

A Different Point of View

• by Avraham Ben-Shalom

FROM THE VERY start of the recent disturbances an uninterrupted discussion of the Arab problem has appeared in the Zionist press of this country. Very few of the articles printed have evaluated the problem in terms of Palestinian realities, and needless to say they have had no effect on the finding of a concrete solution to this problem in Palestine, the *only* place where this question will be decided. The articles may have served to give a certain emotional satisfaction to the writers and perhaps to the readers as well, but they were also instrumental in stirring up among Zionists, and particularly the youth, a hypersensitivity to this problem, based less on realistic, political considerations than on psychological complexes. Writers of these articles either forgot or were unaware of the fact that there existed within the Histadrut certain definite stands on this problem, stands which have been crystallized after a struggle lasting many years among the three main groups comprising the Histadrut.

These three main groups make up the "flesh and blood" of the Histadrut and are engaged in a severe struggle to shape the entire ideology of the Palestinian labor movement and particularly of its Arab policy. The friends of Labor Palestine in America and other countries should realize that the Histadrut has become what it is today not because it is infallible or sanctified so that one may not question it, but because it has always presented a united front to the outside world, a unity based on a common halutz mission in Palestine *in spite* of the fact that there have been within the Histadrut various political groupings and that there has been going on an unceasing ideological struggle.

The Histadrut is not a socialist toy to be exhibited by this party or another and certainly not a totalitarian organization, in need of a dominating single stand. The Histadrut is the legitimate home of all groups today comprising the Palestinian labor movement and the right of each group to criticize and freely to present its own stand—that is the sanctity, the most fundamental of all principles, the one which can raise up the Histadrut, or cause it to fall back considerably. To be sure, into the argumentation and criticism levelled against the political policy of the Histadrut in reference to the Arab problem there have crept many wrong evaluations and even falsified facts. But just as the representatives of Antifa place themselves in a rather ridiculous position when claiming for their organization a monopoly of Arab-Jewish solidarity, so will the Histadrut benefit but little from a presentation of the problem which "sanctifies" its stand and derides any one who dares to criticize it as "weak, uncertain, otherwise, and secretly malicious." The problem under consideration is one too serious and painful to permit of name calling. The friends of Labor Palestine are first of all in need of a clear exposition and an objective discussion of the stands current today in the Histadrut on a problem considered by a large part of the membership in Palestine and friends outside of the country to be the one problem that will decide our fate here as much as any verdict reached by this or that Royal Commission.

In this article I intend to present the stand of Hashomer Hatzair on the problem of Arab-Jewish solidarity. In spite of the fact that Hashomer Hatzair represents not a political party but a federation of 33 Kibbutzim, located in almost every part of Palestine, it constitutes nevertheless an independent political grouping in the Histadrut, and has for years been battling for a stand on the Arab problem

which is not identical with that of Mapai (the majority party in the Histadrut). It also differs greatly from that of Left Poale Zion or its off-spring, Antifa.

Naturally, none of the three groupings (Mapai, Hashomer Hatzair and Left Poale Zion) negates the socialist principle of international labor solidarity. On the soil of Palestine this expresses itself in the problem of "Irgun Meshutaf," which means the organization of Jewish and Arab workers.

Were it only a matter of "principles" and abstract faith, there would be very little difference of opinion; in our constant criticism of Mapai for its neglect in the organization of Arab workers, we have never claimed to be fighting for a principle of our own discovery. On the contrary, we have learned our lesson from the older labor leaders of the country, the very same leaders who are today responsible for the policy of the Histadrut. None other than Ben-Gurion, the most prominent of the leaders of Mapai in the Histadrut, addressed a conference of his party some 16 years ago in the following terms: "The introduction of comradely relations between the Jewish workers and the Arab laboring masses on the basis of a common economic, political and cultural activity is an unavoidable prerequisite to our redemption as a free laboring people, and to the redemption of the Arab working masses from their oppression at the hands of their lords and landowners," and again: "the creation of an organized class strength of Jewish and Arab workers for the improvement of working conditions is a necessity for the existence of a cultured worker in these trades."

What more is needed? The resolution which was then drawn up by Ben-Gurion can today be accepted by *all* groups in the Histadrut. The conventions of the majority party and those of the entire Histadrut ratified the above resolution and similar ones, on various occasions. How to put this resolution into effective practice—that is where differences of opinion and at times even an embittered struggle have arisen. What were our demands?

