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Mass Mobilization Under Occupation

Textile factory worker, Beit Sahor, West Bank.

Joan Mandell

The Emerging Trade Union Movement in the West Bank

Joost R. Hiltermann

The last several months have witnessed an intensive Israeli crackdown against Palestinian political activists in the occupied territories. Since the summer, at least 21 Palestinians have been deported, and more than 80 arrested. Although the military authorities have attributed their renewed "iron fist" approach to the series of individual and apparently spontaneous assaults on Israeli troops and settlers, they have targeted key political and trade union leaders with valid residence permits and no criminal records. They have not been charged with any specific offense.

The largest group of detainees are activists in youth and union organizations linked by the authorities to Arafat's Fatah organization, but particularly hard hit was the Workers' Unity Bloc, a trade union group the Israelis say is allied with the Democratic Front (DFLP). Twelve members of its executive committee have been detained, and the four Palestinians most recently seized for deportation (in late October) include Ali Abu Hilal, a leader of the Workers' Unity Bloc from the small town of Abu Dis, and Azmi Shu'aibi, a leading al-Birah political figure accused by the Israelis of working for the Democratic Front.*

Economic and political changes over the past two decades have resulted in new forms of Palestinian consciousness and organization, especially among the nascent Palestinian working class, and the Israelis are clearly concerned.¹ But political repression and ties to the land have been powerful impediments to workers' organizing efforts. Today, with their national leadership in disarray and their access to employment in the Gulf increasingly curtailed, Palestinian workers in the occupied territories have been thrown back onto their own resources.

Fatah tried its version of *sumud* (steadfastness) mainly by pumping money into the municipalities. This money, channeled through the Jordanian-Palestinian Joint Committee set up after the 1979 Baghdad Conference, has amounted to \$100 million per year.² But the program has been wracked by endemic corruption,³ and has been undermined by the continued expropriation of Arab land and the pace of Israeli settlements.

Others have tried to devise new modes of mobilizing Palestinians. Women's committees, labor unions, voluntary work com-

* See the interview with Azmi Shu'aibi in MERIP Reports #116 (July-August 1983).

mittees and student groups have proliferated in recent years. Their goal is not exclusively the preservation of land and economy. Rather, they target social oppression—even, as in the case of the workers' struggle, if the employers are Palestinians rather than Israelis.

The national question overshadows the class one, though. Israeli rule is vulnerable to economic forces of resistance. This stems from Israeli dependence on Palestinian markets and especially labor. With this in mind, the social activities of the various trade unions serve to attract and consolidate a membership which will prove committed in the hour of direct confrontation.

Israeli Economic Policy

After the 1967 war, the Israeli economy expanded rapidly, boosted by large amounts of US economic and military aid. One main result was a large demand for cheap labor. The newly occupied territories, with their large population of underemployed peasants and refugee camp dwellers, contained just such a large pool of unskilled, cheap workers with no political rights. By limiting economic development in the territories, Israel assured itself of a steady flow of the type of workers it needed. Because of the semi-proletarian character of Palestinian labor—most are day-laborers who still own and till a small plot of land in their village—the cost of the workers' social reproduction has been thrown back onto the community.

In early 1985, West Bank and Gaza workers employed in Israel totaled 90,000: 50,000 from the West Bank and 40,000 from Gaza.⁴ Israeli entrepreneurs also move business to the territories or engage in subcontracting, employing women and children. Israel is dependent to a considerable degree on Palestinian workers in the construction and agricultural sectors. By 1982, a third of the legally hired workers in each of these sectors were Palestinians from the territories. Workers without a permit increase the proportion of Palestinians still further—to as much as 60 percent of the total labor force for the construction sector.⁵

With high demand for Palestinian labor since 1967, a female work force has emerged. Palestinian women have taken jobs abandoned by Jewish women, who have moved out of agriculture and the garment industry into the Israeli services sector. Palestinian women are concentrated in seasonal agriculture (especially the citrus and tobacco harvests), in textiles and in food processing.⁶ The transfer of the inflationary Israeli price structure to the territories made it necessary for many women, and even children, to look for wage work in order to supplement the income of adult men.

