

THE PALESTINE QUESTION - PHRASES AND SOLUTIONS

-L. Shields

In the January 20th issue of Labor Action there appeared an analysis of the Zionist Congress by William Gorman, which gives us an opportunity to write some comments, not only on this article, but also on other and more important, opinions on the Jewish question which have been expressed in the Marxist movement during the past year or so.

Comrade Gorman finds nothing whatsoever in the deliberations of the congress to take seriously enough to analyze, comment upon, and indicate what, given the same problems, the Bolshevik solution for the Jewish people would be. He finds it sufficient, from the vantage point of an enlightened Marxist, to laugh at the whole procedure, solutions and problems alike. Yet he does think that the speech of Zrubavel a Left-Poale Zion representative, to the effect that "the best chance for the realization of Zionism lies in the hands of the workers of the world, British and Arab included, who do not agree with their rulers", "is much closer to the solution." Yet, he continues, "Zrubavel and his followers fail to realize that it is utterly impossible to expect the Jewish bourgeoisie which controls the Zionist movement to join hands with the workers of Britain and the Arab countries. Only the Jewish workers themselves can do this." If the Jewish workers did this, then we would have the solution to the problem.

This, of course, is a very good conclusion - for an article in a newspaper. But since this is advanced as a solution, i.e. as a course of action, just what can it possibly mean? How do the Jewish workers go about "joining hands" with the British and Arab workers? Should they go to the marketplace, hunt up proletarians of British and Arab origin, and attempt to hold hands with them? But obviously this is ridiculous. The British and Arabs would object - and perhaps so would the Jews. It might even have such serious consequences as to lead to a permanent and irreparable rupture between them, which might endure even after the triumph of socialism. No, in all soberness, we must reject this tactic.

Perhaps Comrade Gorman will give us a clearer idea of what he has in mind later on? In the last paragraph we find this: "They must begin to look elsewhere - to the peoples of Egypt, India, Indo-China, Burma, Malay, the Philippines, Indonesia - all of whom are struggling valiantly to free themselves from imperialist exploitation and terror. When the Jewish people join in this decisive struggle, it will sound the final death knell of political Zionism, and the beginning of national and social liberation."

Ah! Now we have a more definite picture of what is in Comrade Gorman's mind. Only, again, there's this business of joining in there. We suspect that Comrade Gorman has invented a secret and marketable hand-shake which will enable the Jewish people to join hands not only with Arabs and Britishers, but with all kinds of assorted peoples from all over the world. (Note: Only a while ago the trouble with Zrubavel lay in his failure to differentiate the proletariat from the rest of the Jewish people. Now the Jewish people are good enough for Comrade Gorman himself. Maybe there's

something to this business of joining hands all around after all. Note also: all the other peoples whom Comrade Gorman mentions, he supports simply by virtue of the fact that they are struggling against imperialism, and lays down no other condition for his support. For the Jews however, this is not enough. They must not only struggle against British imperialism (which they are doing, and which is the only serious meaning that the phrase "join hands" can have), but they must also shake hands with all kinds of exotic peoples before Comrade Gorman will support them.)

But of course we have taken Comrade Gorman too literally. He has no secret handclasp at all. What he really means is that the Jews should simply take up arms and start fighting the British. But no! He has already told us that unless they hold hands with someone, this would be sheer terrorism which no Marxist can support. Well then, he means that they should support the political parties of the proletariat all over the world. This means, above all of course, that they must throw their full strength behind the Labor Party of Britain. But wait--this too doesn't seem right. The Labor Party is precisely the one which had made it "a tragic joke" to speak of Palestine as a "national home", and has converted it into "an armed camp on the brink of a gigantic bloodletting". (It doesn't occur to Comrade Gorman that a Homeland may become an armed camp, or conversely, that an armed camp may become a Homeland.) This too cannot be his meaning.

But enough of this forced facetiousness. What Comrade Gorman really means, if he means anything at all, is that the Jews of Palestine should accept the program of the Trotskyist Party, naturally the Trotskyist Party of England and of Palestine. Let us examine seriously this possibility. Leon Trotsky stated that it is the duty of the revolutionary party to gain the confidence of an oppressed nation. How has the REVOLUTIONARY COMMUNIST PARTY OF BRITAIN fulfilled this dictum in relation to the Jews?

