

The political dead end of Labour Zionism

Part 1—The origins and class character of political Zionism

Jean Shaoul
5 April 2001

This three-part article examines the historical process that has led Israel's Labour Party to form a coalition government with Likud under Ariel Sharon, and its participation in the brutal suppression of the Palestinian intifada. Parts two and three will be published on April 6 and 7.

The acceptance by the Labour Party of cabinet seats in General Ariel Sharon's right wing coalition government alongside Likud, Shas and other extreme right wing formations has conferred legitimacy on an administration that is headed by the butcher of the Palestinians. In 1983 an official Israeli Commission found Sharon responsible for the 1982 massacre of 1,000 Palestinians at the Sabra and Chatilla refugee camps, and declared him unfit to be a government minister.

Labour's decision to join Sharon represents the wholesale repudiation of its supposed differences with Likud, in terms of Israel's relations with the Palestinians and its Arab neighbours. The Labour Party remains formally committed to a negotiated peace deal with the Palestinians, which involves handing back most but not all of the land Israel seized in the June 1967 war. However, it is common knowledge that Sharon totally opposes such a perspective. In practice, therefore, it has lined up as the chief apologist for Sharon's conception of "peace" through the complete subjugation of the Palestinians, and possibly even war with Israel's Arab neighbours.

Sharon has stepped up Labour's policy of "containment" or ghettoisation. Trenches have been dug around Jericho and other West Bank towns cutting off access. Palestinians have become virtual prisoners, unable to travel more than a few kilometres, even to get healthcare, as towns and villages across the West Bank and Gaza have been cut off. It is as if history were scripting events to expose the long-standing myths of Labour Zionism. First, that the Zionist state could be established as a homeland for the Jews on a peaceful basis without the expulsion and subjugation of the non-Jewish inhabitants of the land. Second, the illusion that Zionism could ever develop a democratic and progressive society that could live at peace with its neighbours.

A party that once aligned itself with social democracy has joined forces with an extreme proponent of rightwing conservatism to reproduce within Israel and the Occupied Territories the ghettos, repression and civil war from which earlier generations of Jews had fled. To understand the historical connection between Labour's repudiation of the "peace process" that has been its hallmark for the past decade and its political programme, it is necessary to review Labour's political perspectives and role in the development of Zionism and the state of Israel. Such an historical analysis contains many profound lessons for workers, not just in Israel and Palestine, but the world over.

The origins and class character of political Zionism

Zionism was only one of several responses to a deepening social crisis and virulent anti-Semitism. From the very beginning, the Zionist project was based on an explicit rejection of a fight against anti-Semitism and a socialist perspective. Instead it rested precariously upon the most

backward looking petty bourgeois layers. In the final analysis, it was this that was to determine the trajectory of all the diverse political currents that embraced Zionism.

Zionist ideology arose not in Palestine, but in the salons of Central and Eastern Europe in the last years of the nineteenth century. This was an age characterised by extreme bourgeois reaction, militarism, imperialism, clericalism and virulent anti-Semitism. The progressive period of the formation of nation states in Europe, which had laid the basis for the development of the productive forces and saw the predominance of the democratic principles of the Enlightenment, had long since passed. The major European bourgeoisies had become imperial powers, brutally exploiting their colonial possessions and often suppressing basic democratic rights at home. Zionism drew its own inspiration from a second wave of nationalist movements within Europe, which emerged in the less developed East, where feudal relations combined with Great Power dominance had inhibited democratic and social advance. The Zionists were particularly enamoured of Bismarck's Germany, and his proposed solution to the task of nation building through the unification of the German people, through "blood and iron".

By this time, class antagonisms and conflicts between the European powers had become too acute for the bourgeoisie to advance itself as the guardian of the collective democratic interests of the people. As a result, national identity was increasingly conceived of in particularist terms, rather than the universal notions of citizenship that had played such a central role in the French revolution.