The textile and fashion industries have become heavily dependent on Palestinian, especially female, labor.⁷ Israeli entrepreneurs prefer to subcontract in the territories, where they can engage more women who otherwise are less likely to commute.⁸ Israeli companies cannot by law be forced to pay benefits to subcontracted workers; this has become the obligation, at least in theory, of the Palestinians who manage the numerous small workshops. Thus women earn sometimes as little as half the wage they would have received in one of Israel's industrial centers.

The subcontracting business flourished during the boom in the Israeli economy in the years 1968-1974. It accounted for 12 percent of West Bank industrial revenues in 1973.⁹ The recession in the Israeli economy after 1974 reverberated in the subcontracting business. The Israeli textile industry began to shift operations

to the Arab sector in Israel itself. As a consequence, many local West Bank workshops have closed in the past few years, and the number of women in the work force has not increased. In 1983, 28,900 Palestinian women were employed out of a total Palestinian work force of 236,000.¹⁰

Organizing Palestinian Workers

Palestinian workers employed in Israel can hardly be called a proletariat, nor do they have a clear class identity. The transitional status of the Palestinian peasantry—one foot in agriculture and one foot in the Israeli workplace—largely determines the nature of its ambivalent class identity.

These workers also have an ambivalent social and political status in Israel. This has led to a peculiar brand of trade unionism in the occupied territories. These workers are predominantly day-laborers who maintain strong ties to their land and community, and who are effectively thwarted from organizing at the point of production in Israel. Yerucham Meshel, then-Secretary General of the Histadrut, said in a 1983 memo: "We have never attempted to formally organize those workers as Histadrut members in order to avoid the impression that we support the annexation of the administered territories."¹¹

A growing number of Palestinians fall back on organizations in their own villages in search of protection against unemployment and job accidents. The number of local unions has mushroomed in recent years, but their goals have remained limited, due both to the lack of sufficient leverage over Israeli employers, and to lack of experience and unity.

The unions have concentrated on solidifying their base by providing services rather than ideology. Unions, for example, sell Palestinian consumer products at below market prices. They also provide medical care and health insurance at reduced rates. Finally, the unions encourage the creation of workers committees at the job site. These committees negotiate with employers on issues of wages and work conditions. In the case of Palestinian employers, this is done directly. The Israeli worksite requires a more surreptitious approach or, in the case of arbitrary dismissal, a lawyer.

There are several examples of Palestinian workers bargaining with Israeli bosses for better conditions. After dismissals at Shalom Hotels in Jerusalem in 1980, workers formed a committee and demanded that the dismissed workers be reinstated. This demand was not met but, against all expectation, Shalom Hotels offered compensation to those laid off. One year later, a Palestinian worker at Berman Bakeries in Jerusalem tried to organize his fellow workers and succeeded in pushing through some demands. The boss then brought in the police, who detained the organizer. He was subsequently released, but dismissed by his employer even though he had worked there for 10 years. And in 1984, a committee of Palestinian workers in a poultry factory in Jerusalem obtained higher wages and fixed work hours.

Such limited experiences have enhanced the reputation of the existing unions. One union official estimated that out of 150,000 workers in the West Bank, around 30,000 are now members of a union. The entrance of women in the labor force has also brought women into the unions, but their numbers remain small—between 2,000 and 3,000. Others, of course, have joined the ranks of the women's committees.¹²

The Case of the Ya'bad Union

The first impulse for organizing Palestinian workers who commute daily to Israel for work came from the Workers' Unity Bloc. The WUB began its drive in 1979 in an effort to erode the Palestine Communist Party's traditional strength in the labor movement in the West Bank and to develop the workers' movement as a crucial element in the struggle against the occupation.

