

HOW JEWISH WORKERS LIVE IN PALESTINE

By G. Koenig

THE Jewish working class is the backbone of the Jewish *Yishuv* in Palestine in point of numbers, weight of sacrifice and love of country. In Palestine are the beautiful houses, roads and highways and factories built by the Jewish workers. In cement, textile and metal plants, in glass works, on the railroads, in port, in the fields—everywhere I met them. I saw them under the burning sun, in the *khamzin* winds, in the rains, burned, emaciated by heat and sweat. I studied them at work, in the city and inter-urban busses that carried them to and from their work. I saw them deep in newspaper, pamphlet or book. I listened to their discussions among themselves. I talked to them. I visited many workers' homes. I spoke to some at 25 lectures and discussions in towns and villages, collectives and factories. Not always did our opinion on this or that question correspond with that of the majority of these workers. But we always understood each other; we felt the closeness of our common class; the same determination, not clearly felt by many, to see the working class and all humanity happy, joyous, socialist; the same great love for our people.

How do these workers live? I was constantly alert to observe this, as well as to discover what they were thinking.

G. KOENIG, editor of the French-Yiddish paper, *Neue Presse*, has recently returned from a four-month visit to Palestine.

When I was in Palestine at the end of 1946 and early in 1947, I found the shop windows packed with all kinds of goods. The most varied commodities, necessities as well as luxury items, all sorts of foodstuffs, fruits, wines. The ration system, except for one or two items, did not exist. In comparison with the countries of Europe and other parts of the world, Palestine did not suffer from the war. Because of special conditions, the war years were a period of unprecedented prosperity in Palestine. Palestine had worked for the allies, some of whose soldiers passed through the country and some of whom remained there. Industry developed greatly, trade blossomed. About £100 million of savings were deposited in the banks.

To what extent did the worker share in this prosperity? Very little, sad to say, in comparison with the earnings of the entrepreneurs, merchants and speculators. The only gain for the workers was a full week's work for the first time since the unemployment caused by the serious economic crisis of 1936-1940. Real wages, however, did not rise during the war years or in the post-war period, but actually kept dropping.

The prominent statistician of the Jewish Agency, Dr. Didrowitch, made a survey among a great number of Jewish working class families. These are the results: only 25 per cent of the Jewish workers earn somewhat more than the minimum living standard, the rest earn less than the mini-

imum. This minimum is 102 to 132 per cent of their income.

Have wages fallen since the war? Not at all. On the contrary, money wages increased about threefold. But the prices of all kinds of commodities more than quadrupled. Despite increased wages resulting from high prices, real wages are lower than before the war. The comment of the Histadruth's statistical journal *Elon* of January 1947 on the survey of Dr. Didrowitch is characteristic. "It becomes clear from this investigation," wrote *Elon*, "that the masses of workers cannot get along on their earnings and are compelled to fall into debt. The conditions of the lower strata are particularly difficult. From this it can be seen that the complaints about the high living standard of the Palestinian workers have no justification."

And here is a second statistical study, also a Histadruth investigation. Working class families in various parts of the world spent on the average the following percentage of their budget on food:

Country	Year	Per Cent
England	1938	39.5
England	1943	50.
United States	1943	37.6
Palestine	1939	50.6
Palestine	1941	59.8
Palestine	1946	64.9

Even omitting comparison with the United States and England, these figures show that in Palestine a working class family spends almost two-thirds of its budget on food, while before the war it spent only a little more than half!

Crowded Housing

True, according to official figures, rent for the Jewish worker amounts to less than half of the pre-war figure—9.1 per cent of his budget. But how do most of the Jewish working class live? Here we come to one of the most painful problems in the life of the Jewish workers, its housing. At a time when the rich Jews in Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem live in beautiful villas, in six, eight, ten and twelve-room apartments, the majority of the Jewish workers suffer in one-room flats. Everywhere one sees the system of common kitchens. This means that in an apartment of several rooms, a different family lives in each room, while the kitchen is shared by all. Since the war, children have been added, families have become larger, and the crowding has become even more unbearable. As a result quarrels frequently arise which embitter the lives of not a few families.

There was no construction during the war, but it was resumed after the war. But getting a new apartment is an unattainable dream for the vast majority of the workers, since one must pay hundreds of pounds for the right to take possession!

Here is one incident among hundreds about a girl who

has been in the country for 12 years. She works in an aluminum plant and earns a pound (approximately four dollars) a day. Years ago she met a young man who is a government employee in Tel Aviv and earns £32 a month. She lives in a small, dark room in a barrack, without water or conveniences of any kind. He lives in a hotel. Their earnings, after deducting dues, taxes and fares, are barely enough to get along on. It is impossible for them to marry for they must have at least £200 to £300 in order to take possession of a small room in Tel Aviv, let alone pay for furniture and other items.

