

Dogged by history

Why Israel's powerful labour federation was rejected by the 2011 social protest movement

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For a few heady months in the summer of 2011, it seemed Israeli society was about to change completely. Walking along Tel Aviv's leafy Rothschild Boulevard, among hundreds of tents, discussion groups, speakers, soup kitchens, banners, drummers and jugglers, I was amazed by the energy and optimism – swept away by the sense that this grassroots struggle was making an impact (Figure 1). This was our Arab Spring, our Indignados, our Occupy Wall Street – and we were doing it bigger, louder, more democratically and more colourfully than anyone else.

At that time I had already been researching labour representation in Israel for a couple of years, and was interested to see that two relatively new general unions, including Koach Laovdim ('power to the workers'), were there among the protesters, a constant presence in debates and demonstrations. However, Israel's main general labour federation, the Histadrut, was conspicuous by its absence. In fact, I heard later that it had quietly allowed the social protest leaders to use its Tel Aviv offices for meetings, but publicly at least, the protesters wanted nothing to do with the Histadrut, and had sent its chairperson ignominiously packing.

In the light of organised labour's history of protest around the world, of activism in demanding rights and welfare, and of broad alliances with various social movements, including those that rocked much of the world just a few years ago, this rejection of the Histadrut is somewhat puzzling. It is even more so when we consider that the Histadrut is huge and powerful, counting almost 30 per cent of the workforce among its members – by



Figure 1
The social protest movement in Tel Aviv, 2011: colourful, cacophonous, diverse. Photo: ActiveStills.

far the largest labour organisation in Israel, with strong workers' committees in key industries who are able to bring the economy to a standstill if they choose.

Indeed, the social protest movement erupted in the middle of another, quieter sea-change. From around 2007 onwards, Israel saw a wave of trade union organising drives and labour struggles, some of which were very high profile and received widespread media coverage. The discontent driving these campaigns was drawn from the kind of issues which ignited the social protest: high prices and low wages, socioeconomic insecurity, employment uncertainty, and the general feeling that somewhere 'up there', someone was screwing us over.

It seemed to me that this was a perfect opportunity for labour organisations to do as they have done countless times in history, and take a prominent role in a wider coalition for social justice. Surely an alliance between the Histadrut and the social protest movement would have added significantly to the strength of both?

At the end of that long and exciting summer, when the 'tent cities' had been dismantled or forcibly cleared by the police, it was clear that the social protest had not brought any substantial change, nor had it collapsed into revolution and renewed dictatorship as elsewhere. Instead, it had fizzled out into politics as usual. And I

began thinking about this seemingly wasted opportunity and the puzzle of the Histadrut's role.

An answer to this puzzle can be found in the nature of the recent wave of union organising, which reflects a lacuna in Israel's labour history in comparison to other labour movements. Two aspects of the wave are particularly notable. Firstly, unions were having to learn how to organise because they had had little experience of it in the past, and similarly, employers were learning how to thwart organising efforts. Secondly, the legal and institutional frameworks of industrial relations were being recalibrated to enable such organising and to define the boundaries of what is permissible. Indeed – and this is the lacuna – the country's glorious labour history has included very little grassroots organising: union organising is new to Israel.

The Histadrut, in fact, is not a 'regular' labour federation which was built from the bottom up through the efforts of workers coming together; it is a top-down institution created by a political leadership for political ends. So the Histadrut was – and is often still perceived as – part of the same old, ostensibly corrupt establishment against which people were protesting in 2011. When they came out onto the streets, they were seeking a new politics, of grassroots activism and participatory democracy, and the Histadrut's staid institutions epitomised all that was wrong with the old system. They wanted nothing to do with it.

The strange non-labour character of a labour organisation

That the Histadrut is an anomaly in itself requires an explanation. We are familiar with the idea that the State and employers' organisations are compelled to contend with a strong labour movement when the movement's strength is drawn from organising and activism – organising and activism in the past at least, if not in the present. Indeed, there is much literature that discusses how past struggles led to the creation of institutions which delimit and 'frame' current disputes, and how these institutions can continue to exist even after the balance of forces that led to their creation has changed completely. This, in fact, is the heart of what is known as neocorporatism, the political arrangement in which employers' organisations, labour organisations and the State come together within frameworks of collective bargaining to agree on socioeconomic policy at various levels.

