

Trade Unions Reunited

This year Palestinians are celebrating May 1st, International Workers' Day, with particular enthusiasm in view of the reunification of the West Bank trade union movement.

On March 1st, the reunification of the General Federation of Trade Unions in the West Bank, occupied State of Palestine, was announced. This healed the division that had prevailed since the 1981 split in the federation. While the division corresponded to political differences in the Palestinian arena and was basically caused by the right wing, it was also rooted in changing realities in the 1967 occupied territories, and the failure of the existing trade union movement to respond adequately to the new situation. Since the 1967 occupation, land confiscation has pushed more and more Palestinians to work in industry and services; with the subordination of the local economy, increased numbers of them were driven to work in Israel. But while the Palestinian working class was growing, the occupation authorities imposed a series of restrictions to hinder the process of unionization. Obviously, Palestinian trade unions were not authorized to negotiate on behalf of Palestinians working in Israeli concerns and, in official terms, these workers could not be unionized. The formation of a new union, as well as the list of candidates for office in existing unions, had to be approved by the military government. Just to give one example of the consequences of this, of 50 applications to form new unions since 1967, five were approved (*Al Fajr*, February 6, 1989). Many unions refused to submit to this illegal interference, and thus functioned without permission.

The West Bank Trade Union Federation has traditionally been led by the Palestinian communists who deserve much credit for the first efforts to unionize the Palestinian working class. However, with the expansion of the working class, other progressive forces began protesting that they were not accorded just representation in the existing trade unions. At the same

time, the various Palestinian political contingents formed labor blocs to organize more workers in the context of the overall rise of the mass movement in the occupied territories in the early eighties.

Democratic reorganization

The March reunification of the federation was preceded by four months of intense dialogue to find means of overcoming these problems. A 16-member executive committee was formed to reorganize the trade union movement according to a new internal charter. The aim is merging all the existing unions on a district basis. This means regrouping about 100 unions into 20 general unions to be based in Jenin, Ramallah, Nablus, Hebron, Bethlehem, Tulkarm, Qalqilya and Jerusalem. These unions will be open to all workers, and elections will be based on principles of democracy and proportional representation of all the participating forces. General elections are to be held within one year or, if this proves unfeasible, within two years.

With the March 1st reunification, the various trade unions and labor blocs were represented in the federation's executive committee, save for the Workers' Unity Bloc which was accorded two seats, but initially failed to join, saying that proportional representation had not been correctly implemented. In addition, a general secretariat was formed as the highest decision-making body. The secretariat is composed of five members: two representing the Youth Movement and one each representing the Front for Trade Union Action, the Progressive Bloc and the Workers' Unity Bloc. The general secretariat is charged with drafting a new constitution and internal charter for the federation as soon as possible. Once approved, these documents cannot be amended without

the agreement of all the signatories. Thus, the federation has been opened to all nationalist political trends and labor blocs. It is in the process of reorganization on a firmer, more democratic and unified basis. All progressive and nationalist forces are called upon to join in this process to ensure its success.

The intifada and the federation

While much of the reunification process focused on organizational matters to rectify the problems of the past, there is no doubt that the driving force for the new labor unity is the intifada itself. More than anything else, the intifada has tangibly proved what great gains can be made via united mass struggle and democratic, collective leadership. From the onset, workers have been on the frontlines of the intifada, bearing credit for some of its major achievements. Statistics released by Israel's biggest bank, Hapoalim, in early 1990 estimated the direct losses to Israel in production and economic growth during the first two years of the intifada to be \$800 million to \$1 billion. Along with the Palestinian boycott of Israeli products, the main cause of these losses was Palestinian workers going on strike. In addition, Palestinian workers stood on the frontlines in the battle against the imposition of the new magnetic ID cards. The trade unions reuniting enables further consolidation of the working class role in the intifada.

The March 1st announcement reiterated the federation's commitment to the resolutions of the 19th PNC. The reunification of the federation is a significant contribution to the consolidation of national unity in the framework of the PLO. Here it is relevant to note that the federation was the first mass organization in the occupied territories to declare adherence to the PLO when it broke away from the Jordanian federation after the 1970 Black September massacre.

The reunification declaration pledged the federation's intent to make «efforts to develop the trade union movement to fulfill its vanguard role