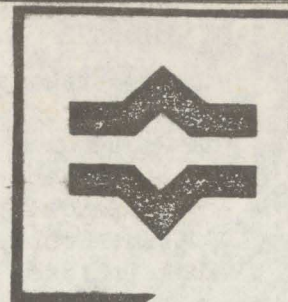


FOCUS'ON HISTADRUT

The General Federation of Labor



Kibbutzniks, like close to 70% of the Israeli population, Jews and Arabs alike, are members of the Histadrut - the General Federation of Labor. Unlike any other labor organization in the world, this enormous workers' confederation touches almost every aspect of Israeli life. The very size and scope of the Histadrut are the sources of its strength and its weaknesses.

ORIGINS

In December 1920, eighty-seven men and women gathered in Haifa as delegates to the first assembly of Jewish workers in Palestine. At this time there were some 4,400 members of various workers' groups in different parts of the country and since they were so few, but shared similar problems, they decided to establish a single all-embracing organization.

Most of those at the meeting were young, and all of them were immigrants. In their ancient land they wanted to build a home not only for themselves, but for all the Jews who wished to come there.

They found it a poor home, mostly swamps or desert, with no farms or factories to offer them work, no doctors to tend them if they fell sick, no schools for their children, and a way of life taking its tone from the dying Ottoman Empire. They hoped that eventually their work would make it easier for others; in the meanwhile, they had to help themselves and one another. Where work was available, groups hired out jobs among themselves. Others formed permanent settlements to farm land for the common benefit. Each of them paid a small fee each month so that doctors and nurses could be engaged and a cottage hospital could be built. During the difficult days of World War I, they had formed a cooperative to keep themselves supplied with grain and other essentials, and they now wanted to keep it on as a permanent institution.

The agricultural workers took the initiative in inviting representatives of all other groups - printers, clerks, teachers, and others - to meet with them to consider the situation. Since many had no permanent jobs, working one day perhaps in a citrus grove and the next day helping to build a road, they saw no point in rigid subdivisions. The outcome of this meeting was the decision to form the General Federation of Labor, the Histadrut. Prevailing conditions dictated the structure and program of the Histadrut, and it has to this day remained a single overall body representing all types of workers and handling an unusual range of functions. It has always worked in conditions of immigration, and so the fight for better conditions of employment has always been inseparable from the problem of finding employment for the newcomers. A dual task has thus defined itself: to help the country in order to absorb succeeding waves of immigration, and to train the immigrants to contribute to this development.

DEMOGRAPHY - WHO BELONGS TO THE HISTADRUT?

Everybody can and almost everybody does. Histadrut members include: salaried urban workers who lack independent means of production, the independent working intelligentsia (teachers, engineers, scientists, physicians, writers, artists, etc.), the hired agricultural worker and the independent farming class with its own means of production - including kibbutzniks and moshavniks, soldiers, housewives (Israel is the only country in the world in which housewives can become full members of a labor organization), and pensioners. The Histadrut has totally overcome the contradictions between town and village and continues

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to invest considerable efforts in the attempt to overcome strains between physical and intellectual workers with considerable if not complete success. The kibbutz has come closer than any other social organization to a complete and harmonious fusion of the two sorts of workers. Obviously, a labor organization that includes the President of the country, garbage men, teachers, farmers, Justices of the Supreme Court, factory workers, housewives, professors, soldiers, and students; that includes Jews, Arabs, and Druze, cannot be understood as the typical labor union found in other countries.

FUNCTIONS OF THE HISTADRUT

I. Trade unions: The Histadrut encompasses 40 national labor unions organized according to occupation. The typical salaried worker thus belongs to a specific work union and elects a workers' committee in his place of work; he belongs to a local or regional work association of all the Histadrut organizations in his town or city and elects his local or regional council there; and finally, belongs to the national Histadrut roof organization. The worker obviously wears many hats and it goes without saying that some of them may not sit very well together. The factory worker, for instance, belongs to the same regional and national Histadrut organization as the teacher of his children - and may be furious with the teacher, or vice-versa. The job of the local and specific labor unions is similar to that of labor unions everywhere: to protect the interests of the worker whether in salary, job security, safety conditions, pension arrangements, or whatever.

II. Hevrat Ovdim: (Histadrut owned enterprises). The Zionist, nationalist nature of the Histadrut led almost naturally to the creation of a Histadrut economy. The need to create jobs for new immigrants and the need to develop the country combined with the lack of private capital or the fear of losses that prevented capitalist development of certain economic enterprises motivated the Histadrut to become a producers' as well as a workers' organization. The Histadrut built factories throughout the country, organized transportation (bus) cooperatives, helped create the national airlines and the national carrier fleet. Soleh Boneh, the largest building contractor in Israel, is a Histadrut enterprise, as is Bank Hapoalim, Hamashbir (department stores), the newspaper Davar, and so on. About 23% of all Israeli workers work in Histadrut owned enterprises. The historical importance of these enterprises in developing the country cannot be underestimated: the Histadrut did what was necessary for the good of the country and the good of the worker.

III. Mutual Aid Organizations: The pre-state Histadrut took upon itself to provide for the needs of its members and organized the national health system known as Kupat Holim, a Histadrut school system, old age homes, insurance schemes, and later kindergartens for the children of working mothers and a whole range of other social services. Many workers today do not even think of themselves as members of the Histadrut: they see themselves as members of the Kupat Holim, which is the essential reason why they may be in the Histadrut. Everyone likes to complain about the long lines, the waste, and the often unsympathetic attitude of doctors and nurses without taking into account the generally high level of medical care that is available to all Histadrut members whether they live in the city, in a development town, or on kibbutz or moshav. The Histadrut run Kupat Holim guarantees to all workers and their families adequate medical care without tying that care to the family's ability to pay for it.

IV. Culture and Education: The Histadrut sponsors a whole range of cultural, educational, and sports activities ranging from vacation centers, special holiday celebrations, film and slide libraries, youth activities, the Noar Haoved Vehalomed youth movement, Hapoel sports teams (over 900 of them), seminar courses, for workers, and general educational programs that include Hebrew courses, art work, child care, and so on.

The week of Hannuka will mark the 61st anniversary of the Histadrut.....

