

noring them, or by promising to look into the matter, and then 'forgetting' all about it.

PLANNING THE STRIKE

Given the miserable conditions and the ineffectiveness of the prisoners' previous forms of protest, preparations began for a hunger strike in Ashkelon, as well as in other Zionist jails. Preparations started six months before the date of the strike was set. Plans were made in order to strengthen the relations among the prisoners and boost their abilities. The aim was to build trust between the prisoners and the leadership in the jails, to consolidate the prisoners' enthusiasm, and to coordinate effectively between the various organizations inside and outside the prisons.

In the pre-strike deliberations, there were democratic discussions among all imprisoned militants from the various resistance organizations. A committee was formed to decide on and plan the strike. It included representatives from all organizations in the prison: one from Fatah, one from PFLP, one from DFLP, one from the Popular Struggle Front, and one to represent the other organizations. The decision to stage the hunger strike was taken unanimously by the committee, plus one non-committee member from the Muslim Brotherhood. The entire pre-strike dialogue was secret. What was publicly declared before the strike was the demands of the prisoners for improved living conditions. The final outcome of the dialogue was positive. It is noteworthy that bilateral discussions between Fatah and the PFLP, and collective discussions among all the organizations, served to restore the effectiveness of the prisoners' movement.

The committee of all the organizations' representatives prepared the practical measures for the strike. It sent messages to all nationalist and progressive forces and institutions in occupied Palestine, particularly the Committee for the Defense of Prisoners and the Committee of Lawyers. Messages were also sent to the Arab governments, the Arab League, the UN, the Red Cross and the Pope, explaining the harsh circumstances which the Palestinian revolutionaries were enduring in the Zionist prisons. Finally, the date was set for the strike -unanimously agreed to be on December 11, 1976, the ninth anniversary of the founding of the PFLP.

THE STRIKE DECLARATION

On the morning of December 11, 1976, a prisoner handed a document to the officer on duty at the start of the daily roll call. This document declared the start of the hunger strike, the reasons for its declaration and the prisoners' demands. This marked the actual implementation of the plan which had been under preparation for weeks by the strike committee. This committee took upon itself the formulation of the prisoners' decisions about protesting their conditions. It conducted extensive, secret communications among all the prisoners from the different organizations, to ensure their unity in struggle. The plan aimed at continuing the hunger strike until fulfillment of the prisoners' demands, or until the prisoners faced death.

A negotiating committee of four prisoners was formed to take decisions relating to the course of the struggle, to negotiate with the prison administration and to meet with the Red Cross and delegations. A central organizational detention committee was formed to follow up the question of living conditions in the prison. Subcommittees were formed to guarantee the coordination and execution of the plan. Information committees were formed to issue news about the strike, and follow up

the reactions outside the prison. Special cleaning committees were formed of prisoners who were asked not to join the hunger strike, so that they could serve as messengers between the different sections of the prison.

The document declaring the start of the strike was smuggled out of the prison to be sent to international and local organizations, so that they could begin a solidarity campaign that would put pressure on the Zionist authorities to submit to the prisoners' demands. The negotiating committee and the central organizational detention committee laid out a three-stage program for maximizing the capacity of the militants who were participating in the strike. All sick prisoners were excused from participating, as were the cleaning workers. In the first stage, 150 revolutionaries were supposed to participate. After 10 days, 100 others would join in. One week later, the rest of the prisoners would join in. However, this schedule was not followed. The majority of detainees joined in at the moment the strike started. Even sick prisoners joined in.



FORCE—FEEDING

The Zionist prison administration only realized what was happening when the strike actually erupted. At first, they tried to ignore the action, thinking it would not last long. They did not imagine that so many detainees had the energy needed to continue for more than a week. For one week, they continued to ignore the strike, but things did not happen as they had wished. The strike continued, and the administration declared an emergency situation in Ashkelon. Guards and medical staff were prohibited from leaving, and more personnel were brought in.

After the first week, the prison administration made its first concerted effort to break the strike. They started sending groups of strikers to the prison clinic. Here guards tied each prisoner to a chair, and a nurse would attempt to force-feed him with hot, salted milk. This caused the prisoners severe pains, and the administration was forced to transfer some of them to hospitals outside the prison for emergency treatment. Despite this, the strikers continued their fast, thus foiling the Zionists' first attempt to break the strike.

On the ninth day of the strike, the administration once again attempted to break it. This time, they isolated the revolu-