace the existing Arab economy, but to complement it."

The Palestine Labor Movement is too realistic as well as idealistic, not to understand that a great mass of backward, unorganized native workers is a constant menace to the higher-paid Jewish worker. It knows very well that the economic status of the Arab worker must be raised not only for the sake of the Arab but to preserve the standard of life of the Jewish worker who will otherwise be driven to the wall by the pressure of cheaper labor.

The Histadrut has been occupied with the problem of organizing Arab workers for years. It maintains a special department for this purpose whose object is first to organize Arabs employed in government projects such as the postal service, the telegraph and the railroads. The first attempt to organize Arab and Jewish workers in one union was with the railway workers. The Histadrut succeeded in organizing a considerable section of the Arab railway workers within a joint Arab-Jewish union. Though such joint unions are more feasible in government projects than in any other, the practical difficulties of joint unions

raised the question of the best method of unionizing Arab labor.

There are certain obvious objections to admitting Arab workers to the Histadrut. The differences in language, background and culture cannot be levelled at once. The politically untutored Arab and the advanced Jewish worker cannot function effectively within one union. The divergence in their comprehension of economic problems is too great. Each group must meet a given situation in terms that it understands, otherwise there is the danger that the energy of the union will be dissipated by issues irrelevant to the labor movement as such. Furthermore, the Histadrut is not primarily a trade-union; it is also a colonizing agency, connected with Jewish labor organizations in other countries. A considerable part of its budget is spent outside of Palestine for *hachshara*, the training of prospective immigrants to Palestine. It maintains many cultural institutions of a purely Jewish national character, such as a Hebrew newspaper and a Hebrew theatre. In view of its essentially national character and the diversity of its interests, far exceeding those of an ordinary trade-union, it clearly cannot accept a group, alien to many of its chief purposes. There is no reason why the dues of an Arab worker should go toward training a *halutz* in Poland.

In view of the obstacles to the organization of Arab and Jewish workers within the same unions, the Histadrut in 1927 evolved the plan of the *Brith Poalei Eretz Israel*, the "League of Palestine Workers." The object of the "League" is to unite all Palestinian workers, Jews and Arabs, into one international league. According to this plan the autonomous Arab and Jewish unions both belong to the "League of Palestine Workers" and cooperate within its framework. This provides a means for taking joint action in all questions affecting both groups, such as the improvement of labor conditions and the struggle for more advanced social legislation.

The "League for Palestine Workers", though as yet not large numerically, is of great importance in creating better relations between Arab and Jewish workers. The center of the League is Haifa where it has enjoyed its greatest success. Last year it organized some Arab port-workers of Jaffa despite the bitterest opposition of the Arab employees, Arab press and Arab politicians. These port-workers requested the Histadrut to organize them after they learned what the Histadrut had done to improve the condition of the maritime workers in Haifa. The organization of the Jaffa port-workers went on despite provocative acts, lock-outs and violence. Active members and organizers were beaten on a number of occasions. Nevertheless, due to the pressure of the League and of the Secretary for Arab affairs of

the Histadrut, the government was obliged to appoint a special commission to investigate conditions of labor in the port of Jaffa. During the present strike, those port-workers who were members of the "League for Palestine Workers" remained at work and even transported Jews from Jaffa to Tel Aviv, so saving many Jewish lives at risk to themselves.

In Haifa, the League organized evening courses in Arabic, English and Hebrew for Arab workers. Arab workers participated for the first time in May first celebrations in 1935. The same year also saw the election of the first representative of Arab workers to the municipal administration of Haifa. The comparative failure of the anti-Jewish general strike in Haifa may be ascribed to the influence of the "League of Palestinian Workers".

