

Farm Labour and Wage Labour

Everybody in Ras el-Tin owns land. A majority of those farmers who work in Israel spend one to two months every year away from their work to pick their olives. Some take a few extra weeks to work for big landlords in neighbouring villages (Mizra'a, Burham, Deir Ghassaneh).

In the hilly regions of the West Bank very few households live exclusively from their family farm. In Ras el-Tin, there are about eight families (less than 5% of the total households) whose members work a substantial portion of the year in their family land. (Husam's father-in-law is one of those. Relying on his sons' and on hired labour during the picking season, he makes 120 cannisters (2,400 litres) of olive oil during good years. This amount yields him enough income to make him independent, if he so chooses, of having to send his sons to work outside the village).

The economics of olive farming in the West Bank make it worthwhile only for a limited number of peasant families to devote their households' labour to the orchard. A survey of 840 farms conducted in 1974 revealed a net return of I.L. 724* per dunum of Roman olives against an investment of I.L. 425 per dunum, and that during "good" (masiah) years -- i.e. every two years.⁴ For regular trees the net yield was I.L. 338 per dunum in good years and I.L. 80 during "bad" (shalatuneh) years (Farhat-Nasir, 1980:59), hardly an inviting prospect during periods of high demand for wage labour in Israel.

However, the choice facing the Palestinian peasant is not simply between working in Israel and working on his farm, but rather that of the

* The exchange rate of the Israeli pound for 1974 was I.L. 17.2 per Jordanian Dinar (about I.L. 14 per 1 sterling); see also appendix C.