

The Formation of the Indigenous Palestinian Working Class

The incipient formation of the Palestinian proletariat began in the late 19th century with the development of capitalism in agriculture. In 1890 there were about 400 Arab families living and working in the settlement of Rishon Lezion which was also populated by 40 Jewish families. In 1911 about 1,000 temporary Arab workers were employed in the settlement of Petah Tekva which had 600 Jewish residents (Kimmerling, 1983:44). Yet, it was only during British colonialism that the actual formation of a large force of indigenous Palestinian working class took place. Partly due to heavy taxation and the forceful expropriation of the peasants and partly due to the Zionist land policy which resulted in the "extra-territorialization" of the land (3), many peasants were driven out of their land and became totally dependent on wage labour.

The indigenous Palestinian proletariat were not excluded from the capitalist economy. Rather, due to the increasing demand for labour, a large section of this proletariat was absorbed by both the state and the European Jewish capitalist sectors. Johnson-Crosbie's findings quoted earlier estimated the landless, who were totally dependent on wage labour for their subsistence, at about 29 per cent of the total rural population. They also found that among the 47 per cent of the peasants classified as land owners, a large part had to supplement its income through wage labour. (4)

Although, officially, the Zionist authorities in Palestine refused to accept Johnson-Crosbie's findings for ideological reasons, some Israeli writers, notably, Sussman, found these figures to be largely accurate. Sussman believed that during the 1920s over 20 per cent of