There have been many occasions on which the Histadrut supported Arab workers. It helped a group of Arab factory workers in Jaffa to obtain better pay and shorter hours. It helped the Arab carpenters and garment workers of Haifa to secure a nine-hour instead of a fourteen-hour day. Jewish labor members of the town councils in mixed municipalities have consistently championed the rights of the lower grades of municipal employees most of whom are Arabs. The Histadrut has constantly worked for social legislation such as an eight-hour day, a minimum wage, sick pay, etc., although the chief beneficiaries of such legislation would be Arab workers since most enterprises employing Jewish labor have already adopted most of the elements of such legislation because of the strength of the Jewish Federation of Labor. It is the Arab employed by Arabs or engaged in government works who requires the protection of the proposed measures.

However, despite the efforts of the Histadrut to organize the Arab worker, the results have not been all that one might wish. The first stumbling block has been the apathy of the oriental laborer to whom conceptions of labor unionism are completely new. This apathy is reinforced by the active antagonism of the Moslem clergy and the Arab landed gentry who are interested in keeping the Arab masses uninfected by "revolutionary" ideas. For instance, the demand of the Haifa Arab workers for an eight-hour day was denounced by Moslem "patriots" as a menace to country and religion.

Though the Histadrut has not succeeded in organizing as many Arab workers as one might wish, the influence of a flourishing labor movement in the country has not been without effect. There is a greater class-consciousness now among the Arab masses. This growing class-consciousness has been further increased by the importation of Arabs from Syria and other adjacent Arab countries prepared to work for incredibly low wages.

The Arab press and Arab political leaders have been attempting to exploit this phenomenon to their own advantage. An Arab "nationalist" workers' movement has been started under the sponsorship of the powerful patriarchal clans, the Nashashibis and the Husseinis, as well as *Istaklal*, a typically fascist organization. These "nationalist" trade unions follow the stereotyped fascist pattern. They are completely dominated by the Arab nationalist parties, and like Italian "corporations" include the employer as well as the employee. These supposed workers' organizations rarely undertake action against the employer. Their chief activity consists in creating anti-Jewish feeling. They carry on a furious propaganda against the Histadrut, ostensibly for nationalist reasons. It is clear, however, that the wealthy feudal landowners in control of these unions are interested in diverting the Arab masses from any real workers' movement modelled on the Histadrut, substituting instead what amounts to a company union with "patriotic" coloring. The Arab leaders have brought nothing but ill to the Arab workers. One of the largest strikes in the country was that in the Iraq Petroleum Company. The strike was conducted with the support of the Histadrut which gave money and direction. Public opinion was in favor of the strikers, who had every prospect of victory. At the last minute Nashashibi intervened by concluding an unfavorable agreement to the detriment of the workers. A second large strike in a Jaffa quarry, conducted at first by the "patriotic" trade-unions was accompanied by anti-Jewish propaganda. The strike failed. Finally, a not wholly ignominious settlement was secured through the intervention of the League for Palestine Workers. This was achieved even though the majority of the workers in the quarry were not members of the League.

Curiously enough, the Palestinian communists support these "nationalist" unions very strongly, despite the obvious fascist character of their leadership and their anti-proletarian purpose. An instance of how the communists advance the class struggle in Palestine may be gathered from the following: A few months before the present disturbances the government was building schools in Jaffa. The Jewish contractor, affiliated with the contracting department of the Histadrut, employed an equal number of Jews and Arabs. The Arab unions picketed the enterprise, insisting on 100% Arab labor. The demand that the Jewish workers be ousted received the whole-hearted encouragement of the Palestinian communists. In all labor disputes, the communists work not only in opposition to the Histadrut but in complete harmony with the fascist *Istaklal*.

This brings us to the question of the much publicized *Kibbush Avodah*, the "conquest of labor."

What does the Histadrut mean by its struggle for "Jewish labor." The phrase "conquest of labor" has furnished opponents of Zionism ammunition for some of their happiest fusillades, but what is the actual significance of the term? It means nothing more nor less than the right of the Jew to work. A fundamental tenet of labor Zionism holds that Palestine be reconstructed not through the exploitation of cheap Arab labor by Jewish entrepreneurs but by Jewish workers engaged in agriculture and industry. A Jewish national home implies a restratification of the Jewish masses, a transformation of petty tradesmen into productive workers. On any other terms a Jewish homeland becomes inconceivable since obviously the purpose of Zionism is not to create a convenient sphere of exploitation for Jewish capitalists but a center for Jewish mass immigration. Equally obviously, there cannot be Jewish workers unless there is work for them to do.