Throughout the war, the British government waged what was in effect a war in alliance with Germany against the Jews; while the latter carried out the murders, the former conducted a blockade of Palestine, the only possible source of mass escape, against the Jews. Under the circumstances, it might have been reasonable to expect the RCP to conduct a struggle against its government on this question. Well, if not a struggle, then a protest, some token of disapproval, just for the record? But if there is such a record, neither we nor anyone else we know of has heard of it. Can it be possible that this is the one phase of the conduct of the war by the British government with which the RCP found itself in agreement? Let us see.

During the war, while the heart of the Jewish nation was being slaughtered, the RCP found no reason to express itself on this question. But immediately after the war, when British police headquarters were blown up in Tel Aviv, and a physical struggle developed between British imperialism and the Jews, suddenly the RCP woke up, and took active position on this question - against the Jews!

What was the essence of the struggle between the Jews and the British Empire? Above all, it concerned the right of Jewish refugees to migrate to Palestine. There was not the slightest possibility for the Jews to come out victorious in this fight, except through the

mobilization of popular opinion in their behalf, above all in America and in England. As Ernest Bevin recently said, "I could have solved the Palestine problem in a way which would have insured peace for twenty years, except for the pressure of American Zionists" - on the basis of securing the agreement of the Arab delegates to continue admitting 18,000 Jews into the country in a year! On whose side is the RCP fighting in this extremely important battle for popular support?

One quotation from their paper, the Socialist Appeal (Supplement Mid-October, 1945) will suffice. "Is there any truth in the claim that these survivors want to go to Palestine? The answer is no." (the italics are S.A.'s) "The Jews never really wanted to go to Palestine. They were forced to go there, because the gates of all other countries were closed to them." This is the essence of the role of the RCP in the struggle, they and their Palestinian theoretician T. Cliff, supply the necessary ideological ammunition from the Left, with which to combat the struggle of the Jewish nation to survive. In this country the SWP parrots their position, and in our party too, Comrades Gates is of the opinion that "with world borders closed to the Jews, they have turned to Palestine..." (N.I. 8/46). In contrast to the rest of the world, the gates of Palestine are, of course, wide open to the Jews - as any fool can plainly see.

Am I reading too much into this quotation? Then let us see more fully what the position of the British Trotskyist party is on Palestine. (From the same issue of the S.A.):

"Ever since the Zionist colonization in Palestine started, the Arab masses tried to resist by one means or another, this invasion of their land. Every four or five years, the Arab masses led, or more correctly, misled, by the most reactionary elements among the Effendis, would rise against the unwelcome invaders, only to be betrayed again and again by the same leaders. The Arab landowners, like the feudalists in all other feudal or semi-feudal countries, are the strongest supporters of imperialism, and once the masses get involved in a struggle, these same "leaders" quickly bring the struggle to an end and come to terms with British imperialism.

"But this is only half of their betrayal. At the very same time that the men whom they rallied to the struggle perish in battle... the so-called leaders make profitable business by selling their land to the Zionists. As a result of which, hundreds more peasants are expelled from the land."

Could anything be more clear? The Arab masses rise against the invaders-that is, not against the English, but against the Jews-but their leaders betray them by bringing the struggle to an end. What then does the RCP require of a loyal and honest Arab leadership? Quite obviously, an honest leadership, one acceptable to the British Fourth Internationalists, would not call the struggle off until - until what? - until every Jew in Palestine is either killed or driven from the land. No? Is there some other meaning, too subtle and recondite for me to grasp in the sentences I have just quoted? If so, someone please show me what it is.

But this is only one-half of the betrayal. The Arabs who sell

their land to the Jews are also traitors - for "hundreds more peasants are expelled from the land", in this way. In his excellent article on the Stalinist record on the Jewish question, LA 2/3/47, Comrade Al. Findlay pointed out that the "number of peasants landless as a result of Jewish settlement" amounted to no more than 600. In the opinion of our fellow historical materialists of England, the significance of 600 landless Arabs outweighs the fact that the remnant of a whole nation, through heroic efforts, has been given a fighting chance to survive. Incidentally, note how cleverly the RCP leaders both create the impression of vast numbers of Arabs being driven off the land ("hundreds more will be expelled") and yet at the same time stay within the confines of literal truth. After all, didn't they speak only of hundreds? Aren't the Jewish masses lucky to have such clever champions in England?

