

Letter from an Israeli reader on the recent strike in Israel

27 March 2007

Below we are publishing a letter from an Israeli reader on the recent general strike in Israel, sent in reply to a World Socialist Web Site “Workers Struggles” brief posted March 23).

I think you are mistaken in reporting the recent mass strike in Israel as a success. For the last year-and-a-half, the government (national and local, they share the responsibility but eventually it's up to the national government) had been avoiding paying wages to some of the municipal workers and workers of religious services bodies.

The Histadrut labor federation was very late in “noticing” the problem, and ended up riding a wave of public outcry that it did not help engender. Eventually, however, it started a strike in demand that the workers be paid—not for days on strike during this strike, but for the previous one. That strike had ended with only some (over 50 percent, I think, but am not sure) workers being paid the wages due to them, but with many workers still unpaid.

That had been a colossal failure—or rather, betrayal. Even in a strike on the most fundamental cause, payment of agreed and acknowledged wages, with the strike having almost unanimous support in the public, with even the capitalist press being indifferent if not mildly supportive—even then, the Histadrut folded at a point where all workers were still not going to be paid their wages. Not to mention that, by law, an employer who has not paid due wages to an employee must pay sizable compensation fees (5 percent of the total unpaid sum for the first week of delay, then 10 percent for every additional week; the law specifically recognizes this compensation as an integral part of the wages due).

Given the fact that some workers had not been paid for almost a year, conceding payment due—by the capitalists’ own law—and not demanding a single improvement in conditions, or the putting in place of

mechanisms for guaranteeing that wages will be paid in the future, renders this latest strike a failure. Also, it was not really a general strike; it was a strike only by workers who are members of the Histadrut union. These are by now a relatively small minority of all workers in Israel. It is only in the public sector that they seem to be a majority, and even there I am not sure this is still the case, as the government outsources more and uses more contract labor, especially for the more menial tasks.

In the private sector, the Histadrut is present in the banks (which used to be nationalized—they’re in a process of privatization, almost complete by now), the war industries (same story, although privatization has been slower), the utilities, the transport industry (ditto). Numerically, that’s not too many workers. They can’t even use their presence in individual industries to make the strike really effective.

For example, the trains didn’t run because of the strike, but the inter-city buses, run by the Israeli bus company Egged, continued working, so it was more of an inconvenience than a shut-down of transport. There were sporadic sympathy strikes in some unionized workplaces, but nothing significant.

Another aspect worth noting about these strikes is that they may be seen as more of a containment measure against grassroots militancy than a means of expressing it and building upon it to achieve gains. Histadrut labor federation Chairman Ofer Eini issues the order and you just don’t show up for work. Heaven forbid that you should come to your workplace or elsewhere to demonstrate and increase public awareness of the cause of the strike—which was more of a problem this time around, because the media were their usual selves, decrying the possibility of a strike and its inconveniences, demanding that the Histadrut back down, etc. And when the strike is over—with very

little, if anything, gained—workers probably end up feeling even more discouraged about future collective action.

And so we arrive at this recent strike. It was basically a replay of the previous one—that is, exhibiting the same failures—except for two key points. The first point—more positive compared to the previous strike, but still quite outrageous—is the number of workers who continue not to be paid their wages after the strike ends. The number has dropped from thousands after the previous strike to hundreds (I think 650) after this one.

But the second point, which is incredible even when compared to the willingness to forego payment of wages and compensation due by law, is the fact that the Histadrut itself agreed to pay these workers, for the period of time until the government can secure the payment to them, out of the Histadrut strike fund! The “workers’ organization” will effectively have the workers loan the government money to pay the workers their wages!

Actually, the Histadrut won’t even pay the full wage; there’s a 4000 NIS cap. The monthly minimum wage in Israel is 3,585 NIS this month ... but that’s just minutiae.

By the way, I said failure, or betrayal, but obviously I have to take that back. The Histadrut leadership is elected on a partisan basis. Eini, surprisingly, is supported by a coalition including almost all parties—Kadima, Likkud, Labor, Shas, etc.—for which reason, after replacing Amir Peretz, no candidate has ever been fielded against Eini. He will thus serve his entire term without ever being elected, like Gerald Ford.

At lower levels it is sometimes the case that section heads or district heads go unelected for many years (although I don’t have exact details). Not that Eini couldn’t have won an election, but the fact that the ruling class does not even bother with the semblance of democracy within the Histadrut is quite characteristic of the degree of its control of that organization (whose very name means “accommodation,” by the way). So an unsuccessful Histadrut strike is more like a success for it rather than a failure; it certainly seems that is the intended result.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact

ER
Haifa, Palestine/Israel
23 March 2007