



Histadrut: Israel's racist "trade union"

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A Zionist poster from the 1930s encourages settlers to buy only watermelons that are produced in Jewish settlements. (Israel MFA)

Histadrut has always been a strange creature. In most countries one joins a trade union which is affiliated to a national trade union federation. In Israel one first joins Histadrut and then one is allocated to a union. It is only outside Israel that Histadrut is seen as a normal trade union, the Israeli equivalent of the British Trade Union Congress or the American union movement AFL/CIO.

Less well known is the fact that Histadrut, an organization of the settler Jewish working class, was the key Zionist organization responsible for the formation of the Israeli state. As former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir remarked: "Then [1928] I was put on the Histadrut Executive Committee at a time when this big labor union

wasn't just a trade union organization. It was a great colonizing agency." [1] Pinhas Lavon, as secretary-general of Histadrut, went so far as to describe it in 1960 as "a general organization to its core. It is not a trade union ..." [2] Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, held that without Histadrut, "I doubt whether we would have had a state." [3]

Today Histadrut is a shadow of its former self. From a position where it was the second-largest employer, owning 25 percent of Israeli industry, the 1980s and 1990s saw the privatization of nearly all of its industries. The National Health Law of 1995, which severed the ties between Kupat Holim (Israel's National Health Service) and Histadrut, dealt the final blow. Histadrut membership plummeted from 1.6 million in 1994 to 650,000 in 1996 and its 150,000 Arab members declined to less than 50,000. [4]

Politically, Histadrut operated as an arm of Israeli and US foreign policy. In 1958, the International Institute for Development, Co-operation and Labor Studies was established as a means of furthering western interests in the third world. Half of its graduates came from Africa and a further 40 percent from Asia. [5] And in 1960 Histadrut formed the Afro Asian Institute for Labor Studies and Co operation, funded by the CIA through the AFL-CIO. It operated on behalf of the US in African countries such as Zaire and Kenya. [6]

Even the most right-wing, social democratic trade unions opposed apartheid. Histadrut was unique in actively collaborating with the South African state. Iskoor steel company, 51 percent owned by Histadrut's Koor Industries and 49 percent by the South African Steel Corporation, manufactured steel for South Africa's armed forces. Partly finished steel was shipped from Israel to South Africa, enabling the apartheid state to escape tariffs. [7]

Other Histadrut companies such as Tadiran and Soltam were equally complicit in supplying South Africa with weaponry. [8] Histadrut also helped build the electronic wall between South Africa/Namibia and neighboring African states in order to keep the guerrillas out. [9] It was a precursor of Israel's wall in the West Bank.

As its economic importance has declined, Histadrut's political role has increased in importance. Histadrut is recognized by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions as the representative of all Israeli workers. It is seen as being on the left of Israeli society, in favor of reconciliation and peace and its delegations abroad always include at least one pliant Arab member. It therefore came as a shock to

people that Histadrut supported the attack on Gaza: “Israel had no choice but to respond to the repeated attacks and aggression as an act of justifiable self-defense.” [10]

Pre-1948

Histadrut founded Haganah, the Zionist terrorist group, in 1920, later to become the Israeli armed forces, and Mapai, the Israeli Labor Party, in 1930, an anti-socialist party whose supreme value lay in the needs of the Israeli state. [11] David Ben-Gurion, Histadrut’s first secretary-general, became in 1935 chairman of the Jewish Agency, the Zionist government-in-waiting, and in 1948 prime minister of the State of Israel.

Histadrut was formed in 1920 as the General Confederation of Hebrew Labor by the two main labor Zionist parties, Hapoel Hatzair (Young Workers) and Achdut Ha’Avodah (Union of Labor). From its inception it excluded Arab labor and thus rejected worker solidarity in favor of national exclusivism.

Histadrut’s primary role was not the defense of its members’ wages and conditions but the colonization of Palestine. In the absence of a Jewish bourgeoisie, it had to become that bourgeoisie. As the late William Frankel, editor of *The Jewish Chronicle* (London), described it, Histadrut was a capitalist union. [12]

Its enterprises included Tnuva (dairy products), Solel Boneh (building and construction), Koor (manufacturing), Hamashbir (food co-operative) and Bank Hapoalim. It established a holding company, Hevrat Ovdim, to manage these enterprises and even after 1966, it remained 100 percent Jewish-controlled.