Since then, this party has not changed its position. Its Palestinian theoretician, T. Cliff, writes articles which can only be termed as slanderous to the Jews. Like the RCP leaders, he also is very clever, and does not write anything which is literally untrue. In every article he mentions a cert in Arab market which is picketed by some Jewish boys; he implies that the magnitude of the Jewish problem in Palestine is simply on a par with that of the Jews in Egypt; in estimating the number of proletarians in the Middle East, this Marxist excludes the Jews from his figures because, you see, they are not proletarians, but Zionists, etc.

With remarkably penetrating insight, the RCP informs its readers (today!) that "the British deliberately imported Jews into Palestine for this reason alone: as a brake in the struggle of the Arab masses for independence." They are, consequently, not only opposed to the admission of 100,000 Jews into Palestine, but they attack the British government for having permitted as many Jews to enter the country as it did: "The effect of the limited immigration which British imperialism has allowed has been to sidetrack the anti-imperialist struggle of the Arab masses, and turn it into anti-Semitic channels." (S.A. Aug. 46) As though there is any country in the world to which any nationality could migrate in any great number, without an upsurge of nationalistic feeling! (On a much smaller scale, the difficulties of the Polish soldiers in Scotland might be cited.) They raised the slogan of "open the gates of all countries (except Palestine - L.S.) to the oppressed Jews", which they had not raised during the war, and which no one takes seriously now, but which does have the purpose and effect of shaking the determination of the Jews and their supporters by instilling doubts as to the justice of their struggle to enter Palestine, the only country where a struggle for their survival as a nation is possible.

On the whole one can say that this party's leaders agree with the opinion of W. Brooks (who has essentially their position) that "the Arab world is awakening. It is only a question of time when a powerful movement for national liberation and unification will set in." And since no equally powerful movement of Jewish refugees can be envisaged, they understand, quite as well as Brooks, that it behoves them "to take sides for the Arabs." (N.I. 11/46) (as an aside it is interesting, though hardly surprising, to note that this same Comrade Brooks is of the opinion that "Zionism, as all varieties of Jewish nationalism, is based on a racialist ideology and is at least as old as, and, by no means on a higher level than, Hitler's"

and that "this ideology permeates all strata of the Jews, unfortunately including the working classes..." As a matter of course, it is interesting to speculate as to what would have happened if Comrade Brooks had expressed the opinion that "all varieties" of say, Polish or Italian nationalism were "racialist", and "by no means of a higher level than Hitler's"? Would he have been booted out of the movement? I do not of course, dare to even wonder what would have happened if he had suggested that German nationalism "of all varieties" was on no higher a plane than Hitler's. But since it is only Jews "of all strata" whom he has insulted, of course it is understandable that the NI editorial board should see no reason why he should not be invited to review books dealing with Jewish subject matters for the theoretical organ of our party-where of course, he has repeated the same highly objective opinions about Jewish nationalism.

(However, I wish to make it clear that the RCP has no connection with this particular opinion of W. Brooks.)

Trotsky once said: "The desire of a ruling nation to maintain the status quo frequently dresses up as a superiority to nationalism, just as the desire of a victorious nation to hang on to its booty, easily takes the form of pacifism. Thus MacDonald in the face of Ghandi feels as though he were an internationalist. Thus too the gravitation of the Austrians toward Germany appears to Poincare an offense against French pacifism." Brooks, in his desire to be on the side of the more powerful, Arab nation, (but above all, in his desire not to be associated too closely with the threatened and strategically hopeless Jewish minority in his own country), inveighs bitterly against Jewish "chauvinism" and "racism". And unfortunately it is necessary to say, T. Cliff and the British Trotskyite party in the face of the remnant of the Jewish nation fighting with its last breath to survive, adopt a lofty "internationalist" attitude toward it all.

Evidently this too is not the party Comrade Gorman had in mind when he spoke about joining hands as a solution.

One more possibility remains, as to what he meant. He meant that the Jews of Palestine should read the majority resolution of the WP, as interpreted by Albert Gates, who has become the party spokesman on the Jewish question, and apply to to the Palestinian situation. Let us examine this last remaining possibility.