Ya'bad is a town of 15,000 in the Jenin area, close to the Green Line. It is typical of Palestinian villages in terms of employment patterns and forms of popular mobilization. Employment opportunities in Ya'bad itself are limited. The local Taher family owns about 70 percent of the village lands, which are very fertile. Consequently, most Ya'bad villagers either work for Taher or must find a job outside. Some have worked in the local tobacco industry, but the Israeli military government has recently prohibited tobacco production to protect its own industry. About 3,000 villagers are employed in the Gulf or Jordan. Others have little choice but to cross over into Israel daily in search of a job.

One common method of finding work is by showing up at the "black" (labor) market in the nearby Israeli Arab town of Baqa al-Gharbiya. There, workers are picked up by an Israeli Arab contractor, or directly by an Israeli employer, who brings them to the Israeli worksite, usually in a city like Hadera or Karkur. Women working seasonally in Israeli agriculture, like the walnut harvest, are picked up by Arab contractors at their homes in Ya'bad. Some workers will stay with the same contractor for several years (and thus do not have to go to the labor market), but rarely longer than five years.

In all cases, the workers register with the Israeli employment office in Ya'bad to obtain a work permit. Work found by the office would be for a definite period, and the worker would be insured against sickness and job accidents. But the labor exchanges are notorious for not finding work, since their primary purpose is not to provide jobs but to regulate the flow of workers. In fact, the Ya'bad labor exchange has been laying off workers in the past two years in response to the recession in the Israeli economy. So the Ya'bad villagers continue to look for work on their own, without a permit. Local union leaders estimate that about 60 or 70 percent of Ya'bad workers cross into Israel each day to find work by themselves; almost half of them return empty-handed.

About two-thirds of Ya'bad workers are employed in construction. Others work in agriculture or industries such as food processing. Complaints about discrimination at work abound. The Ya'bad workers complain that their real wages have been halved in the past five years due to inflation. If they used to earn the shekel equivalent of 5 (Jordanian) dinars in 1980, today they receive the shekel equivalent of 2.5 dinars per day. (They work 18-20 days per month on average.) Even without a work permit, Arab workers have to pay the Israeli defense tax, insurance fees, social security fees and Histadrut membership dues (which may come to as much as 40 percent of their wages), but they receive no benefits in return.

If they do hold a permit, at least they are eligible for health insurance and the official "protection" of the Israeli trade union federation. In practice, this amounts to very little. When one legally employed Ya'bad worker recently petitioned to the Histadrut to act on his behalf to secure better conditions for him and his colleagues at his poultry factory, he was told to go to his employment office instead. The answer he received there was: "This is what you deserve, no more!" Most Ya'bad workers have



Joost Hiltemann

A woman from Ya'bad.

no alternative source of income. Few women work for a wage, and most of the men employed in the Gulf have taken their wives and children with them and send no money back to families at home.

These circumstances motivated some Ya'bad villagers to begin organizing their fellow workers. In 1983, the Union of Construction and General Workers saw the light of day. Today it has about 150 members, most of them employed in Israel. Initially, the union experienced some harassment from the Israeli authorities. Troops twice raided the small office and confiscated archives, posters and publications. Union officials have been put in detention on several occasions. Since the last raid in October 1984, things have been relatively quiet. Because the union sought affiliation with the Workers' Unity Bloc, it has not received any financial support from the Jordanian Ministry of Labor or from the Jordanian-Palestinian Joint Committee. It must thus rely on contributions from its members.

Union activities have concentrated on lobbying with local doctors and pharmacies to reduce rates for union members. Attempts are also made to find work for Ya'bad villagers both in Israel and in the occupied territories. Finally, the union has contacted lawyers who educate workers about their rights and occasionally have sued Israeli bosses. In all instances, the union's emphasis has been on concrete help without ever explicitly raising the issue of workers' political rights. This is a result both of the conditions imposed by the military occupation, and of opposition within the village itself from the side of the owning classes. Union officials insist that organizing activities and aid to

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workers must not interfere with the national question, which is paramount. In that sense, the Ya'bad union accurately reflects trends in the Palestinian union movement in the territories.