Histadrut: an apartheid union

As unemployment grew in the Zionist economy in Palestine in the 1920s, Histadrut launched a campaign to promote Jewish labor (*Avodat Ivrit*) and Jewish produce (*Totzeret Haaretz*), which was essentially a boycott of Arab labor and produce. David HaCohen, former managing director of Solel Boneh, described what this meant:

“I had to fight my friends on the issue of Jewish socialism to defend the fact that I would not accept Arabs in my trade union, the Histadrut; to defend preaching to housewives that they should not buy at Arab stores; to defend the fact that we stood guard at orchards to prevent Arab workers from getting jobs there ... to pour



A Zionist poster from the 1940s reads, “Buy Local Products,” referring to goods produced by Jews. (Israel MFA)

kerosene on Arab tomatoes; to attack Jewish housewives in the markets and smash Arab eggs they had bought ... to buy dozens of *dunums* [of land] from an Arab is permitted but to sell God forbid one Jewish *dunum* to an Arab is prohibited; to take Rothschild the incarnation of capitalism as a socialist and to name him the ‘benefactor’ — to do all that was not easy.” [13]

In 1944, “the mere rumor that a cafe in the exclusively Jewish town of Tel Aviv had taken on a few Arab workers provoked an angry gathering of thousands of demonstrators. ... Every member of the Zionist Trade Union Federation — the Histadruth [sic] — had to pay two compulsory levies: (1) ‘For Jewish Labor’ — funds for organizing pickets, etc. against the employment of Arab workers, and (2) ‘For Jewish Produce — for organizing the boycott of Arab produce.’” [14]

It was Histadrut which mapped the route the Zionist project would take in Palestine. From the start it excluded the Palestinians, first from the economy and later from the land itself. Class struggle was redefined as the struggle against Arab labor, as Ben-Gurion railed against “the evil of mixed labor” [15] Ben Gurion explained to those who mistook Histadrut’s red flags for socialism that “Nothing is further from the mind of Jewish labor than to engineer disputes with all the material and political loss in their train. For it, the supreme charter of our generation is reconstruction and Aliyah [immigration to Palestine]. ... It is a charter meaningless without Jewish labor.” [16] With typical colonial condescension, Ben-

Gurion spoke of Arab workers acquiring “a smattering of culture” through mixing with Jewish workers. [17]

The role of the working class was a national one, to construct the Jewish state; “Socialism was never an aim in itself but a tool for the advancement of national objectives.” [18] It was Ben Gurion who “coined the slogan from class to nation ... both perspectives saw the role of labor as a nationalist role.” [19]

Zionism was following a well-worn path. All settler colonial projects, e.g. the Boer trek in South Africa and the colonization of America began as collective endeavors. Private capital could only operate once the threat from the indigenous populace was eliminated.

As Arthur Ruppin, the father of land settlement in Palestine and a fervent believer in the racial sciences, explained: “I can say with absolute certainty: those enterprises in Palestine which are most profit-bearing for the businessman are almost the least profitable for the national effort and *per contra* many enterprises, which are least profitable for the businessman are of high national value.” [20]

Where exclusively Jewish labor was not possible, as in government employment, Histadrut campaigned, like its South African counterparts, for higher wages for Jewish workers. Although the British refused this demand, in practice four different rates of pay for unskilled labor developed depending on whether the worker was Jewish or Arab. [21] Ernest Bevin, leader of the British Transport and General Workers’ Union and former British foreign secretary, was emphatic: “No, we would be absolutely against two wages.” [22] But to Berl Katznelson, Ben-Gurion’s effective deputy in the Labor Zionist hierarchy, equality “was only a whip with which to scourge the concept of Jewish labor.” [23]

The Union of Railway, Postal and Telegraph Workers (URPTW) was a bastion of the political left with a mixed Arab and Jewish membership. Histadrut sought to incorporate them in order to hive off the Arab workers into a separate national section. [24] Arab workers who joined this Arab section objected to Histadrut’s Zionism, not least its policy of Jewish labor. At a meeting in Haifa in 1924, union activist Elias Asad described how Arab workers “saw on the membership card the words ‘Federation of Jewish Workers’ and they cannot understand what purpose this serves. I ask all the comrades to remove the word ‘Jewish,’ and I am sure that if they agree there will be a strong bond between us and all the Arabs will join. I would be the first who would not want to join a nationalist labor organization ...” [25]

Ironically, when at the end of 1923, the leaders of the Arab Railway Workers Club filed a request with the British Mandatory Government to establish a workers' organization, the Palestinian Arab Workers' Society (PAWS), Histadrut lobbied against its recognition, denounced it for being separatist and exclusionary and thus against the spirit of workers' solidarity! [26]

In 1936 Arab workers in Palestine declared a general strike that lasted six months, one of the longest strikes in labor history. This provided Histadrut with the opportunity to replace striking Arab workers with Jewish labor. With the support of the British authorities, the Jewish Agency and Histadrut established Tel Aviv as an alternative port to Jaffa, which was strike-bound. Far from being a trade union, Histadrut was a scab organization.

