

al-Khuffash, Husni Salih, *Hawl Tarikh al-Haraka al-'Umaliya al-Filastiniya*. Beirut: Palestine Liberation Organisation Research Centre, 1973 pp. 62-66). Translated by *The Palestinian Revolution*.<sup>1</sup>

*The Workers' Struggle After 1948*

It's no exaggeration to say that that the workers' movement was the foremost popular institution in the many levels of the Palestinian struggle after the Nakba, especially in Nablus. We could speak at great length of the saga of political and labour battles our people in the West Bank fought under the Association of Palestinian Arab Workers' leadership.

The workers' movement evolved and intensified the struggle. This annoyed Jordanian authorities, who closed the society's Amman branch under the pretext that the law permitting workers to organise in the West Bank was invalid there.

In December 1950, a labour dispute arose between the owners of Khalifa Mechanics Company and their workers. The Nablus trade union leaders strove to resolve the dispute peacefully but their efforts proved futile, prompting the workers to go on strike and organise a sit-in at the plant. The strike continued until an arbitration committee was formed. The dispute was resolved in the workers' favor.

A few days later, Ahmed Taha al-Khalil, the Administrator of Nablus District, called Husni Salih, Secretary General of the Council of Trade Unions of Nablus, into his office. In the office, Salih was informed that he had been sentenced, without trial, to six months' exile in a village called al-Shubak near Amman. The Administrator ordered that Salih be taken directly from the office to Amman by taxi, at the administrator's own expense. At that time, the law obliged all convicts to walk from the place where they were sentenced to their place of exile. Three days later Abd el-Rahim Irshid, a worker and organiser at the Khalifa Company, joined Salih in exile, having also been sentenced to six months.

*Glory to the Proletariat*

---

<sup>1</sup> This work is made available under a Creative Commons 4.0 International Licence, and must be used accordingly. Please see citation guidelines on the About Us page.

When workers in Nablus and the West Bank heard this news, their anger erupted in demonstrations. An avalanche of telegrams demanding the exiles' release and protesting against government actions flowed into the royal palace. Popular pressure from workers and the masses in Nablus and elsewhere forced King Abdullah to grant Husni Salih and Abd el-Rahim Irshid amnesty after three months in exile.

Husni Salih returned to Nablus, where the various branches of the workers' association and the public organised an incomparable popular reception. Bands from Tulkarem, Scouts and National Guard troops from Nablus participated in the reception, accompanied by a spectacular motorcade of private cars and buses. The motorcade set off from a village called al-Lebban and travelled thirty kilometres to Nablus. That was on the 2 February 1951.

It wasn't long before the government decided to close down all branches of the Association of Palestinian Arab Workers and confiscate its assets, dispersing everyone involved. This brought the labour movement to an end.

### *The Workers Organise in Secret*

The forced closure of the association office and the disbanding of the unions dispersed the workers. But did it kill their determination to struggle? No, a thousand times no. The workers, particularly those in Nablus, went underground. They met secretly in the Arab Club and certain private houses, and pressured the government to officially sanction workplace organising. They did so by sending letters and signing petitions; as well as contacting some of the free representatives such as Abdullah al-Rimawi, Abdullah Na'was, Abd el-Halim al-Nimr, Shafiq Irshidat, whose raised their voices to demand legal change.

In 1952, the head of the International Federation of Trade Unions addressed a letter to Husni Salih. The letter informed Salih that the Honorary President of the Free Federation of Trade Unions was to pay him a visit in Jordan. The Honorary President, who was also the President of the Federation of Trade Unions of Belgium, arrived in Jordan in the company of a Lebanese lawyer named Musa Prince.

Salih arranged for his guest to meet with workers who had been organising clandestinely in Nablus, Amman and Jerusalem together with several national political figures. The Honorary President urged the Jordanian government to pass labour laws that recognised workers' right to organise

publicly. All this pressure culminated in the enactment of labour legislation in 1956.

### *The Establishment of the Jordanian Trade Union*

Passing legislation doesn't automatically unify or mobilise workers. Those who led the campaign for labour legislation had to continue their struggle and organise their colleagues.

Around that time, Zaki al-Sheikh Yasin and his brother Mustafa Ali A'sqalan moved from Nablus to Amman. As I mentioned before, they were both founders of the Nablus branch, which was established in 1940. Both figured among the most enthusiastic proponents of workers' rights, and those most ready to sacrifice themselves for the proletariat. History must pay tribute to the fact that these brothers gave their time and energy to the labour movement. Yasin also funded the movement out of his own pocket. In early 1954, Yasin and A'sqalan met with Hussni al-Khufash, the Secretary General of Nablus Branch, in Amman. They collected donations and rented an office to serve as the trade union campaign headquarters. Soon afterwards, they published a first statement calling for workers to organise. Construction workers in Amman responded to the appeal and formed a temporary committee to register members. Three months later, a great number of workers met and officially formed their trade union. They elected Zaki al-Sheikh Yasin president.

Following the same procedure, brother Mustafa Ali A'sqalan, formed a trade union for retail and public service workers. Brother Musa Queidr followed suit. Queidr is a union leader who played a key role in the history of the Palestinian Labor movement, particularly in Yafa. He was a refugee who settled in Amman.

The following trade unions were rapidly formed:

- General Union for Construction Workers, headed by Zaki al-Sheikh Yasin
- General Union for Garment Workers, headed by Musa Queidr
- General Union for Tobacco Workers, headed by Wajih Manko
- General Union for Singer Factory Workers, headed by Faydallah Odeh
- General Union for Phosphate Workers, headed by Akram Doughan
- General Union for Public Sector Workers, headed by Mustafa A'sqalan

After these trade unions were formed, it was decided that a general union should be established. The general union would support the above trade

unions and enable them to attract the workers from other professions. A competent train union leader was required to guarantee its success. At the time, brother Zidan Younes was working for the National Company of Tobacco and Cigarettes. Since he had previously been an organiser in Haifa, where he had overseen the Sibni Workers' Trade Union and gained significant experience in the field, it was agreed that he should be assigned the duty of directing the general union.

Zaki al-Sheikh Yasin, Mustafa A'sqalan, Hussni Salih al-Khuffash went to Zidan's house in the city of Zarqa and presented the idea to him. After consulting with them, he agreed to be nominated. The trade unions unanimously elected him president of the first Jordanian trade union. The labor movement stepped up its struggle to secure workers' demands and rights.

The Jordanian Trade Union was vital to the establishment of the Union of Arab Workers. Brothers Zaki al-Sheikh Yasin, Mustafa A'sqalan, Zidan Younes and Hassan al-Watha'efi became members of this union's executive council. Zidan Younes was also elected First Assistant to the Secretary General of the Union of Arab Workers.

The Jordanian workers' movement grew to include 37 trade unions representing around 25,000 workers.

It's worth mentioning that the Jordanian trade unions fought fierce battles against reactionary forces, and its leaders were imprisoned and exiled until 1962.