

The Palestinian Working Class Under Occupation

This is the conclusion of the article begun in *Democratic Palestine* No. 16, which gave an overview of the Palestinian working class and unionization, then focused on Zionism's institutionalized discrimination against Palestinian workers who are considered Israeli citizens. Below we address the situation of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, working in the Zionist state, who are hardest hit by the economic crisis.

As many as 100,000 workers from the 1967 occupied territories today commute to unskilled or semiskilled jobs in 'Israel'. Of those who are registered with the Israeli employment office, the greatest numbers work in industry and construction, followed by services and then agriculture. «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% of the total labor force for the construction sector» Joost R. Hiltermann, «The Emerging Trade Union Movement in the West Bank», *Merip Reports*, Nos. 136/137, October-December 1985).

The dominant fact about the formation of the working class in the 1967 occupied territories, is that its growth was paralleled by a decline in local industry and economy in general. This situation is a direct result of the Zionist occupation and its intertwined political and economic motives. The Zionists worked systematically to destroy the Palestinian national economy in order to deprive the population under occupation of any material base for independence. At the same time, this boosted the Israeli economy enormously by turning West Bank and Gaza Palestinians into a captive market for Israeli products and a cheap labor reserve for Israeli industry. Palestinian industry declined due to restrictions imposed by the occupation authorities, and inability to compete with the products of heavily subsidised Israeli industry. Before the occupation, industry accounted for 8.7% of gross national product in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. By 1983, this had dropped to 6.7% (*Al Fajr*, May 20, 1983).

In the West Bank, land confiscation and depriving Palestinian farmers of water resources played a main

role in pushing people to work in 'Israel'. Right after the occupation, 45% of the active West Bank labor force was employed in agriculture. By 1980, only 26% were, while only 15% were employed in local industry. Forty per cent were employed in 'Israel' and 10% in Israeli projects in the West Bank. (Sarah Graham Brown, «Report from the Occupied Territories» *Merip Reports* No. 115, June 1983). The majority of those working in Zionist enterprises are from the refugee camps or rural areas. They are those most dramatically dispossessed of land and other means of livelihood.

Gaza industry can only absorb about 20% of the Strip's current labor force (*Al Fajr*, October 4, 1985). As of 1983, the Israeli Labor Ministry estimated that 34,000 Gaza Strip residents (43% of the work force) had jobs in 'Israel'; 12,000 had work permits, while 22,000 worked illegally but received their wages through Israeli labor exchanges. At least 800 were day laborers - men, women and children who line up in the slave markets to try for a day's work (*Al Fajr*, May 20, 1983).

Most residents of the 1967 occupied territories who commute to work in 'Israel' are forbidden to stay overnight. Yet many do so anyway, to avoid the erosion of their wages by transportation costs. Those who commute daily must leave their homes well before dawn and may not return much before midnight. Even those who work without a permit must pay Israeli taxes and fees for social security and health insurance - benefits which they cannot cash in on, though they may take 40% of their wages (Joost, op. cit.). For those who are registered, «the Employment Service... deducts both income taxes (at higher effective rates than Israelis pay) and worker and employer contributions to the standard state and private social security schemes» (*Jerusalem Post*, January 7, 1986). The same article points out that minimum wage standards are not honored in overtime for

Arab workers, terming this «legal employment for illegal wages.»

Another less visible form of superexploitation is found in the Israeli use of Palestinian labor, especially that of women, through subcontracting and cottage industries. Many large Israeli companies have opened branches in the towns and villages of the 1967 occupied territories, and in the Galilee. Here women do sewing, handwork or other manual labor at way below standard wages. The Palestinian women who work in 'Israel' itself are confined to sewing, tinning, conversion and packaging industries, which are lowest on the pay scale. Even there, they earn half that of Jewish women doing the same work. In addition, the Jewish women workers work shorter hours and are eligible for bonuses.

UNDISGUISED EXPLOITATION

The Israelis often boast that Palestinians earn higher wages in 'Israel' than they would in the territories. At face value, this is true since the occupation's strangulation of local industry prevents Palestinian employers from giving sufficient wages, even if they might want to. However, a few facts about how the Israeli economic crisis hits workers from the territories gives a clearer picture of the Israeli exploitation of Palestinian labor.

The Israeli economic crisis has been pushed most violently onto the backs of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians. Workers from the 1967 occupied territories are seldom classified according to standard job descriptions by Israeli enterprises. Besides depressing their wages, this excludes them from being considered permanent employees. They receive no sick, vacation or unemployment payments. These factors combined mean that they are the first to be fired, without the Israeli economy paying a cent to cushion the blow. They can also be shuffled around into different jobs as best suits Israeli efforts to overcome the economic crisis, by further depressing wages, etc.

Israeli Employment Minister Moshe Katzav confirmed in January 1985, that Palestinians from the occupied territories do not receive unemployment benefits despite wage deductions for unemployment insurance. In fact, these taxes are passed on to the occupied territories «development fund», i.e., reserved for Jewish settlers. The Minister was also forthright in saying that these workers