
A Workers' Party: From Concept to Necessity

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The notion of a workers' party received its first incarnation on February 11, 2006, when 300 manual laborers and youth gathered at the Almaden Theatre in Haifa for the opening of ODA's election campaign. The event was the culmination of a lengthy process, which included intensive work on two major levels. There is the daily level, where members of WAC, which ODA founded, seek to establish a trade union that will find and protect jobs within the framework of organized labor. And there is the general level, where we in ODA seek to establish a party that will answer the worker's need for political representation.

The public that assembled on February 11 was organized within the framework of the Workers Advice Center (WAC-MAAN). These were people who had learned to recognize the advantages of union defense, as well as the fact that they need their own party. This idea, first raised in ODA's 2003 campaign, has today become a historical necessity, dictated by the political and economic realities in which we live.

What are these realities? At the start of the 1990's, Israel's society and economy underwent structural changes as a result of neo-liberal privatization. The government abandoned the welfare economy, which had guaranteed steady jobs and a social safety net. This change had a disastrous effect on the Arab population, whose main employment had been in construction, agriculture and textiles.

In the last fifteen years, we have witnessed a polarization of classes within Arab society itself. A well-heeled middle class has developed, made up of independent professionals, small contrac-

tors, owners of personnel companies and educators, who have managed to gain from growth at the top. In contrast, the class of Arab manual labor – having lost its union protection – has been shunted into unemployment, exploitation and poverty.

The existing Arab political parties draw their power mainly from the middle-class. Their principal message focuses on pan-Arab nationalism and the fight against discrimination. They are far removed from the issues affecting those who have suffered most from the structural changes in Israel's economy.

This is the source of the gap that yawns between the Arab parties and the wider Arab public, which is made up largely of manual workers. Most of the latter see the nationalist slogans as lip service, bruited by people who have turned their backs to the common misery. Because they make do with empty proclamations, their parliamentary presence pales.

There is another reason too why the workers remain untouched by national slogans about an end to the Occupation and the need for a Palestinian state. The general political situation has made fulfillment of this program impossible. America's hegemony in the region, and the one-sided support it gives Israel, have put peace out of reach. The working public hunkers down, therefore, on immediate existential questions of bread and work.

This phenomenon is not unique to the "1948 Arabs," as those in Israel are called. The massive vote for Hamas in the recent Palestinian elections shows a similar trend in the Occupied Territories. Like the Arab parties in Israel, the ruling party in the Territories, Fatah, decked itself out with national slogans as a cover for the narrow interests of a ruling clique. The Palestinian working class voted not for the extrem-

ist program of Hamas, but rather for an immediate improvement in its own desperate living conditions. The indifference to the national current does not signify an acceptance of Israel's Occupation. It reflects an instinctive sense that peace is unattainable anyway within the present balance of forces.

Where is the Jewish worker?

The call for a workers' party is not directed to Arabs alone. Most of the Jewish manual laborers, whether they work for a contractor or a personnel company, aren't organized within the Histadrut (Israel's General Federation of Labor). Like their Arab colleagues, they are alienated from the whole range of parties, from Likud to Meretz. It is logical, therefore, that they should join a workers' party. Until now, however, no serious attempt has been made in this direction.

The socioeconomic gap, of course, is not an Israeli invention. In the West, and especially the US, unbridled capitalism creates gulfs that challenge the imagination. Despite the widespread American phenomenon of poverty-stricken workers without union representation, there is no attempt there to establish a workers' party that will wean itself away from the Democrats and Republicans, both of which represent capital.

The Jewish worker in Israel sees it as his country. In the existing parties and the media, he finds a means for communicating his message. He may even hope to influence how the pie is cut. A large part of the Jewish poor are ultra-orthodox or Soviet immigrants or descendants of Jews from Arab lands. They still consider the existing establishment to be a framework, although a weakening one, for expressing their desires.

When we speak of the Arab public,



ODA Convention in Haifa, Feb. 11, 2006. The 55 candidates display the party's ballot. Photo by Galit Hinon.

however, the picture reverses itself: the state isn't theirs, they have no parties close to the sources of power, and the Arab media lack influence. The existing political vacuum in Arab society transforms the notion of a workers' party into a realistic possibility.

It isn't an accident that the Arab public, in the last 30 years, has been the spearhead of the peace camp and the Left. Hadash, on the strength of its Arab members, was the kernel around which that camp crystallized. The electoral strength of Hadash, and of the Israeli peace camp in general, depends on the Arab street. The Labor Party also depends on Arab support in order to reach a parliamentary majority. The fact is, however, that the events of October 2000 (when Israeli police, under a Labor government, shot and killed Arab citizens who were demonstrating) created a rift between the Arab public and the Labor Party. Since then the latter's mandates have dwindled below 20, and it is far from having real hope of returning to power.

Although the Jewish laborer may not yet see a workers' party as suiting him, in current Israeli discourse its relevance is recognized. The problem of poverty isn't sectoral or national. It crosses continents and boundaries. It recognizes no separation line between Jews and Arabs. The contractors, employment bureaus and the Wisconsin Plan do not discriminate between Arab and Jew: all fall victim to the iden-

tical system.

ODA's Knesset list contains a large number of laborers, men and women and youth. The party platform calls for fair employment. It opposes privatization. It opposes the importation of labor slaves in the form of unorganized migrant workers. It opposes cuts in welfare budgets. It calls for taxing the rich. This isn't pan-Arab nationalism, but rather a program that can and should attract every worker without regard to race, religion, nationality or sex.

The masters of capital have united and expropriated the Jewish state for their private purposes. They have replaced the national Zionist goals with cosmopolitan economic values. They have no hesitation to invest abroad in order to increase profits.

The unfortunate reality, however, is that the same unity does not exist among the workers. All of them, Arab and Jew, have poverty in common. All are exploited. All lack union protection. Why then don't they unite? It appears that the "national" mosquito continues to buzz in their brains, even after it has sucked their blood. There is still a palpable gap between, on the one hand, those who feel they are defended by the state, with a strong army and a favored legal status, and, on the other, those who feel left out in all walks of life.

The Arab worker identifies with the oppressed of the world and feels their suffering. He despises the US and its

imperialist policy. He rejects Zionism, viewing the Occupation as the source of the continuing conflict. Not so, the Jewish worker. He prefers to support the strong, even if this goes against his interest. That is why the stratum of poor, unemployed Jewish workers still fails to pose a challenge to the ruling capitalist establishment.

For this reason, every leftist should see the unique attempt by Arab laborers to establish their party – not on the basis of national affiliation, rather on that of social class – as a breakthrough toward the rebuilding of the peace camp. A workers' party is internationalist in its essence. It doesn't bind itself within a national camp, but extends a hand to every activist, to every person who struggles against the Occupation. Every worker who puts class interest above national interest is an ally in the fight for social change.

The Jewish worker has a long way to go to achieve an internationalist consciousness, which will enable him to see an ally in the Arab. The state of Israel turns its back today on the rights of the Palestinian people, and also on the rights of its own poverty-stricken citizens. Thus Israel marches steadily toward disintegration. Anyone who wants to build an alternative future, based on an end to the Occupation and an end to the rule of capital, will find our outstretched hand. ■