

# May 1st

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## Recollections of a Palestinian Worker



For May 1st, International Workers' Day, we have translated a selection from the recollections of the veteran Palestinian communist, Khalil Khouri, taken from a long interview made with him by the Palestinian poet, Hannah Nasser. The recollections reveal the relations among workers in Palestine in the thirties and forties, the relations between the workers and British colonialism, and how the discrimination practiced by the Zionist settlers thwarted efforts at proletarian internationalism.

We were eleven persons living in one house (in the village of Rama). Our family was barely able to obtain enough food for that number of people. One day, in the early thirties, a guest from Abu Sanan village arrived. He was well-dressed and looked well-fed. He said that he worked in a bakery in Haifa, owned by a German, and that he earned seven shillings a day... and a loaf of bread. After a few years, he continued, he had managed to buy a piece of land and some olive trees, which classified him as an owner. He said that the bakery owner needed a boy my age to work in the bakery. Two days later I was working there, earning five shillings a day... and a loaf of bread.

After I had worked two years, the owner terminated my services for one year, as he said, so that a German boy, also my age, could replace me. At that time, I had accumulated an amount of shillings and learned the German language. I found a job at another bakery owned by a German Jew in Al Halisah. The owner liked my enthusiasm and knowledge of the German language. He did not know Hebrew, and he used to hide me when the Histadrut representatives searched the shops. The Histadrut had raised the



Khalil Khouri

slogan of «Hebrew labor» which meant employing only Jews. It was impossible to continue hiding me between the flour sacks every time the representatives showed up. So before completing a year in his bakery, I found myself jobless.

However, I found a job at a British bakery called Sebni. There I met a Jewish worker who from time to time told me about life in Europe, particularly in Russia, and about the Bolsheviks. I didn't care at first. At that time, we reacted negatively to the word *Bolshevik* due to the abundance of lies and fabrications that had been spread about it.

In 1936, the Palestinian revolt erupted, and relations between Arabs and Jews worsened. But my friend continued explaining to me that the evil source behind all the troubles we were facing was the British themselves; they were the enemies of both sides. He also explained that, if left alone, the Arabs and Jews could live peacefully together, as did scores of nationalities in socialist Russia. Although I could not understand everything he was talking about, I was very eager to hear more.

One day he said, «Khouri, you must learn... leave the bakery and learn!» I told him it was impossible to leave the bakery, given my family's economic situation and my responsibilities towards them. He then advised me to join the Palestinian Communist Party where I could learn a lot, as he said. I had a friend at the time, the late Assaf Hananiya, who knew everything about me and my Jewish friend. I used to tell him everything my Jewish friend told me. Thus, together we joined the party, knowing how dangerous it was to do such a thing.

Soon we were invited to attend our first meeting. It was a thrill for us - going in secret, using secret passwords, and the meeting itself. It was held in a damaged house in the bushes of the Carmel mountain, in Haifa. There were fifty persons attending, who barely knew one another. I remember asking the man sitting next to me about his name. He replied: «My name is a spearhead in the chest of colonialism.» I realized I had to stop being curious.

Five speakers took the podium. We only saw their shadows because of the darkness. I recall that the speeches focused on the danger of fascism's rise, and British colonialism's threats to Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula. I remember one speaker who quoted a poem which