

May 1st

Workers, Peasants and Merchants in the Uprising

May 1st is International Workers' Day, and this year there is truly cause to celebrate the leading role of the Palestinian working class. A powerful component of the current uprising is the general strike when Palestinian workers boycott their jobs in the Zionist state. However, the overriding characteristic of the uprising is the united action by all Palestinian classes against the occupation, as a logical consequence of the national oppression imposed on the Palestinian people as a whole. In addition to the role of the working class, this article examines the role of the Palestinian national bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie in the uprising, specifically the role of the merchants and peasantry.

THE PALESTINIAN WORKING CLASS— A NEW CHALLENGE

The expansion of the Palestinian working class in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is a direct result of the policies of economic subordination enforced by the Israeli authorities since the beginning of the occupation. Contrary to Zionist aims, these policies contributed to the expansion of the Palestinian working class and its role in the struggle. In urban areas, the economic subordination policies affected mainly the craftsmen and small businessmen, and forced the majority of them to become day laborers. In the countryside, these policies had similar damaging effects on the peasantry. Thousands of small landowners, and consequently their family members, were turned into laborers in Israeli factories and farms.

The bulk of the expanded Palestinian working class in the occupied territories has been channeled into light industry, such as the manufacture of glass, furniture and construction materials, rather than into automated, heavy industry, where the workers constitute the nucleus of the proletariat. The national industry in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has generally been deteriorating due to the high tariffs, taxes and interest rates imposed by the Israeli authorities. This lead to a reduced number of large factories, limiting the concentration of Palestinian workers; 93.3% of Palestinian industrial enterprises employ 1 to 9 workers, whereas only 6.3% employ 100 workers or more. Despite horizontal expansion of the industrial sector in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 1967, there was no significant rise in production. Industrial production was restricted to processing raw materials (such as tobacco and textiles) rather than turning out finished products, and other light industries that absorb the largest share of the laborers. The dispersion of the Palestinian labor force in small production units, spread in different areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, has had negative effects on the development of the working class, and on the maneuverability of trade unions.

According to Israeli statistics, in 1981 there were 247,000 workers in the occupied territories, of which 70,000 worked for Israeli enterprises, in addition to over 40,000 unregistered Palestinian workers. These figures reflect the extent of the deterioration of the Palestinian national economy and the decrease of the number of workers in the national industry, parallel to the increase in the number of Palestinian workers in the Israeli economy. This situation is a result of systematic Zionist efforts to provide for the Israeli economy's need for a low-paid reserve labor force and to fill the vacancies left by

drafted settlers. Hereby the Zionist authorities also aim to weaken the Palestinian farmers' adherence to the land.

THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

After 1967, despite the continuous expansion of the Palestinian working class and the formation of many trade unions, the trade union movement has suffered due to several factors. Prime among these is the continuous harassment and repression of the Zionist authorities, such as periodic storming of union headquarters and the arrest of union leaders and activists. The Zionist authorities also issued decree no. 83 that constitutes interference in how the leading bodies of the trade unions are formed. Moreover, the military government and the Histadrut prohibit the Palestinian trade unions from defending the interests of Palestinians working in 'Israel', who now constitute approximately half the Palestinian working class. Added to this, the trade unions under occupation lack the finances to hire professional trade unionists or to rent offices needed to function at full capacity.

The union movement faces other difficulties which are the responsibility of the different Palestinian political forces. First, there is the split in the West Bank General Federation of Trade Unions, due to political disagreements which have had very damaging effects on the unity of the working class. Second, there is a separation of the trade unions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As a result of the objective and subjective difficulties, the workers' movement has not in the past played the vanguard political role it should play.

A prerequisite for advancing the awareness and consequently the role of the Palestinian working class, and for improving the conditions of the trade union movement, is the unity of all the nationalist and democratic forces, in order to maintain the unity of the working class. There is an urgent need to restore the unity of the General Federation of Trade Unions in the West Bank, to unite the trade union movement in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and to consolidate the democratic spirit in the trade unions. It is the role of the political forces to advance the political role of the trade unions, and to motivate the working class to play its vanguard role in confronting the occupation.

THE WORKING CLASS UNDER OCCUPATION

Over fifty percent of Palestinian laborers in the 1967 occupied territories work beyond the green line and fall prey to a