The Zionists were to hold a mirror up to this type of exclusivist nationalism, mixed with an unthinking reaction to the racism and anti-Semitism whipped up by Europe's rulers, and make this the basis of their own programme.

For years, Jewish workers and peasants in Russia and Poland had faced vicious pogroms. But anti-Semitism did not only arise in the more backward countries that were just beginning to emerge from feudalism, it also reared its ugly head in France. The Dreyfus trial in 1894 was a crisis for the Jewish intelligentsia that had staked its hopes on being accepted into French bourgeois society. Army officer Alfred Dreyfus was the victim of an anti-Semitic witch-hunt and trial, in which he was accused and found guilty of betraying military secrets to Germany.

Two political tendencies emerged during this period of rampant anti-Semitism. Within the working class, there was the development of a powerful socialist movement that understood anti-Semitism to be the product of decaying capitalism, aimed at dividing the working class. The socialists opposed anti-Semitism on the basis of the defence of democratic rights and uniting workers in a common struggle against the profit system. But the reactionary turn in capitalist ideology spawned a nationalist movement. Zionism grew from Jewish middle class despair. Theodore Herzl (1860-1904), the founder of political Zionism, was a successful Austrian playwright and journalist, and an admirer of British arch-imperialist Cecil Rhodes and the Prussian Junkers.

The Dreyfus Affair had a major impact on Herzl, who in 1895 had witnessed the Paris mob howling for the officer's death. Whereas socialists and liberals such as Emil Zola mounted an international campaign that was ultimately successful in securing Dreyfus' release and exoneration, Herzl never once used his position as a journalist to mobilise support for Dreyfus. Indeed he rejected any possibility of a struggle against the persecution of the Jews. The trial convinced him that the only solution to the problem of anti-Semitism was the resettlement of the Jews in their own state, effectively countering one national exclusivism with another.

Herzl's book *The Jewish State*, published in 1896, launched political Zionism and he established and led the World Zionist Organisation, founded in 1897, as the instrument to achieve a Jewish state. He initially discussed the possibility of Uganda, then ruled by Britain, as its location. It was only later that Herzl sought to establish such a Jewish state in Palestine.

For political Zionism, the "Jewish problem", as it was then widely called, was not a product of the class contradictions of capitalism but the absence of a Jewish national homeland. Zionist claims to Palestine and nationhood were justified on the grounds that the Jews had been expelled from their homeland 2,000 years earlier.

The socialist movement, which included many Jewish intellectuals and workers, vigorously opposed Zionism as a reactionary utopia. Indeed, the notion of a Jewish sovereign state held little appeal for the mass of Jews, whose prime hope at that time was not a "return" to Palestine, but emancipation and the attainment of basic democratic rights.

Many voted with their feet. More than 2.4 million Jews fled the persecution, social misery and economic hardship of Eastern Europe between 1882 and 1914, some 85 percent went to the United States and a further 12 percent to other Western countries. Fewer than 3 percent went to Palestine, and many of these soon moved on.

Significant numbers of Jews began to emigrate to Palestine only after the situation they faced in post-World War One Europe became truly desperate, and especially after 1922 when the US enacted immigration laws that barred entry to Jewish migrants. There was a wave of immigration to Palestine immediately after the War; the first mass influx of refugees came from Poland between 1923-26, and then from Germany and Eastern Europe between 1933-36, as the Jews sought to escape Nazi persecution.

Ideologically, Zionism was from its inception the preoccupation of a minority, who saw the "Jewish problem" not in terms of ensuring the physical existence, economic security and social and political rights of the Jews but as the justification for statehood. This is what lay behind their failure to mount any political action to oppose fascism, the persecution of the Jews, and the refusal of the democratic countries to open their doors to the Jews in the 1930s.

There was at that time only a small Jewish minority in the biblical land of Palestine, then an overwhelmingly rural province of the Ottoman Empire ruled from Damascus, Sidon and elsewhere. These Jews had no conception of creating a sovereign Jewish state. Indeed the Jews faced Ottoman restrictions on immigration and land acquisition, and an increasing opposition to Jewish expansion from the majority Arab population. Thus the Zionist project was always going to be dependent upon Great Power support.