Contradictions, Conflicts

Trade unions in the West Bank (unionization in Gaza is prohibited by the Israeli authorities) remained dormant throughout the 1970s, as the Palestinian battle for national liberation was being fought on the diplomatic and military fronts in the diaspora. Only after 1976 did a vocal and visible Palestinian leadership emerge in the occupied territories in the person of the elected mayors, and they hastened to declare their allegiance to the PLO and its program. In addition, there was little incentive for workers to organize themselves: although many faced discrimination on their jobs in the Israeli sector, they brought home relatively high wages, both from Israel and the Gulf, and had little fear of being laid off as long as the Israeli and Gulf economies prospered. Few workers had time for union activities. For those who worked in Israel it was *min al-farshe 'al al-warshe* and *min al-warshe 'al al-farshe* (from the mattress to the workplace, and back to the mattress).

The economic slump of the early 1980s and the destruction of the Palestinian political and military presence in Lebanon in 1982 changed all of this. The Palestinians still living on their land were clearly central to any territorial solution of the Palestine question. And the economic recession induced many to organize to protect themselves. These new organizations came to serve as vehicles for their national aspirations, now voiced more insistently. But these two factors also had deleterious side-effects. If in 1985 a large and active popular movement exists in the West Bank—and to some extent in Gaza—it is also severely divided and close to paralysis in its internal relations.

The labor movement in the West Bank is ideologically ambivalent. It is essentially a social movement, but the environment of military occupation provokes a dominant nationalist current. Generally speaking, the workers of even those unions which proclaim themselves Marxist-Leninist have subordinated the class struggle to the national struggle. In fact, in a situation where recruitment and alliances have traditionally been based on patronage, personalities and family ties, to try to attract workers on a purely class program is to court disaster. The emphasis on the national alliance of classes does leave room for union activities against Palestinian employers, but never as a priority. Consequently, strikes against Palestinian owners are rare. The recent successful strike of the *Al-Quds* newspaper workers against their employer was clearly an exception, and a widely applauded one.¹² The nationalist stance of the major unions has effectively rallied workers, while the focus on issues that affect them in their daily lives helps to cement the unions' base, thus preparing them for national campaigns at a future stage. This strategy has attracted some criticism, usually from the outside. One sympathetic Israeli has criticized the union leadership for not dealing with social issues which are bound to explode sooner or later:

What is dangerous here is the demoralization... The unions are really workers' branches of the PLO. In the unconscious of the Palestinian leadership there is the conviction that the struggle fought by the Palestinian masses is not the struggle of the Palestinian masses: they are a means toward a national goal.¹³

The PLO and the Trade Unions

Before Palestinian unionists can even begin to address such structural contradictions, they first have to satisfactorily resolve the conflicts that continue to wrack the labor movement in the occupied territories.

The expansion of the labor force in the 1970s put new pressures on existing unions to incorporate more workers, and gave the impetus for the creation of new unions. The mainstream groups in the Palestinian national movement responded by setting up a large number of "cardboard" unions which have few members but are heavily financed by Jordan and the Joint Committee. The PLO groups, when they turned their attention to the occupied territories, after 1976, found the workers' movement there effectively controlled by the Progressive Workers Bloc (PWB), which is widely regarded as the workers' organization of the Palestine Communist Party. The PWB's dominant role was reflected in the size of its membership and its representation in the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) dating back to the period of Jordanian rule.

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) was the first of the PLO organizations to move in this sphere. In 1976, independent activists set up the "Voluntary Work Committee 1976." Similar committees among students and women sprang up in the following years. They posed no threat to the primacy of the Communist Party in the workers' movement.

By 1979, the Democratic Front had decided to refocus its energies from outside to the Palestinians living under occupation. This significantly changed the configuration of forces and led to success in mobilizing mass support. The Workers' Unity Bloc (WUB) emerged as the first new organization to address seriously the labor question in the West Bank. Many of its activists had just been released from prison and were eager to put into practice the strategies they had developed jointly in detention. The new bloc also benefitted from broad support in the West Bank for a strategy of armed struggle, a position not shared by the Communist Party.