But what can push a political leadership within a capitalist economy to *choose* to do business with labour organisations, even up to creating those organisations themselves? To understand this, we need to go back a long way, to the first waves of Jewish immigration to what was then Ottoman and British Mandatory Palestine, decades before the State of Israel was established.¹

Briefly, Europe in the 19th century was swept by a wave of nationalism. Riding this wave, some Jewish in-

1. Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1917-18, when British forces conquered the area. Britain was later granted the Mandate over Palestine by the League of Nations, in effect from 1923.



Figure 2
A poster marking 30 years since the Histadrut was founded. The text reads 'Shield for the worker, home for the immigrant', using the word 'oleh' which refers specifically to Jewish immigration to the Land of Israel. The organisation's full name was 'The general federation of Hebrew workers in the Land of Israel'. Image: Palestineposterproject.org (public domain).

tellectuals, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, came to the conclusion that a Jewish homeland was the best solution to the 'Jewish question' and European anti-Semitism. This idea was appealing to the newly secular, educated middle class Jews. From the 1880s onwards, and particularly from 1904 until well into the 1930s, many made their way to Palestine, which had been marked as the ideal location for this future Jewish homeland. Thus the Zionist movement took shape.

In a very basic sense, this Jewish immigration to Palestine can be seen as a settlement movement much like the Europeans in North America or Australia: they went to another part of the world, took over territory, wrested control of resources from the local population, and eventually created a society in which that local population were at best second-class citizens, and at worst hardly human at all. Of course, there are some important differences between the Jewish settlement of Palestine and the colonial projects of the major European powers. Most importantly, we should note that the Jewish immigrants were not sent by some powerful 'mother state', and they had no national army to impose their



Figure 3
A poster celebrating 53 years since the Histadrut was founded, showing the dual nature of the organisation. The text reads: 'One hand works, the other holds the sword'.

presence and ensure their physical security in the new country. Similarly, they had no army or administration to ensure the settlers had access to the two resources which are crucial to any settlement enterprise: land and jobs.²

So at first, the immigrants were undercut by local labour: the Palestinian Arabs were willing to work for lower wages, and do the kind of work that most of the new immigrants were not used to doing. For this reason, together with the relatively harsh conditions, many of the first Jewish immigrants to arrive in Palestine did not stay long. The Zionist leadership had to find a way of keeping the immigrants in Palestine, particularly by ensuring work with higher wages and improving living conditions. Their solution was to create a separate 'Jewish' economy within the larger geographical territory under the British administration. This essentially meant the collectivisation and centralisation of the Jewish community to enable the control of jobs, wages and services, funded to a large extent by external contributions. Thus a collectivist ideology was promoted,

2. Gershon Shafir was one of the first to discuss Jewish immigration in these terms; see Shafir (1989), *Land, Labour and the Origins of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict 1882-1914*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

emphasising solidarity among Jews for the sake of the national project. Hence too the Histadrut was established (in 1920) as an administrative organisation, distributing funds and providing essential services to the settler immigrants (Figure 2). These immigrants – whether workers, self-employed, unemployed or retired – became Histadrut members almost automatically, because they needed the services it provided.

The Histadrut was also central to developing the collectivist 'Jewish' economy. Major economic enterprises were collectively owned through the Histadrut, including in agriculture, industry, public utilities, banking and construction. As both employer and worker representative (Figure 3), the Histadrut was thus able to create an internal market, partly insulated from the general labour market, to a considerable extent freeing the Jewish immigrants from having to compete with Palestinian Arab labour.³ Jewish employers, of course, were reluctant to take on the more expensive Jewish workers, which led to a call for 'Hebrew labour' – an ideology which emphasised the importance to the national project of employing only Jews.

The kibbutz movement can be viewed as the epitome of the collective approach to settlement. The *kibbutzim* were communal agricultural settlements, the first of which was established in 1912. Drawing very explicitly on a strong socialist ideology, many kibbutzim took the ideals of communal living to great lengths, eating together in a communal dining room, sharing community tasks and rotating jobs, sharing ownership of resources, and even bringing up their children together in dedicated children's houses. These settlements, a kind of physically enclosed village run by the members, were ideal for ensuring a Jewish presence in what was often hostile territory, while also solving the problem of work: the kibbutz members 'employed themselves', and assisted each other in overcoming the challenges of immigration and hard labour in tough conditions.