There is no comparison between the position of the RCP of Britain and that of the WP on the Palestine question. The resolution of the WP, despite its many errors, does not confuse simple anti-Jewish prejudice with internationalism. Its intentions are good, but unfortunately completely incapable of offering the Jews a solution to their problems. The following are some of the resolutions more basic mistakes:

First, its categorical rejection of the right of self-determination for the Jews: "It is not a problem of today, of self-determination of Jews against Arab rule or vice-versa, but of Palestinian self-determination against British rule." An analogous position would have been if in 1917 the Bolsheviks had decided to deny the right of self-determination to the Ukrainians, a great many of them whom lived in Poland, on the basis that it was "not a problem of self-

determination of Ukrainians against Polish rule or vice versa, but of Poland's self-determination against Russian rule." Would a single Ukrainian have been won over to the Bolshevik side in such a case?

Second, (and this is basic to the resolution) there is the idea that it will be on the basis of a joint economic struggle against exploitation that the unity of the two nationalities will be secured: "The proletarian class struggle against economic exploitation unites all toilers and serves as the bridge across all reactionary nationalist barriers." Rub our eyes as we may, the sentence still remains. We have no space to explain the anti-Leninist character of this very important, fundamental mistake. We will only say that had the Bolsheviks decided that this, the joint strikes let us say of Russian and Finnish workers for some economic advantages, rather than the slogan of national self-determination, was the type of activity by which unity of the nationalities of Russia would be achieved, there would never have been a successful Russian revolution. And we can say quite categorically that if we depend primarily upon joint economic action by Jewish and Arab workers to unite the two peoples, there will never be Jewish-Arab unity in Palestine.

There is also the inevitable repetition of Trotsky's opinion that the attempt to achieve a Jewish state under capitalism "is to pose a reactionary Utopia". Let us ask, comrades, why so? Is it the contention of the Majority that the struggle to achieve independent political statehood under capitalism by any oppressed nation is a reactionary utopia, or is this dictum reserved only for the Jews? If the former, then it is simply one more fundamental and very false revision of Lenin's concepts on the national question, which it is the duty of the NC to explain. If the latter, then again we must ask, what is the reasoning behind it? Is it due to the exceptionally weak strategic position of the Jewish nation? But if there is only this practical reason, then it is our manifest duty to strengthen this position, rather than to repeat unreasoned phrases about "reactionary utopias" which only weaken it.

In his defense of the Majority's denial of the right of self-determination to the Jews, Comrade Gates has emerged in the completely unexpected role of a great explorer of the twentieth century: He has discovered, all by himself, the existence of a Palestine nation (hitherto we had always thought that Palestine was not a nation, but a country, in which lived two nations: the Jews and the Arabs). Just to make sure that no one makes a mistake as to what kind of a nation it is, Comrade Gates says: "...The fact is that Palestine is an Arab nation." It is upon the invention of this fantastic and non-existent nation that the whole defense of the majority position is based. How else could a denial of the fundamental right of self-determination be justified?

Comrade Gates assures us that if an independent Arab state were established, the Jews need not fear a repetition of their fate at the hands of the Germans, the Poles, etc. The fact, he tells us, that the relationship of the population is "as two to one and not 100 to one (Germany)... in itself creates a better possibility for harmonious cohabitation of the peoples..." This is another of Comrade Gates' original discoveries. (We leave aside the fact that if the Jews had followed Gates' advice, they would never have achieved this pro-

portion of the population whether in Palestine or anywhere else in the first place.) The rest of us have observed the exact opposite: by and large, under capitalism the greater the proportion of the minority to the dominant population, the greater is the friction and bitterness between them. (Unless of course, the minority organizes itself into a powerful militant organization in defense of its rights, in this case, acts as a nation; but this is in fundamental conflict with Comrade Gates' program for the Jews.)

And lest anyone remain unconvinced, Comrade Gates assures us that it is only due to the attitude of reactionary Zionism that there is any antagonism among the Arab masses against the Jews, and that "the Jews could appear before them as liberators if they adopted a correct policy free of imperialist overtones."