At first the WUB concentrated on mobilizing workers at the grassroots level, not directly threatening the position of the Progressive Workers' Bloc in the union apparatus. The WUB formed tactical alliances with small workers' organizations: the Progressive Unionist Work Front (alleged to have ties with PFLP), the Workers' Vanguard Bloc (in the tradition of the Arab Nationalist Movement and allegedly an arm of the Syrian-backed Saika faction of the PLO), and the Workers' Youth Movement (frequently reflecting the influence of Fatah). Through these alliances, the Workers' Unity Bloc managed to further erode the command of the Progressive Workers' Bloc among the rank and file. In addition, new unions sprang up in professions not previously organized. Altogether, the unions' ranks grew significantly with workers hit hard by soaring inflation and rising unemployment, both in the West Bank and in the Gulf.

Competition and Confrontation

At the same time as it expanded greatly in size, the labor movement became increasingly paralyzed as a force in the national struggle. This mainly resulted from the effort of the Progressive Workers' Bloc to resist the erosion of its popular base and its organizational hegemony.



Palestinians at the day laborers' market near Tel Aviv.

The first of a series of confrontations occurred early in the summer of 1981 and culminated in a formal split in the Palestinian labor movement that August. The main protagonists at this stage were the Progressive Workers' Bloc and the Workers' Youth Movement. The WYM had functioned (often under other names) for a decade, but had neglected to deploy its considerable resources in mass organizations. Starting in 1980, it began to penetrate local popular organizations, helped greatly by the reputation of the Fatah leadership in the diaspora. The balance was further affected by a tactical alliance between Fatah and Syria in 1981. The WYM then felt strong enough to push for greater representation in the labor federation, a PWB domain. In response, the Progressive Workers' Bloc used its organizational weight to close the federation to new unions and to close individual unions to new members. Every meeting of the GFTU turned into a battle over numbers and representation.

Behind this struggle lies the more general competition for political hegemony between Fatah and the other PLO organizations and the Palestine Communist Party. Fatah was particularly sensitive to the influential Communist Party role in the Palestine National Front of the 1970s and the looser National Guidance Committee of the 1979-81 period.

In the summer of 1981, the Workers' Unity Bloc and the smaller blocs sided with the Workers' Youth Movement to resolve the struggle over numbers and representation. But the alliance did not last long, and the Unity Bloc quickly switched its alliance to the Progressive Workers' Bloc, which it suddenly judged more suitable for its own climb up. This coalition of the PWB and the WUB allowed the Communists to maintain control of the General Federation. In response, the Youth Movement established its very own General Federation of Trade Unions, headed by She-

hadeh Minawi, which claimed to be the only legitimate representative of Palestinian workers on the West Bank.

Since then, two entirely separate General Federations of Trade Unions have been in rivalry, sharing identical names and a determination to lead the workers' organizations. The function of the newer GFTU of Minawi is less to mobilize workers than to represent the views of local and outside political leaders.

The older GFTU still consists of the Progressive Workers' Bloc, the Workers' Unity Bloc and two smaller blocs, and is headed by long-time PWB official 'Adel Ghanem. It has been wracked by internal divisions and conflicts since its inception, reflecting the rivalry of the Communist Party and the Democratic Front. By 1982, it was paralyzed by the intensifying power struggle between the entrenched Progressive Workers' Bloc and the insurgent Workers' Unity Bloc with organizing frozen. In part, this freeze was a tactic of the PWB, which feared it would have to concede even more ground if it engaged the WUB directly in a contest for new members and new unions.

The Workers' Unity Bloc continued its recruitment drive nonetheless. It paid particular attention to the West Bankers who worked in Israel. Historically, the Progressive Workers' Bloc had left organizing of workers in Israel to Rakah, the Communist Party of Israel. The Workers' Unity Bloc broke through PWB defenses in several unions, securing a majority if it could and creating a parallel union with the same name if the PWB used organizational rules to block ratification.

For a time, all blocs except the Progressive Workers engaged in a feverish scramble to set up new unions, many of them mere administrative structures lacking real worker constituencies. Now this practice has been abandoned. As of 1983, the GFTU headed by 'Adel Ghanem consisted of 29 unions: the PWB