

tionary leaders in two separate cells, while force-feeding others with hot milk, this time sweetened.

Then, on the 16th day of the strike, the administration admitted a Palestinian delegation to the prison. It included the infamous Rashad Shawwa and Lawyer Fayez Abu Rahma, both rightists, who visited the prison on the pretext of checking up on the conditions. They gave the strikers promises, trying to get them to end their action. Obviously, the prison administration's allowing them in was a propaganda ploy, to defuse the international and local reactions to the strike, which had reached a level that was embarrassing for the Israelis. In allowing the delegation's visit, the administration also hoped to ignite conflicts among the strikers about continuing the strike, and thus erode their unified position. However, the prisoners' negotiating committee did not fall for this delegation's promises. The prisoners' unified position was sustained, as was the strike which entered the third week.

At the end of the third week, certain symptoms appeared among the strikers, especially the sick, such as difficulty in walking and losing consciousness. This forced the guards and nurses to carry such cases to the clinic on stretchers. Here the strikers were force-fed milk. In particularly critical cases, strikers were put alone in cells and pressured to make a deal with the administration for ending the strike. This attempt to take advantage of the critical state of some of the strikers was, however, in vain. The revolutionaries continued the strike.

STRIKE—BREAKING BY TORTURE

With the exception of some who stopped due to their critical state and at the request of their comrades, the revolutionaries continued their strike. The administration's attempts to break the strike continued to fail. Then, on the 30th night of the strike, a new attempt was made. Prison guards started transferring groups of prisoners to other prisons, while leaving some of the strikers in Ashkelon. They then began to torture the strikers, but only to face failure to break the strike once again.

In view of the continuous failure of Ashkelon's administration to halt the strike, Haim Levi, director-general of Israeli prison affairs, promised the negotiating committee to comply with the prisoners' demands. His pledge was given on the 45th day of the strike, and the committee agreed to stop the strike. With the strike over, all the strikers, including those who had been transferred to other prisons, were returned to Ashkelon.

THE STRIKE RESUMES

Days passed with no sign of the prisoners' demands being fulfilled. The negotiating committee, in conjunction with the central organizational detention committee, decided to renew the strike. Thus, 20 days after stopping, the hunger strike was resumed. The prison administration quickly transferred the members of the negotiating committee to Tel Mond prison; other prisoners were transferred to other prisons as well. Severe punishments were imposed on the strikers remaining in Ashkelon.

The new phase of the strike lasted for 22 days. It ended after the strikers received pledges to fulfill their demands. At the same time, the members of the negotiating committee in Tel Mond continued to strike until the 38th day (counting from the resumption of the strike). Then they received assurances from their lawyers and families that the prisoners in Ashkelon and other prisons had stopped their strike.

The decision to end the strike was taken unanimously after the authorities had pledged to meet the prisoners' demands.

However, based on wrong calculations, the Muslim Brotherhood threatened the prisoners' unity by refusing to end their strike. Yet due to the ineffectiveness of this force, the strike ended anyway as agreed by all other prisoners.

Through the secret and public methods at their disposal, the striking prisoners had been able to follow how the news of the strike was spreading outside the prison. They were aware of the solidarity campaign with their struggle in occupied Palestine and abroad. They knew that their compatriots in other Zionist prisons had staged strikes lasting at least one week. In occupied Palestine, there had been solidarity sit-ins and hunger strikes in the Red Cross offices in Jerusalem and Gaza. There were mass demonstrations and commercial strikes protesting the occupation authorities' oppressive measures against the prisoners. The Committee for the Defense of Prisoners had convened several press conferences, to explain the strikers' demands and call for their recognition as political prisoners, not criminals. Amnesty International and the International Red Cross also joined in the protest, condemning the Zionist prison policies. Liberation movements around the world showed their support to the Palestinian prisoners' demands.

RESULTS OF THE STRIKE

The famous hunger strike in Ashkelon had a series of results which set a precedent at that time in terms of improving prison conditions. Sponge mattresses were provided. The daily break was increased by two and a half hours. A second family visit was allowed each month. Some newspapers were provided and some books with contents about Palestine. Summer and winter clothes were supplied. Prisoners acquired the right to celebrate national and international occasions. The centers where prisoners had worked were closed down with the exception of the kitchen and the room for washing clothes. Discrimination between Jewish criminal prisoners and Palestinian political prisoners was reduced somewhat concerning food and allowances.

Perhaps more importantly, the strike had a series of repercussions on the prisoners' mutual solidarity and unity in struggle. Relations between the Palestinian organizations were reorganized on a firm basis. Coordination grew between the prisoners' movement in all the Zionist jails. The prisoners' reinforced solidarity facilitated the elimination of collaborators in the prisons, and helped curtail the influence of reactionary trends such as the Muslim Brotherhood. All in all, the alliance between the Palestinian resistance organizations was strengthened in the prisons and among the masses in occupied Palestine.

To be realistic, such achievements, no matter how important, did not constitute a 'coup' in the Zionist authorities' prison policy. The strike showed that such achievements can only come through hard, unified struggle, but Zionism, as a racist and fascist movement, could only continue its repressive policy, attempting to subjugate, if not eliminate, the Palestinian people. Prisoners are targeted daily by the Zionist authorities who realize that breaking their morale is the first and essential step towards defeating the Palestinian national liberation movement. Thus, many of the achievements made in the Ashkelon strike have been retracted, and Palestinian militants continue to strike and strike again for fulfillment of the very simplest human rights. Nonetheless, the hunger strike in Ashkelon constituted a qualitative leap in the struggle of the prisoners' movement which is on the front-lines of the overall Palestinian struggle confronting the Zionist entity. ●