Herzl tried to enlist the support of the German Kaiser. He also sought the assistance of Lord Balfour—who was then introducing the Aliens Exclusion Bill aimed at putting an end to Jewish immigration into Britain—and the Tsarist Minister Plevhe, who had organised the 1903 pogrom. Herzl sold Zionism to the European bourgeoisie on the basis that his proposed Jewish state in Palestine would form "a bastion of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilisation against barbarism" and would steer Jewish youth away from socialism and revolutionary parties. Chaim

Weizman (1874-1952), the Russian-born scientist then working in Britain, whose work was important for the war effort and who was later to become Israel's first president, was to use the same claim in his negotiations with British imperialism that culminated in the 1917 Balfour Declaration broadly accepting Zionist calls for a Jewish homeland in Palestine.

The myth of a "land without people"

The core premise of Zionism was that Jews everywhere constituted a single nation with permanent and exclusive rights to occupy Palestine land. This was embodied in the slogan, "A land without people for a people without land". But Palestine was not an uninhabited territory. A Zionist state for the Jews in Palestine could only be established at the expense of the existing population. The very conception of the Zionist state was based upon profoundly undemocratic principles: the denial of the rights of non-Jews already living there.

The question of Jewish-Arab relations arose very early on. When the author Max Nordau, one of Herzl's supporters, realised that Palestine was not an empty land, he said, "But then we are committing an injustice". The response to this was twofold. One group, the "practical" Zionists, saw its mission as essentially a colonising one until a Jewish majority was achieved, subordinating the political issues to the practical ones. They largely ignored the presence of the Arab majority or downplayed its significance, much as the colonial settlers had done in Africa.

The other group, the small minority of "political" Zionists led by the journalist and writer Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880-1940) took the opposite stance. Jabotinsky, who was later to form the Revisionist Party, the forerunner of Likud, argued that it was imperative "to take political possession of Palestine" if the Jews were to become the majority, since neither the Turks who then ruled Palestine, nor the Arabs who lived there would willingly accommodate a Jewish homeland.

Yusuf al-Khalidi, a prominent Jerusalem Arab who was sympathetic to the plight of the Jews, wrote to the Chief Rabbi of France insisting that it would only be possible to achieve large-scale Jewish settlement and ultimately Jewish sovereignty over Palestine by force. This would face strong resistance by the local population. He implored the Zionists to find somewhere else for a Jewish state. But even as Herzl reassured al-Khalidi that Zionism had only peaceful and benevolent intentions, and would bring prosperity to the country, he was engaged in diplomatic manoeuvrings aimed at gaining Great Power backing for Zionism.

Immigration had begun to augment the small, longstanding Jewish community in Palestine in the last decades of the nineteenth century. The political composition of this immigration was anything but homogeneous. Most Zionists agreed that the desperate plight of the Jews was due to the lack of political power stemming from their dispersion and lack of statehood, which only sovereign status could redress. But there was little agreement about the means by which such a state would be established and what its political and social character would be.

Some immigrants were nationalists and virulently anti-socialist, later going on to found the political parties and factions to which Likud is heir, and in some cases to embrace fascism. But many of those who came in the aftermath of the 1905 Russian Revolution regarded themselves as socialists committed to the class struggle. Some had been active in the Bund, the General Jewish Workers Union. Despite its anti-Zionism, the Bund had made dangerous concessions to bourgeois nationalism. In Palestine, they went even further, seeking to reconcile socialism with Zionism.

The nationalist project and the struggle for "Hebrew labour" embraced by the Labour Zionists—that is exclusively Jewish employment—cut across any proletarian unity with the Arab masses, who constituted a low-wage competition for the few jobs that existed. The backward economy in this Ottoman province provided little attraction for Jewish or non-Jewish capital. The habitable and productive land was too expensive for individual workers to settle on. Indeed the struggle for survival was so

great that many of the newly arrived immigrants very quickly left.