Certainly there are workers who are well accommodated, with nice apartments rented before the war, and who pay £4 to £5 a month rent; or those who have flats in the new housing developments. But unfortunately they are a minority. We refer again to official figures. A survey of the Jewish Agency in 1946 established the fact that on the average the following number of persons live in one room:

In Tel Aviv	4.6 persons
In Haifa	5.2 persons
In Jerusalem	6.1 persons

Tax and Dues Burdens

About 10, and sometimes 12 per cent of a worker's earnings go for dues in the Histadruth and other funds. Needless to say, this crimps the budget of workers, let alone the various indirect government and municipal taxes, and cost of education of a child even in elementary school, for books and notebooks. Health maintenance, like school maintenance, rests almost exclusively on the shoulders of the workers. It is enough to indicate that the 1946 budget of £2 million of the Histadruth sick benefit fund, which applies to about 40 per cent of the Jewish *Yishuv*, was made up from the following:

Taxes from workers	83.3 per cent
Employers and institutions	14.7 per cent
Miscellaneous	2.0 per cent

In a country where the government has absolutely no ties with the population except through the police, dungeons, barbed-wire and persecution of all types; in a country where the occupying power tries to suppress initiative to improve the living conditions of the population—in such a country the struggle of the worker to maintain his rights and living standards is increasingly difficult. A trade union, no matter how strong it is, cannot, especially under colonial conditions, represent a state. In fact the present policies of the Histadruth carry out its obligations to the workers badly. Hence I have rarely experienced anywhere such insecurity for the future and fear of unemployment as I found in Palestine. It is apparent how workers deny themselves, work overtime, work in two or three different places at the same time, in order to save for bad times.

In recent years the structure of the Jewish working class in Palestine has undergone a basic change. If the Jewish worker several decades ago was on the whole young, very often without family ties, he is today on the average much older. The majority have families, and in any case the difficulty of earning a livelihood is much greater. Here are some figures to substantiate this:

While in 1922 only 32 per cent of the Jewish workers were married, 77 per cent were family heads in 1945! While in 1922, 78 per cent of the workers were under 30, in 1937 only 53 per cent were younger than 30, and in 1945 only 34 per cent.

Real Wages Fall, Profits Soar

The rich Jews—who consider themselves fiery Zionists—who were great gainers from war prosperity, exploit every opportunity to try to cut wages. Wages, they complain, are “too high” and therefore it is impossible to meet foreign competition. Facts show, however, that while wages before the war amounted to 32.5 per cent of the value of the production, at the end of the war it equalled only from 20 to 22 per cent.

The example of the diamond industry is classic. This industry grew up during the war. Diamond dealers became extremely rich. In 1945 they exported more than £6 million worth of gems. All expenditures for raw materials, wages and other costs amounted to £4 million. This left a clear profit for several hundred establishments of £2 million (approximately 8 million dollars), which is higher than the 5,000 workers in the trade earned for a year. Of the £2 million, a few large establishments gobbled up one half.

At the end of 1946 a crisis hit the trade. The fervidly nationalist employers of the diamond trade did not wait long to lock out the workers from the factories. It took place in December. They did not even wait till the first of the year, when the collective contract was to expire. Simultaneously they established “black factories,” where they offered work at lower wages. When I left Palestine at the end of February, the situation was very hard and the workers complained that the Histadruth was not defending them properly. I also read the same accusations in the newspapers *Mishmar* (organ of the Hashomer Hatzair), *L'Achduth H'Avodah* (organ of the left-wing labor party Zionists) and *Kol Haam* (organ of the communists).

The situation of the Jewish workers had considerably worsened as a result of the war. And once more the employers have shown that they make class interests appear as national interests as the bourgeoisie everywhere.

This is what we read in the Hashomer Hatzair organ, *Mishmar*, of March 11, 1947: “It has happened more than once that employers take advantage of bad times to reduce wages of workers; in times of trouble for the nation ways are sought to throw the whole burden on the shoulders of the laborer. And it is clear that this time also demands will be made on the worker in the name of a false patriotism to reduce wages.”

And yet, in spite of the difficulties of life, of worry over the next day's bread, the Jewish worker in Palestine makes every effort to live a cultured life. The majority of the Jewish workers' homes that I visited (except in the very poorest, and mostly of the eastern Jews) were very clean. The homes, that is, a single small room, are modestly but tastefully arranged. The working father and mother sacrifice so that their children should lack nothing, be properly nourished, clothed and educated. (Hardship no doubt accounts mainly for the fact that working class families of European descent rarely have more than one or two children.) The workers read a lot. A plant of 30 to 40 workers often subscribes to three or four newspapers, which are passed from hand to hand. Workers subscribe for books, save to attend the movies and theater.

The Jewish workers love the country which has taken so much of their toil, sweat and blood. Certainly there are some who would like to leave. The great majority, however, especially among the veteran settlers, are bound to the country. I was happy to meet communist workers, especially some who have lived in Palestine for a long time, and some of the youth who speak with love about *artzainu* (our land). *Artzainu* denotes for them a country from which the occupation power must be driven, and where both peoples of the country should live under a free and democratic regime. The communists are very proud of the fact that one of their leaders, S. Mikunis, has lived in the country for 25 years, and participated in the construction of a great number of houses and highways, first as a worker and for the last 12 years as a first class engineer.

The Jewish workers in Palestine defend their interests, often against the will of the Histadruth leadership. Of the 176 strikes in 1945, 86 were called by the Histadruth, and not a few of these 86 were forced upon the Histadruth by rank and file workers.

Patriotism and class struggle, national interests and friendship between peoples—the conscious working class of the whole world never separated these conceptions. The progressive sections of the Palestinian Jewish working class are struggling so that their country may find as quickly as possible the one correct road that will open new, bright perspectives for both peoples of Palestine.

WE MOURN

PETER V. CACCHIONE

Died November 6, 1947

Gallant anti-fascist fighter

Champion of minority rights

People's leader