Three factors militate against the Jewish worker:

- 1) The Arab employer will naturally not consider the organized, more expensive Jewish worker, even if nationalist reasons did not obtain.
- 2) The government and municipalities employ an overwhelming majority of Arab workers, despite the fact that most of the taxes come from Jewish sources.
- 3) Many Jewish employers, especially in the plantation belt, employ cheap Arab laborers, frequently importing them from Hauran and Syria, in preference to the better-paid Jewish worker.

Naturally the Jewish worker does not expect to penetrate the Arab labor sector. He does not expect more than parity in government works or municipal enterprises. (According to present figures, 80 to 90% of workers in government enterprises are Arabs.) But, unless he is prepared for individual and national extinction, he must demand that purely Jewish avenues of employment be open to him. Both as a Jew and as a worker he must wage a fight against the Jewish capitalist who seeks to displace the organized Jewish worker with unorganized, readily exploitable Arabs. The picketing of Jewish colonies where Arabs are employed is not so much a demonstration against the Arab employee as against the Jewish employer. Unless vigorous action is taken by the Histadrut, there is the danger that Jewish labor will be totally excluded from the Jewish colonies. The Arab labor market is safe from the Jewish worker. Cheap labor need never fear the competition of highly paid labor. But the only sector of labor open to the Jewish worker, the Jewish one, is constantly threatened by the invasion of non-Palestinian as well as Palestinian Arabs. By no conceivable stretch of the imagination does justice to the Arab demand the complete surrender of the right of the Jew to work.

In this connection, it might be well once and for all, to dispose of the libellous misquotation of Ben-Gurion which keeps cropping up. Indignant writers in a number of publications, among them *The Nation* and *The New Masses*, have quoted Ben-Gurion as saying "Just as it is unthinkable for a Jew to open a house of prostitution in one of the Jewish villages, so unthinkable must it be for a Jew to employ Arabs." The actual words of Ben-Gurion, an excerpt from a speech protesting the boycott of Jewish labor by Jewish plantation-owners, were, "To open a house of prostitution is a lesser disgrace than to deprive Jews of their labor on the soil of Palestine." Misquoting scripture to one's purpose simplifies any controversy. The communist *Freiheit* (Dec. 15, 1935) offered its readers, as a gesture of good faith, a photostatic copy of the Hebrew text of Ben-Gurion's words as reproduced in *Haaretz* March 10, 1932. Relying on the public's ignorance of Hebrew, it did not hesitate to use the wholly different Hebrew text as evidence of the accuracy of its vicious mistranslation.

The most scrupulous cannot cavil at the Histadrut's defense of its members' right to work in Palestine. Furthermore, the Jewish labor movement dreads the creation of a status in the plantation-belt according to which the word "Jew" will become synonymous with "employer". Should a

class of Jewish exploiters fattening on a class of Arab exploited be permitted to develop, then the Arab class struggle would coincide with the national struggle. Such a situation would be as injurious to the Jewish settler as to the Arab.

Since the leaders of the Histadrut have been viciously misrepresented in the general press, perhaps it might be well to quote again from the official pronouncements of the labor movement. (Reply to questionnaire submitted to British Commonwealth Labor Conference, 1928)

"If we wish to secure the peaceful existence of different races inhabiting the same country, we must regard as a preliminary condition the necessity of ensuring absolute equality not merely between individuals of different races, but also between the different races themselves. . . . The Labor movement can assist to that end by organizing the labor elements of all national and races for a combined effort to raise the cultural and social status of these workers and for introducing adequate social and agrarian legislation. Such an organization must pay due regard to the rights and culture of each of the races involved, and assist the autonomous development of each section of the population on the basis of absolute equality."

All of the Histadrut's Arab activities spring from this fundamental concept.