Hashomer Hatzair demanded first of all that these resolutions be carried into practice, that definite persons be assigned to the task of organizing Arab labor in the cities and colonies, that in each place local committees of Jewish and Arab workers be organized, and that the long-deferred newspaper in Arabic be published so that we might have a chance to point out our aim and true policy in Palestine as well as show up the falsehoods and real intentions of the Mufti and the Arab Effendis in the country. What did the leaders of Mapai reply?

"Not so fast . . . all this cannot be done as easily and as hurriedly as you imagine, and just as you propose in your resolutions. First of all, the Arabs are not as yet sufficiently mature, politically and socially to make Jewish-Arab solidarity effective; secondly, the common organization of Jewish and Arab workers (Irgun Meshutaf) will not be possible so long as the Arabs do not develop their own labor movement. Have you ever heard of creating a labor movement through missionaries? In the third place there is still the problem of Arab agricultural workers in the Jewish colonies; we cannot give up the principle of 100% Jewish labor in the Jewish colonies and it is, therefore, impossible to speak of the organization of Arab labor (Irgun Meshutaf) in those colonies."

How has the reality in Palestine disproved these arguments in recent years? In the years 1934-5 there were mass strikes of Arabs in Ness Ziona, Petah Tikva, at the Iraq Petroleum Co. in Haifa, and in several other places,

which affected many hundreds of Arab workers and received their support. In those strikes the Arabs revealed a solidarity that might well serve as an example to workers in other countries. It is to be regretted that this ferment and spontaneous awakening were not utilized by the Histadrut for a systematic and consistent policy and for permanent trade organization.

The principle of 100% Jewish labor in Jewish-owned farms (principally citrus groves) has given birth to many misunderstandings and misconceptions. In America I have met "radicals" even among the General Zionists who see in the Histadrut principle of 100% Jewish labor the very same sort of chauvinism which anti-Semites utilize against us in Europe. This is unwarranted, and the "radicals" referred to merely demonstrate their lack of understanding of Palestinian reality. It has been shown in sufficient degree that except for the Jewish economy established by Jewish capital, all other agricultural and industrial enterprises are closed to us, and if we want to have any kind of labor aliyah we must safeguard certain labor positions for that aliyah. This is the justification for 100% Jewish labor; but that principle has also brought us untold harm, politically and economically. It has prevented the Histadrut from organizing Arab laborers who have been working for years in Jewish pardessim, some of them for as long as 10 and 15 years. "100% Jewish labor" has meant that we were in favor of replacing even such Arab workers with Jewish labor. Even if that were possible, it would set up against us the very elements that we were interested in bringing closer to us. That is why Hashomer Hatzair has steadily fought against the principle of 100% Jewish labor to be applied in all colonies and to all Arab labor (not even differentiating between the Palestinian Arab and the Haurani). We felt that the principle was both unjust and futile. In its stead, Hashomer Hatzair suggested the principle of "maximal Jewish labor"; the intention was to safeguard each new place of work in Jewish pardessim for Jewish labor, so long as we would be excluded from the Arab economy and boycotted in government works; and at the same time we recognized the right of Arabs, working for years in Jewish colonies, to their places of work. We suggested that together with those Arab workers we present a united front against the cheap, unorganized Haurani coming from Transjordan and the desert, endangering the standard of Palestinian Arab workers no less than that of the Jewish workers.

Our demand was strongly criticized both by Mapai and by Left Poale Zion, though from opposite angles. "How can you tell who's who?" was a favorite attack, "can you ask them for their passports?" As a result, Mapai insisted that we recognize no one and Left Poale Zion of course insisted that every Arab had the right to work in any Jewish colony.

But the testimony of Moshe Shertok before the Royal Commission, stating that the Zionist Organization recognized the right of 2,000 permanent Arab workers in Jewish colonies to their places of work, and the agreement reached by the Histadrut with the Jewish Planters' Association, calling for 80% Jewish labor, gave the official seal to a principle for which Hashomer Hatzair has been battling for years. It seems that in the face of world public opinion, the principle of 100% Jewish labor could not even be presented, and for the first time the principle was abrogated publicly by a prominent leader of Mapai.

