

Occupied Palestine

The Palestinian Working Class

On the occasion of May 1st, International Workers' Day, we begin an article about the Palestinian working class in occupied Palestine.

The vast majority of Palestinian workers today live and work in the occupied homeland. There they are subject to double-edged oppression - national as well as class. The Palestinian working class, like any working class, was formed by capitalism's development. In Palestine, this occurred primarily via Zionist settler-colonialism. This means that the class oppression suffered by Palestinian workers can hardly be disengaged from the national oppression exercised by the Zionist occupation against the Palestinian people as a whole.

Zionist occupation policy partitioned Palestinian workers into various categories: those living in the area of Palestine occupied in 1948, renamed 'Israel'; those from the 1967 occupied territories who commute daily to work for Israeli employers, some with permits and some illegally; and those who work for Palestinian employers, themselves hard pressed by Zionism's strangulation of the Palestinian national economy. Cutting across these categories are

women who are accorded an especially low status on the labor market.

Regardless of these categories, certain common realities stand out. In general, Palestinians were driven to work in Israeli enterprises due to Zionism's land confiscation and monopolization of the economic structures. Short of creating a pure Jewish state, Zionism's invasion served to mold those Palestinians who were not expelled from the homeland into a cheap, mobile, labor reserve - assigned to menial labor scorned by Jews, deprived of social benefits and forbidden to unionize. Zionism sought in fact to create an Arab lumpenproletariat. The extent to which this succeeded on the economic level can be seen in the following figures: «The average per capita income for the West Bank is one-third of the Israeli average, for the Gaza Strip, it is one-sixth» (*Al Fajr*, May 20, 1983). However, this Zionist aim did not succeed in political terms. Palestinians' determination to preserve their national identity and resist the occupation, has

not been undermined by the fact that large sectors were driven into the Israeli labor market. Palestinian workers under occupation can better be described as semiproletarianized. Due to adherence to the land - a political as well as economic question - many remain living in villages and join their families in tilling what is left of their land between periods of wage labor employment. Their wage labor serves to sustain their families under the steadily worsening conditions of occupation, which is in itself a form of steadfastness.

Unionization

The unionization of Palestinian workers is also to a high degree a political matter. This is true both in the 1948 and 1967 occupied territories, although conditions vary. The original Palestinian trade union movement, which grew rapidly in the period of the British Mandate, was banned with the establishment of the Zionist state; its cadres were dispersed and exiled. The Histadrut (originally the General Federation of Hebrew workers) was founded as part of

Nazareth workers demonstrate against unemployment and inflation.