It was at this point that the struggling Zionist project was to receive succour from an unexpected source: British imperialism.

The Balfour Declaration

When Turkey entered World War I on the side of Austria and Germany, all the “practical” Zionists, with the exception of Chaim Weizman, either orientated towards the Turkish Sultan and the Kaiser (as they were less anti-Semitic than the Tsar) or adopted a neutral position. But Jabotinsky understood that the Ottoman Empire would be dismembered should the British prove victorious; therefore the Jews had to ally themselves with Britain and France and take part in the military effort to take Palestine. Virtually single handed, he fought for and eventually won British consent to form three Jewish battalions, making up the Jewish Legion in which he served as a lieutenant. The Jewish Legion fought with General Allenby in the campaign for Palestine in 1918.

It was in this context that Britain, intent on stealing a march over her wartime allies, France and Russia, and taking over the Ottoman Empire, issued the deliberately vague Balfour Declaration in 1917, which viewed with sympathy the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. British imperialist statesmen were prepared to back Zionism, against the opposition of their Jewish cabinet colleagues, because it offered a cover for their dirty work in the Middle East and elsewhere.

At the same time Britain, duplicitous as ever, was also encouraging the Arab subjects of the Ottoman Empire to revolt (under Sherif Hussein and Lawrence of Arabia), with promises of support for their independence.

Winston Churchill, then minister of munitions in Lloyd George's government, backed Zionism as an antidote to Bolshevism. "The struggle which is now beginning between the Zionist and Bolshevik Jews is little less than a struggle for the soul of the Jewish people", he said. Churchill called for full backing for Zionism and declared that a British-protected Zionist state in Palestine "would from every point of view be beneficial, and would be especially in harmony with the truest interests of the British Empire."

In Russia itself, the Bolshevik-led revolution of 1917 had won powerful support from Jewish workers. Churchill's allies in the White Guard were butchering every Jew they could lay their hands on. The Zionists' leaders in Russia supported the right-wing Petlyura regime (Ukrainian nationalists), which was responsible for much of the slaughter of 60,000 Jews in the Ukraine. So whatever their previous political affiliations, Jewish youth who wanted to protect their communities had to turn to the Red Army. The young Soviet Union won over former supporters of the Jewish Bund, Poale Zion and other “socialist-Zionist” groups. The Bolsheviks repealed more than 600 legal restrictions applying to Jews and the Zionists' outlaw status under the Tsar was ended. In this way, Zionism in the Soviet Union became a spent force, and it took decades of Stalinism, and Stalinist-instigated anti-Semitism to bring about a revival.

Zionism had thus allied itself with those who aided and abetted anti-Semitism, not those who sought to put an end to it. But for the support, albeit wavering, of the British colonial regime until the late 1930s and the approach of war—when British imperialism decided its interests lay with the Arabs and not the Zionists—the Zionists could not have built up its position against an increasingly hostile Arab majority.

The role of Labour Zionism

The 1920 San Remo Treaty recognised Britain's seizure of Palestine and in 1922 the League of Nations gave Britain Mandatory control over Palestine. The Mandate incorporated the Balfour Declaration and obliged Britain to facilitate Jewish immigration and encourage settlement by Jews in Palestine. While it also required that the rights of other sections of the population should not be prejudiced, the clear thrust of the Mandate was the implementation of the Zionist programme. This was not surprising, since Herzl's World Zionist Organisation had prepared the original draft. However, the League of Nations decided that Palestine, and hence the

Jewish homeland, would exclude Transjordan (now Jordan).

The key question for the Zionists was to prepare the conditions, under the protection of the British Administration, for a viable Jewish state. This meant securing Jewish immigration and, as the experience of the previous decade had shown, creating the economic conditions that would ensure the immigrants stayed. The Labour Zionists were to play a crucial role.