The leadership of the Histadrut and Labor Zionism portrayed themselves as being lofty idealists, incorruptible. In fact Ben-Gurion and the other leaders lived the life of a labor elite, with foreign holidays and large apartments. Not only were their wages much higher than ordinary workers but they also made large loans to themselves from Histadrut funds which were quietly written off in 1926. [27] Ben Gurion's debt equalled an ordinary worker's annual salary.

Histadrut was run by a self-perpetuating elite that avoided elections. There were four years between the second and third Histadrut conventions, six between the third and fourth and nine years between the fourth and fifth in 1942. As Zalman Aranne, a member of the Histadrut Executive from 1936 to 1947 and later Minister of Education stated, the rule "is not to hold elections for years on end, and even when elections are held, we are not the ones who vote. It is some appointment committee that does the voting." [28] Even today, at its seven-year convention, less than 10 percent of the delegates are directly elected. As Frankel noted, the appointment of delegates to the Histadrut Conventions are from party lists, primarily the Zionist parties. They elect the leadership and "in national elections, the voters have no say in the choice of the individuals elected to represent them." [29]

Histadrut post-1948

Between 1948 and 1966, Palestinians living in Israel were subject to military rule. Due to Histadrut's close affiliation to the military administration of the Mapai governments, Histadrut was not popular with Arab workers. Arab members to this day are seen as opportunists and collaborators. [30]

In 1959 the Histadrut Convention decided to admit Arabs as members. They were however confined to an Arab (later disingenuously called the Integration Department) headed by a Jew. In 1966, Histadrut changed its name to the General Confederation of Labor in the Land of Israel. “Land of Israel” is a euphemism for the biblical land of Israel, which includes at least all of historic Palestine. A resolution from Rakah, the Israeli Communist Party, to change the name to General Federation of Labor in Israel was defeated.

Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip cannot even join Histadrut, unlike Jewish settlers, even though they inhabit what Israelis consider to be part of the “Land of Israel.” [31] However, many Palestinians did work for Histadrut’s construction company, Solel Boneh, which built most of the early settlements. [31] Migrant workers from the Philippines and elsewhere also cannot become members of the Histadrut.

Class struggle was always anathema to Histadrut, before and after Israel was formed. In the seamen’s strike of 1951, strikers were drafted into the army with Histadrut support. Like their predecessors in the Gdud Avodah workers brigades in the 1920s, some of the most militant workers did break from Zionism. Gdud Avodah were starved into submission by Ben-Gurion in the 1920s. [33] But this was the exception, not the rule. The seamen’s strike was the most violent strike of its kind in Israel, with ships being commandeered and used against the forces of the state.

In the 1969 Ashdod port workers’ strike, the Histadrut accused the Jewish strikers of being equivalent to agents of Fatah, the main faction in the PLO, i.e. “terrorists” and “saboteurs.” But the trial of the militants in a Histadrut tribunal backfired and it was terminated without reaching a verdict.

In February 1976, thousands of Arab citizens of the Galilee demonstrated for their rights to the land and against confiscations. In March 1976, the Arab leadership called for a general strike. In response, Histadrut’s Labor Council in Haifa actively opposed the strike. Six Palestinians were shot and killed by the police and army, an event marked each 30 March by Palestinians as Land Day.

When Histadrut was a major employer, Arabs were not employed in its security industries — i.e. arms, oil, chemical, electronics, aviation, shipping, airlines, electricity, gas, telecommunications — as military service was a condition of employment. They were seen as a “security threat.” This systemic racial discrimination continues to this day. [34] This was mirrored in the fact that only

0.8 percent of employees of government companies are Arabs and in 2004 only 5.5 percent of Israel's civil servants were Arabs, 56 percent of whom worked in the health ministry alone. [35]

The exclusion of Arab workers from whole sections of Israeli industry is tantamount to a color bar. Histadrut consciously did not invest or create factories in Arab towns or villages. Far from being their trade union, Histadrut was one of the primary causes of Arab unemployment and poverty, a situation that continues to this day. According to the National Insurance Institute, 52 percent of Israeli Arab citizens live below the poverty line, as opposed to 16 percent of Jewish Israelis. [36] Almost half of the Arab employed persons work in the low-wage sectors of manufacturing, construction and retail trade.

