

Elections in the Histadrut And Workers' Democracy

By AL FINDLEY

The coming national election in Israel for a new Knesset (parliament) casts its shadow long before the actual campaign. A preliminary to the main bout was the convention of the Histadrut, the federation of labor. Histadrut conventions are not held at stated intervals; the timing of the convention for May was no doubt decided with an idea to the election.

The results of the vote at the convention were undoubtedly a victory for the Mapai, the governing labor party, which received about 60 per cent compared to 57 per cent in 1949.

Mapai ran on its record, defending its pro-Western policy, its contradictory position on peace with the Arabs, and above all its role as the builder of the state and the country. It came out for a "stabilized economy" and "holding the line" on wages—in effect endorsing the government policy of reducing the standard of living of the Israeli population. Like all other bureaucrats, the Mapai leaders think of raising productivity only in terms of machines, ignoring the human factor, namely, the importance of raising living standards in order to give more incentive to labor productivity.

The pro-Stalinist Mapam had gotten 34.5 per cent of the vote in 1949. Now, since the split in the party, it presented two lists. The Achdut Avodah, which is the more nationalistic and relatively less Stalinoid group of the two, went into the vote with a numerically smaller membership than the official Mapam, but got 16 per cent; whereas the official Mapam (Hashomer Hatzair) obtained only 11 per cent.

The main reason for the gain by Achdut Avodah with respect to its rival in the split no doubt lies in the declining attractiveness of pro-Russianism because of Moscow's anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist forays. The Achdut Avodah's advocacy of militant retaliation against the Arabs also played a role. Observers report that this group spent more money than other political groups in the campaign. This may be explained by the fact that it was its first public contest since its break with Mapam. However, there was also a rumor that the sums involved were so large that they must have come from another political grouping in order to defeat Mapam.

The open Stalinist party received 4 per cent, as compared with its previous 2.5 per cent, partly because of the adherence of the group of Moshe Sneh, former Haganah commander who led a small section of Mapam into the CP.

NO VOTE FOR ARABS

It is important to report that the Arab members of Histadrut were not voters in this election. Despite the fact that the Histadrut leadership last year admitted Arabs into the organization, under pressure and very belatedly, the Arab workers were not given a chance to vote.

The "democratic" Jewish press, as well as the general press, was not concerned enough even to mention this "flaw" in a democratic election. We invite our readers' attention to dwell for a moment on the strange fact that this piece of information appears exclusively in LABOR ACTION.

The votes of over 10,000 Arab workers

are involved. These Israeli Arabs were admitted to membership but not given full and complete equality. Their exact status was left unclear.

At that time we wrote in LABOR ACTION that the formal admission of Arabs into the Histadrut was not enough to remove the stigma of racial separatism from it. Everything depended on the kind of membership the Arabs would receive. The fact that they have been denied the right to vote on an equal basis with Jewish workers augurs ill for the intentions of the Mapai leadership of the Histadrut with respect to their full integration. The struggle for the equality of Arab labor is still on the agenda.

The liberals have long had a labor group of their own in Histadrut, the Haoved Hatzioni, and it upped its vote from 4 per cent to 5 per cent.

The conservative party of Israel, the General Zionists, also put up a slate. Clearly, sectarianism is not their problem. They had the temerity to enter a Histadrut election by running on a "give-away program," to give away the cooperatives and the social-welfare institutions.

It was the first time they ran and they received only 2 per cent of the vote. In doing this, the General Zionists were not only engaging in a pre-election campaign but were giving left-handed recognition to the position of organized labor in Israel.

BUREAUCRATIC SETUP

In one way or another, 90 per cent of all Israel workers are part of some Histadrut organization. About 70 per cent are members of the Histadrut proper. Others are connected with the Histadrut through its welfare organizations or cooperatives.

Histadrut cooperatives center in agriculture, but there are also industrial, building-construction and transport sections. The largest employs 25,000 workers. The movement also engages in public service activities, the principal one being Kapat Holim or workers' sick fund. About 60 per cent of the Israeli population receive comprehensive medical care through the Kapat Holim.

Of the 500,000 workers enrolled in Histadrut, over 400,000 voted. This fact has been hailed in lyrical terms to prove the democracy in the Histadrut. That it bespeaks the Histadrut's democratic forms cannot be denied. But there are more serious questions to be raised about democracy and bureaucracy in the Histadrut, in addition to the already discussed issue of Arab discrimination.

In a small country, with a small organization, it may once have been sufficient to have shop organizations controlled from the top with a democratic national convention, and with very few or no local unions and meetings. Given the structure of the Israeli labor movement today, this setup is at best an anachronism (to speak charitably about it). As against the system of appointment of local officials from above, the election of local and regional secretaries by the trade-union workers whom they serve would make the Histadrut more responsive to the wishes of its members.

The Histadrut's co-ops are run by appointed officials without any direct democratic participation of the rank-and-file workers in these fields. The tendency exists, and is growing, for the workers in these enterprises to look on the Histadrut as an employer and a capitalist to be fought.

Any number of strikes have taken place against the Histadrut, the largest being the seamen's strike of a few years ago. Anyone familiar with the system of distributing jobs and economic support knows the terrible power the officialdom has to punish rebellious strike leaders. Only deep-felt grievances and a growing alienation between the Histadrut and the workers could lead to such strikes.

A burning question for the Histadrut is therefore the problem of workers' democracy in enterprises which are nationalized or institutionalized as they are in Israel.



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