Vicious, childish chatter! The Jews have always fought in the wars of liberation of the various European countries; in Poland especially they have been conspicuous in these wars, both against the Russians, and, in the last war, against the Germans. Yet somehow the result has never been that they came to be looked upon as "liberators" or even as co-fighters for liberty, but rather they have always been rewarded with a new and ever more intense wave of anti-semitism among the people. Has Comrade Gates thought about the meaning of this fact? Anti-semitism has arisen where the Jews were led by socialists Bund (in Poland), Zionists (in Palestine) and where they have had no leadership at all, (Germany). In the past there has not been a European anti-semitism among the Arabs for two reasons: one, the comparatively undeveloped state of Arab nationalism; and two, the relative strength of the Jews. But if Palestine is set up as an independent Arab state (as Syria and Lebanon have been) it can be predicted with mathematical certainty that the first result would be the organization of an anti-semitic campaign which, as in Europe, would end in the destruction of the Jews.

The reason for this is that in decadent capitalist society the state is held together to a large degree with ideological cement, the most important element of which is nationalism. It is for this reason that national minorities, no matter how "good" their behavior come to be tolerated less and less. This is the basic cause of modern anti-semitism. This, incidentally, is also the reason for the pressure for assimilation exerted by all countries, and also of extermination, which is simply an extension of the policy of assimilation by other means.

Comrade Gates states that the trouble with the Jews lies in their "rejecting a policy of genuine equality in respect to the Arab population" and he tells us also that the reactionary position of the Jews is shown precisely in their rejecting a constituent assembly, based on universal suffrage and majority rule.

What can one do when confronted with such statements by a leader of the Party? Throw up one's hands in despair? Doesn't Comrade Gates, and everyone else more than two years in the Marxist movement know that every minority nationality throughout the world reacts in precisely this way? So, for example, Leon Trotsky, in speaking of the February revolution, stated, "The proclamation of equal rights

meant nothing to the Finns especially, for they did not desire equality with the Russians, but independence of Russia. It gave nothing to the Ukrainians for their rights had been equal before, they having been forcibly proclaimed to be Russian" (History of the Russian Revolution, Vol 3, p 39) "They did not desire equality. Isn't this clear enough? And somehow the Bolsheviks, instead of proclaiming that the trouble with the Finns was that, basing themselves on their superior culture, they didn't want equality with the rest of the population of Russia, made this the cornerstone of their policy on the national question - the proclamation of the right of self-determination for each people.

So also for the slogan of a constituent assembly. In speaking of the oppressed nationalities of Russia, Trotsky notes that "references to a future constituent assembly only irritated them." Why so? Because these peoples understood that this assembly would only continue "to defend the tradition of Russification". Clear enough? Is it any wonder then that references to the constituent assembly only irritate the Jews now, and would only irritate the Arabs in the future, if the Jews should succeed in getting a majority of the population? (The slogan of a constituent assembly has a place in Palestine, but only if linked and subordinated to the slogan of the right of self-determination for the Arabs and the Jews.)

I cannot here set forth my own ideas on a Leninist position for Palestine. But it is necessary to mention the two basic principles which Lenin developed on the national question: one, there can be no unity between nationalities without equality Two, there can be no talk of equality without the right of self-determination, including the right of separation. (Compare this with Gate's opinion that "Equality lies precisely in the fact that the majority can exercise its majority.")

Abstractly, it would be correct for a Bolshevik party to champion the right of the Jews to a separate existence, but at the same time also to urge their unity with the Arabs (even under a setup of majority rule, if the two nations agree to this). Actually however, there is no question that in this historical situation the Jews would choose to form a state of their own. Under socialism, it would be the duty of the stronger nation, the Arabs, to win the confidence of the Jews, so as to make them willing to give up their own state and become a part of an Arab-Jewish Federation,

Is there no place then, whatsoever, for a policy of international "joining hands" in the struggle for Jewish freedom? In view of the foregoing, surprisingly enough, there is. Its place is here: we must urge the workers of all countries, especially those of England, to "join hands" by demonstrations, etc., with the Jews in support of the struggle that they are actually conducting, against British imperialism. This in itself is our simple duty as socialists and revolutionists. Such a policy would also permit us to begin to gain the confidence of the Jewish masses, among whom the ideas of socialism traditionally have a far more powerful root than among those of any other nation in the world. It would also permit us to begin to replace the heroic, but short-sighted and chauvinistic youths who are at present leading the Jewish resistance against Britain, and enable us to conduct it in such a way (indicated above) as to permit the achievement of a united Arab and Jewish struggle against British imperialism.