And as to the argument of "missionaries": There was a time when the Arab masses were not yet poisoned and incited by chauvinistic propaganda—at any rate, not in the same degree. Only a few years ago, a great many Arabs in villages and cities showed the greatest respect for the Histadrut and for its powerful economic institutions. It could even then have been foreseen that if we did not become the "missionaries" there would be other "missionaries," and not from the socialist ranks. But those were the years of "pros-

perity," politically as well as economically; there was a feeling of security, and the warning of the minorities in the Histadrut was accepted as indoctrinated chatter; today our criticism is labelled that of would-be prophets.

In attacking the policy of Mapai we do so as full-fledged and loyal partners in the Zionist and halutz tasks of the Jewish worker in Palestine; we are represented not only in the legislative bodies of the Histadrut, but in its very Executive; we are a movement, 100% of whose members are in the most difficult and strategic halutz positions of the country, and who, in their very existence, are responsible for the destiny and success of the Histadrut. As such we differentiate ourselves from the Left Poale Zion or Antifa, and that is why we criticize their whole method of attack.

I shall not repeat the words of the delegates of the Histadrut who have asserted that the Histadrut was not only a trade union and that it had to fulfill tasks that were much larger in scope and which did not affect the Arab worker directly. The one thing differentiating the Left Poale Zion from the other groups in the Histadrut is their unwillingness to draw the necessary conclusions from the fact that the Jewish worker has a specific task ahead of him, different from that of the worker of any other nation including the Arabs. The principal tasks of each labor organization including that of the Arabs is to free the working class from exploitation; the principal tasks of the Histadrut is first of all to create a working class. The Arab belongs to a nation that has its economy, its territory, its language, its peasantry, and its workers. The Jew belongs to a nation deprived of all these. In order to create conditions similar to those found in other nations, the Jewish worker must cooperate with all other Jewish classes interested in the same undertaking. That is why we have the Zionist Organization. In the future, when the Jewish National Home will have become a fact, and the two peoples in Palestine will have equal rights, then it will be possible to turn the Histadrut into an international Jewish-Arab trade union. Until that time it is our duty to establish such forms of international solidarity as will not becloud the national aspect of the Histadrut and will not weaken it in its fulfillment of the specific needs of the Jewish worker (settlement on land, productivization of Jewish youth, the entrenchment of the Hebrew language and culture, etc.). The stand of Left Poale Zion that boycotts the Zionist Organization and its funds, that does not cooperate with the Histadrut in its constructive, colonizing activities, and that does not participate in the halutz tasks of the country, is in our opinion a harmful one, even from the point of view of Jewish-Arab solidarity.

The decision of the Histadrut to organize the Arabs in separate unions parallel with those of Jewish workers, both comprising the Jewish-Arab Workers' Alliance, affiliated with the Histadrut, is a decision based upon the realities of Palestine. The important thing today is to enlarge and intensify the organization of Arab workers in those unions. We have never agreed to the separatist policy of Left Poale Zion of organizing Arab workers in Jewish-Arab clubs. Such experiments have inevitably resulted in failure, for the Left Poale Zion without the Histadrut can give the Arabs very little. And the chances are that disillusionment is the more likely to come about. That is why Hashomer Hatzair has all these years fought for a change of policy within the Histadrut exerting all possible pressure to force the powerful institutions of the Histadrut to engage in the organization of Arab labor. For only then will the Arab workers have the fullest confidence in activity of this kind, and only the sturdy shoulders of the Histadrut can withstand the opposition and interference of the Palestinian government to Jewish-Arab organization. The problem of building up Jewish-Arab solidarity is a very complicated and difficult one, and it has become even more difficult after the

last disturbances. The problem will not be solved by mere resolutions, and we must not have any illusions as to the difficulties involved. We are very glad to hear Yussef Najib claim that he is not the only Arab who has been drawn to our cause, but the fact remains that he represents as yet a very insignificant minority among the Arabs.

Difficulties should not deter us. Activity along the lines

of Arab organization has been very much neglected, and it must not be neglected any longer. It is no longer a matter of "principles." We must do pioneer work among the Arabs as well. All our objectives in Palestine have been gained by a determined and stubborn halutz exertion. The same spirit is needed in this activity; otherwise we will not succeed.