

Arab Councils Threaten Strike

In January, Israeli Prime Minister Shamir invited all Palestinian Arab mayors and heads of local councils to meet under the pretext of discussing their problems. Out of a total of 55 councils, only 15 responded to the invitation. The majority decided to boycott the meeting, protesting Shamir's circumvention of the elected regional committee of local Arab councils.

Shamir's move came as the financial crisis confronting the Arab municipalities and local councils had reached a peak. The historical discrimination against Arab communities, as compared to the generous funding accorded Jewish ones, has been greatly aggravated by the new austerity measures adopted by the Likud government. The budget deficit of the local Arab councils now exceeds 100 million shekels.

Shamir's move also coincides with escalation of the Israeli authorities' repression against the Palestinians of the Galilee, Triangle and Naqab. More arrests are taking place. More suppressive measures are imposed in order to force Palestinians to emigrate and to distort their national identity. To counter the growth of the progressive nationalist trend in 1948 occupied Palestine, the Israeli authorities have enacted a concerted attack against the municipal councils in the Palestinian Arab cities and villages, including harassment, new laws, increased taxes, and other political and economic pressure. This aims to weaken the mayors and council heads and make them appear incapable of running the municipalities and meeting the population's needs, in order to reassert the hegemony of the Zionist parties.

In this context, Shamir took an unprecedented measure by meeting with a group of Palestinian Arab leaders. Begin, in contrast, never visited the Arab communities while in power. Though professing "concern" for the Palestinian population's needs, the real intent of Shamir's initiative was: first, to split the unity of the Palestinians under occupation; second, to weaken and hopefully erase the progressive nationalist sentiment among them; third, to fuel tribal and sectarian differences among Palestinians, which would facilitate the implementation of the racist Israeli policies; and finally, to overstep the regional committee of the councils.

Shamir's initiative was designed as a cover for the Israeli government's further moves to tighten the rope, financially speaking, on the local Arab councils.

The Ministry of Interior intends to delay approving the councils' budgets for the 1984 fiscal year. Instead of funding the budget, the ministry will make monthly payments based on last year's budget, without taking into account rising prices and inflation, which has greatly affected the councils' budgets. Due to non-approval of their budgets, the councils are suffering a great shortage in specific budgets. They are unable to meet the minimum expenses for development projects and services. Moreover, they are unable to cover basic need in fields such as education, which might lead to the closure of schools. In the meantime, the councils are being forced to take bank loans, with interest to be paid from their budget, in order to solve problems that have been accumulating, such as paying teachers' salaries and purchasing necessities. Obviously, this enforced practice will only accumulate budget problems in the future, leaving the councils in an impossible situation.

The Ministry of Interior, if it approves the budget at all, intends to make several cuts. Furthermore, there are clear indications that the budget for development, as well as government scholarships, will be cancelled altogether. Inevitably, the standard of living of Palestinian Arab residents will suffer.

The Palestinian Arab mayors and heads of local councils are eager to confront this financial policy, as part of their long-standing defense of the rights of the population. This year's conference of the Regional Committee of Local Arab Council Heads, which convened in Shafa 'Amr on February 8th, accorded top attention to the budget crisis facing their municipalities and villages. Thirty-eight council heads assembled at this conference, which is held every four years after local elections, to agree on future work. The conference issued a document, entitled the National Consensus Statement, which outlined the political line and future program for the Regional Committee. This document reaffirmed that the "Arab people in Israel are an inseparable part of the Palestinian Arab people". Placing responsibility for the local councils' problems on the discriminatory policy of the Israeli government, the conference outlined specific steps whereby the council heads will work for improving conditions for their constituents. These steps include establishing councils in Arab communities where there are none, development and renewal programs, and cancelling land confiscation decisions. The Shafa 'Amr Conference also decided to call for a warning strike unless the government agrees to cover the councils' budget deficit and change its policy for allocating funds generally.

This could be the signal for escalated popular actions against the oppression and racism practiced by the Israeli authorities. It gives the Israeli government

The Shafa 'Amr Conference, 1984

