

The Struggle of a Palestinian Village

This was sent to us from the occupied State of Palestine by a friend who is currently living and working in the West Bank.

Six kilometers southeast of Nablus, tucked among the rolling hills of the West Bank, lies Awarta, a village of 4,000 residents, which I visited on May 8th. As the entrance to the village has been blocked by the Israeli army with piles of rocks and soil, and in order to avoid any possible army checkpoint, we decided to take a roundabout route to the village. This road winds through terraced hills dotted with olive trees and a wheat field, all of which belongs to the village of Awarta. The village owns 16,000 dunums of land, the produce of which is the main source of income for the villagers. In addition, some villagers work as teachers in nearby Nablus or as construction labourers in Israel.

Before the intifada, Awarta had been a traditionally «quiet» village, where only a small group of people were politically active. These days, the village is known as well-organized and militant. Awarta is a major stronghold of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (all the intifada graffiti in the village is signed by this group) and a battlefield against the Israeli occupation. It is an example of a village in which an effective alternative structure of local control has emerged. Early in the Palestinian popular uprising, the local political leadership established new procedures regulating daily life, and popular committees brought a measure of local control. Every villager can tell you the story of one of the four mukhtars of the village. Notorious for tricking the people out of their money by promising to improve living conditions in the village, and for giving the names of intifada activists to the Israeli Shin Bet, he was ordered by the community to come to the local mosque to confess his crimes and to renounce his traitorous behaviour. When he refused, the *shabab* put him under house arrest. Once a month, he was allowed to visit Nablus from 8 am until 1 pm. In the morning, the *shabab* put him in a taxi, and the same taxi driver drove him back to the village in the afternoon. This went on for months; the

mukhtar was repeatedly asked to come to the mosque. He never went. The man still lives in the village, but is totally isolated and controlled by the community. On other occasions, the popular committees settled disputes in the village, decided that the taxi fare from Awarta to Nablus was to be reduced, that shops were allowed to remain open all day, except on general strike days declared by the Unified National Leadership. All decisions of the popular committees and local leadership are made public via the mosque loudspeaker or notices posted on the wall of the mosque.

Health care is provided by the Union of Health Work Committees (formerly the Union of Popular Committees for Health Services). They run the only clinic in the village. Daily, a doctor and nurse come to Awarta to render medical services to the people. Activists of the Palestinian Women's Committees teach literacy, embroidery and sewing classes to the women and girls of Awarta.

The old part of the village, where small, meter-thick stone houses still stand, is being renovated, and the houses

are made available to newly wed couples. In one of these houses, some youths have begun to raise poultry, following the directives of the Unified National Leadership to strive for self-sufficiency. There has been electricity in the village for the past five years, but there is no running water and residents collect their water in wells and cisterns. When the wells run dry, trucks carrying large water tanks come to the village to refill them.

The Israeli occupation authorities are using control of water supplies to make the population dependent and submissive. This is what was attempted during the 33-day-long siege of Awarta after the Gulf war. When the war broke out on January 17th, the village was subjected to the 24-hour blanket curfew imposed throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip. However, unlike other parts of the occupied Palestinian lands, the curfew was not lifted after the war. In fact, the village was surprised by a military raid on February 25th, during which the curfew was prolonged for another 33 days! According to one of the villagers, this collective punishment was in response to their cheering and singing in support of Saddam Hussein during the war. While settlers of the nearby settlement, Tel Hayyim, took refuge in their sealed rooms wearing gas masks, the people of Awarta (who were denied gas masks anyway) took to the streets, chanting and whistling. This act, together with the fact that Tel Hayyim's telephone lines and water supplies had been cut – allegedly by *shabab* from Awarta – infuriated the settlers who demanded, and got,

Awarta families collecting water from cisterns