In 1936, the first of the 'tower and stockade' kibbutzim was established (for the sake of full disclosure, I must mention that my grandparents were among the founding members of this kibbutz, and I myself was born there). The idea for these kibbutzim was that during the course of a single day, the members could set up the prefabricated parts of the settlement, so that by nightfall they would have at least a watchtower and stockade to keep them safe (Figure 4). Here the value of the kibbutzim in the settlement enterprise becomes abundantly clear, and it is not by chance that they have such an exalted place in the official history of Israel.

We can see, then, that the labour movement (the Histadrut) did not grow up in opposition to 'capital', or employers, but was created from above by Zionist leaders in co-operation with employers.⁴ While socialist ideology in a bewildering range of variations had been part of the kaleidoscope of Zionist thought, it had developed as the

3. See Deborah Bernstein (2000), *Constructing Boundaries: Jewish and Arab Workers in Mandatory Palestine*, Albany: SUNY Press, for a discussion of the ways in which the "insulated" Jewish economy was developed.

4. See Michael Shalev (1992), *Labour and the Political Economy in Israel*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, for a full discussion of the Histadrut's role as employer, labour representative and national institution.

dominant discourse along with ‘socialist’ practices only in response to the very concrete needs of a settlement movement that had no support from an army or ‘mother state’. Likewise, welfare services and the institutions of the welfare state were not the result of worker organising or social movements demanding basic social rights, as they were in many other countries, but were created as systems of support for settlers. And we can see just how crucial this approach was thought to be if we note that even the non-socialist, liberal streams of Zionism (what we would probably call liberal capitalist) were in favour of the collectivist method.

The end of labour’s exalted role in the Zionist project

Israel was established in 1948. Almost immediately we begin to see changes to the way the Jewish leadership (now within the framework of State institutions) managed the economy and labour market. Nonetheless, the institutions developed earlier were not easily shunted off stage. Most notably, the Histadrut continued to control an enormous empire well into the 1970s, owning about a third of the economy as the second largest employer after the state. Real change came only in the 1980s and 1990s with a wave of sales of Histadrut enterprises. This change was marked by the National Health Insurance Law 1995, which separated the Histadrut from its health maintenance organisation, and essentially transformed it into ‘just’ a labour federation – albeit an enormous and still powerful one. The 1995 law also separated membership in the Histadrut from membership in the health maintenance organisation: since many had been Histadrut members mainly in order to access its health services, this separation drastically reduced Histadrut membership numbers and thus reduced union density in Israel at a single stroke.

It took at least another decade for the Histadrut, and workers more generally, to comprehend fully that their main source of power had been undercut, and to begin organising. In 2007, the small general union mentioned earlier, Koach Laovdim, was founded, and in 2010 – some 90 years after it was established – the Histadrut finally set up a department dedicated to assisting people who wish to unionise and form a workers’ committee at their workplace. But while Koach Laovdim was welcomed by the social protest movement of 2011 as a grassroots union, whose leadership and activists are notably young, urban and cool, the Histadrut was unable to shake off its image as a member of the old political and economic establishment.



Figure 4
A stamp (c.1963) commemorating the first ‘tower and stockade’ kibbutz, reflecting the importance of this kind of settlement in the official national history.

And here we should note an additional paradox. After the State of Israel was established, there was no longer any need for the conceptual link between being a ‘worker’ and being a settler in a national movement, and over the next couple of decades this link began to unravel; yet just when organised labour was being freed from the shackles of nationalism, its power as an engine for social change was waning: the salience of working-class identity has declined, organised labour is perceived as a narrow interest group, and the legitimacy of neocorporatist structures is in question as the State seeks increasingly market-oriented solutions to social problems.

So now the Histadrut’s position in the social protest movement of 2011 becomes clearer. As a historical institution, it was up against the suspicion that it was part of the same corrupt establishment that was the focus of the protesters’ ire. And as a labour organisation, it faced the widespread belief that organised labour represents nobody’s interests except its own. The smaller unions, whose main figures cut their teeth in social activism of various sorts, were welcomed as just one more organisation in a broad, diverse, colourful alliance; but the imposing presence of the Histadrut was seen as a throw-back to a different kind of politics – a politics whose time is up.

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