In 1985 the Stabilization Plan of the government of Yitzhak Shamir and Shimon Peres, permitting "flexibility" in the labor market, paved the way for globalization as the US and Israel signed a free trade agreement. Koor Industries, a holding company for hundreds of Histadrut companies, was sold off in 1991 to reduce Histadrut's debt. Haim Ramon's election as secretary-general in 1994 led to the demise of Hevrat HaOvedim, which owned Histadrut's industries. [37] In 1994, Histadrut was renamed New Histadrut.

Histadrut has never supported Arab workers' fight against racial discrimination, such as the mass layoffs of Arabs that occurred after the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000 or a labor dispute of Arab and Jewish employees with the Dead Sea Hotel Nirvana in 2003, when an Arab manager was fired because he refused to forbid his co-workers to speak Arabic in front of tourists, although nominally Arabic is an official language of Israel. Likewise it has done nothing about McDonald's Israel's policy decision in 2004 not to allow Arabic to be spoken in the restaurants or the situation at a building site in the Knesset grounds in 2004 when Arab workers' helmets were marked with a red X, to facilitate assassination by marksmen in case of emergency. [38]

The occupation, Histadrut and Palestinian workers

The exploitation of Palestinian workers from the occupied territories was institutionalized by an Israeli cabinet decision of October 1970. It provided that the military administration should supervise their employment. Their wages would be distributed by the payments department of the National Employment Service. Histadrut was a partner in this arrangement. National Insurance coverage was permitted in only three areas: work accidents, employer bankruptcy and a grant on

the birth of a child in an Israeli hospital. Ten percent of the wages of Palestinian workers went to a special “Equalization Fund,” which was supposed to supply the population in the occupied territories with social and cultural services. In fact, this money was used to finance the occupation. The workers did not receive unemployment and disability benefits, old-age pensions, a monthly child allowance or vocational training.

In addition, each Palestinian worker had to pay one percent of his or her wages as dues to Histadrut. Workers saw nothing in return and now a fraction of this money has been returned, as a propaganda ploy, to the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions. When the Shin Bet intelligence service used work permits as a means to coerce Palestinian workers to collaborate, with those who refused being placed on a blacklist and their work permits cancelled, Histadrut again did nothing. [39]

In the last decade, new workers’ organizations have arisen in Israel, such as Kav La’Oved (Worker’s Hotline), Commitment, the Center for Aid to Foreign Workers, Sawt el-Amel and Workers Advice Center. It is this sector which can serve as the basis for a new union, accessible to all and not connected with the Zionist establishment.

Editor’s note: This article originally incorrectly stated that the 1985 Stabilization Pact occurred during the Benjamin Netanyahu government. This article has been corrected to show that the Pact occurred during the government of Yitzhak Shamir and Shimon Peres.

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Endnotes

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[3] Moshe Pearlman, *Ben-Gurion Looks Back in Talks with Moshe Pearlman*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1965, p.51.

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[21] Gabriel Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism*, Verso, 2008, p.77.

[22] Josef Gorni, *The British Labour Movement & Zionism 1917-48*, 1983, Frank Cass, p.95.

[23] Zeev Sternhell, p.157.

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[26] Ibid.

[27] Sternhell, p.295-7, 295.

[28] Sternhell p.271, 273.

[29] Frankel, p.186.

[30] Sawt el-Amel op. cit. p.19.

[31] Michael Shalev, "The Labor Movement in Israel: Ideology and Political Economy," in *The Social History of Labour in the Middle East*, edited by Ellis J. Goldberg, Westview, 1996, p.4: "Membership has never been offered to the non-citizen residents of the occupied territories, even though the majority of the Palestinian working class in the territories, who are employed inside Israel's pre-1967 borders, are legally required to pay the Histadrut for At the same time, within its targeted constituency, the Histadrut is generous to a fault in opening its ranks to non-workers. Surveys of the Jewish adult public suggest that at least half of the self-employed are Histadrut members."

[32] *Jewish Chronicle*, 7 January 1983.

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