In 1920, the main Labour Zionist groups formed the Histadrut, the General Federation of Labour, under the leadership of David Ben Gurion (1886-1973) who was to become Israel's first prime minister. This laid the basis for what later became the Mapai party and then the Labour Party. Its leaders were clear that if the Zionist project was to survive, the priority was not the class struggle but the establishment of a Jewish society on its home or national base. The labour organisations had to be subordinated to the task of carving out a Zionist homeland in Palestine.

The Palestinian workers and peasants presented an obstacle to this objective. More than 80 percent of Palestinians lived in villages and tilled the land of absentee landlords. So the Histadrut had to remove them, create a Jewish working class, establish industries and production, and provide the funds that private capital could not or would not contribute. It would buy up land and set up factories, farms, banks, welfare organisations, social and health insurance schemes, and cooperatives—the very enterprises being privatised today. In other words, the trade unions and the labour movement would carry out the tasks normally associated with the bourgeoisie in providing the economic, social and political infrastructure for the future state and the development of a capitalist economy.

Two inter-related characteristics distinguished the Histadrut and the Labour Zionists from their inception. Firstly, their exclusivity and economic separatism in relation to the Palestinians. Secondly, Histadrut's corporatist role, acting as both employer and trade union to suppress the class struggle in the interests of Jewish capital.

After a faltering start, the Histadrut was to become Israel's largest employer, dominating whole sectors of the economy. It owned the largest industrial enterprises and banks, and established the *kibbutzim*, or collective farms, on land purchased from the Arabs. While some of the capital needed to establish these enterprises came from within the labour and trade union movement, much of it came from the World Zionist Organisation.

Not only was membership of the Histadrut restricted to Jews, but the Histadrut also opposed the employment of Palestinian labour in both its own and other Jewish enterprises. It was vociferous in its espousal of economic and social separatism. As a result Arab workers and peasants became unemployed, paving the way for the ever-increasing hostility between Arabs and Jews.

The Zionists began their task of driving out the ordinary Palestinian people, peasants and workers, under the twin slogans of “conquest of labour” and “conquest of the land”. The big absentee landlords were only too happy to make a profit by selling their land to the Zionists. This and the wider economic crisis and depression that hit Palestine in 1927, was to lead to the Arab revolt of 1929.

The Royal Commission set up by the British after the suppression of the revolt, reported that at the base of the unrest was the “landless and discontented class” of Palestinian Arabs that Zionist expansionism was creating. It urged an end to Jewish immigration and opposed the mass eviction of Arab peasants. A second Royal Commission warned that “the persistent and deliberate boycott of Arab labour in the colonies is not only contrary to the Mandate, but it is in addition a constant and increasing source of danger to the country.”

In 1927, the Histadrut and the various Labour Zionist parties came together to form the Mapai party, also under Ben Gurion's leadership. There was a protracted debate as to whether Mapai should affiliate to the reformist Second International. Many Zionists argued that their role was

not to engage in class struggle, but in the struggle for Jewish labour. But Mapai leader Ben Gurion's pragmatic argument won the day: Zionism would affiliate internationally as a voice for Zionism and win new and valuable allies for its cause.

Another left party, Mapam, which later joined Mapai/Labour in 1967, was no less divisive. It borrowed phrases from Marxism to cover over its reactionary nationalist programme, which included ethnic separatism. Rejecting the working class as a revolutionary class, it saw the development of mass production as "weakening the ties of national minorities with their mother cultures. Under such conditions, if a minority is to preserve its national integrity it must return to the homeland." Furthermore, "The concentration of production... may give advantage to the majority in the competition for jobs." Far from uniting the working class, Mapam accepted the divisions that the competition for jobs would bring. This was to be a deliberate tool of the left parties in later years: discrimination between Jews of different origins, and between Israeli Jews and Israeli Palestinians.

While much of the leadership of the World Zionist Organisation was originally hostile to the Labour Zionists, they eventually began to appreciate their role in attracting immigration and mobilising workers in the service of the Jewish bourgeoisie. At the same time, the Labour Zionists, driven by the need for the funds under the control of the World Zionist Organisation, came ever closer to the official Zionist leadership.

By 1936, the vital role of the Labour Zionists was recognised when Ben Gurion relinquished his leadership of the Histadrut and Mapai to become leader of the Jewish Agency. The League of Nations Mandate given to Britain had provided for the establishment of a Jewish Agency—an "almost-government" of the Jews in Palestine—to represent the Jewish people and advise and co-operate with the British Administration. Ben Gurion held this post until 1948 when the state of Israel was declared and he became its first prime minister. Since the Jewish Agency was in practice under the control of the World Zionist Organisation, Mapai/Labour was, from 1936 onwards, synonymous with the official Zionist leadership.

The Labour Zionists came to dominate the Jewish Agency at a crucial time. In 1936, when, as a result of the Nazi persecution, the Jewish population of Palestine had reached 400,000 or 30 percent of the total, the Jewish Agency could contemplate forming a state, and if necessary dispense with British supervision.

By this time the Labour Zionists had realised that if a Jewish state were to be achieved, it would be in a fight against the Palestinian people. They turned their backs on their past socialist rhetoric and limited efforts to organise Arab workers, and began to drive them out of their traditional seasonal jobs in the Jewish orange groves.

The Histadrut and Mapai/Labour Party were characterised by a lack of interest in international developments, in so far as they did not affect the Jews. Despite their prominent position in the World Zionist Organisation, they never called for any action in defence of the European Jews. They suppressed inner party democracy; conventions where the membership could voice their opinions and discuss policy were rarely held.

The Histadrut presided over ever-greater social polarisation. The gap between the wages of unskilled Jewish workers, who were in competition with Arabs for jobs, and those of the skilled workers was far wider than in other countries. The Histadrut leadership was recruited from a narrow self-perpetuating clique that enjoyed a far superior standard of living to ordinary workers. As a result, by the end of the 1930s, social protest was being directed against the Histadrut.

The divisive policies of the Labour Zionists did not go unopposed. The influence of the 1917 revolution in Russia led a number of Palestinian Jews to form the Palestinian Communist Party (PCP) in 1921. But the PCP was perpetually divided between Jews, who formed the majority, and Arabs, and was subject to frequent splits. This was because the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow used the PCP to serve its own foreign policy

needs. The unprincipled twists and turns of the Kremlin bureaucracy, its subordination of the various communist parties to bourgeois nationalism, participation in the Popular Front alliances with capitalist parties, the Hitler-Stalin Pact and later the dissolution of the Third International had a disastrous impact on the PCP, leading to disorientation and subsequent splintering along nationalist lines. More than a few disillusioned members left Palestine, including Leopold Trepper of the Red Orchestra (the most important antifascist intelligence organization during the Second World War), and the parents of Abram Leon, author of *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation*.

The record shows that despite their origins, the Labour Zionists were not animated by international working class solidarity. In so far as they still clung to socialist phraseology, it was simply to give their nationalist programme a more acceptable cover.

Bibliography

Zionism in the Age of Dictators

Lenni Brenner, Lawrence Hill & Co, ISBN 0882081632

The Making of the Arab Israeli Conflict 1947-51

Ilan Pappé, I B Tauris & Co Ltd, ISBN 1850438196

The founding myths of Israel

Ze'ev Sternhell, Princeton University Press, ISBN 0691009678

The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation

Abram Leon, Pathfinder Press, ISBN 0873481348

See Also:

The political dead end of Labour Zionism

Part 2-- The convergence of the Labour Zionists and Revisionist Zionism

[6 April 2001]

Israel's war measures and the legacy of Zionism

[16 October 2000]

Why has Israel's pacifist movement failed?

[7 November 2000]

Zionism's legacy of ethnic cleansing

Part 1—Israel and the Palestinian right of return

[22 January 2001]

Zionism's legacy of ethnic cleansing

Part 2—Israeli expansion creates more Palestinian refugees

[23 January 2001]



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact