



Israeli unions silent over deportation of asylum seekers

Assaf Adiv

On the 2nd of April 2018, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, announced that the deportation of 37,000 refugees to Rwanda was cancelled. He indicated that the Israeli Government has agreed with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on a deal that would have resettled roughly half of the 35,000 African migrants in Israel to Western countries with Israel absorbing the rest. Yet, this positive development did not hold more than several hours. Under the pressure of his Likud party leaders and right wing activists who voiced their opposition to the agreement, the Prime Minister announced on his Facebook page that the new policy was put on hold. It remains to be seen what would be the result of this zigzag that reflects the influence of racist elements in Israel. At the same time, the current situation indicates the difficulties facing the Israel Government in implementing a policy that contradicts the norms of the international community in regards to refugees that seek shelter from the Israeli state. Officials - including the Prime Minister - claim that the refugees are migrant labourers and infiltrators. Israel has entered an agreement with Rwanda, an authoritarian regime that buys arms from Israel, whereby Rwanda will accept the deported and receive US\$5000 for each. Rwanda has a high unemployment rate, and among the more than 3000 deportees that it took from Israel in recent years, the vast majority could not stay there as reported by [Hotline for Refugees](#) and Migrants (Birger, 2017) and many other human rights groups.

Public outcry

Months before the announcement, tens of thousands of Israelis mobilised to demand that the deportations be cancelled. Since the beginning of 2018, there has been a massive public campaign, including two major demonstrations by refugees in front of the Rwandan Embassy in Tel Aviv. A nationwide protest took place in South Tel Aviv on 24 February drew around 20 000 protestors in Tel Aviv. Many petitions have been organised by groups of professionals, including 1100 doctors and hundreds of teachers and artists. The campaign is being led by various NGOs, which accuse the government of blatantly violating the UN Refugee Convention of 1951, which Israel was one of the first countries to sign.

Yet this outcry has failed to move Israel's labour unions to oppose the deportations. The doctors have failed to convince their representative organisation, the Medical Association of Israel, and the teachers have failed to convince theirs, the Teachers' Union and the Association of Secondary School Teachers in Israel. Of the four general confederations which represent workers from all sectors, the three major ones kept low profile or even supported the Government move. The biggest federation - The Histadrut - is aligned with the oppositional Labour Party but refused to take a position. The third federation, Koach La Ovdim came out with a statement that opposed the deportation but was very vague and without commitment to stand strongly against it. Only the fourth - the

Workers Advice Center (WAC MAAN) - firmly opposed the deportation¹.

Not apolitical

Some claim that workers' organisations should avoid political issues which divide their members and that political arguments should be left to political parties. This claim is wrong. From the beginning, many workers' organisations were established as social organisations linked to political parties. The same was true in Israel. Histadrut was set up by the historic workers' party, Mapai, which is associated today with the conservative wing of the Labour Party. National Histadrut was established by the right wing Herut Movement which became the basis for today's Likud Party. Koach La Ovdim was set up by activists associated with the social democratic wing of the Labour Party and Meretz.

The right wing National Histadrut is aligned with Likud, the conservative ruling party, and thus naturally supports its policies, including the deportation of refugees. The Labour aligned Histadrut's silence was also not surprising. It is known to be a conservative and bureaucratic behemoth which enjoyed a hegemonic position for years in Israel's industrial relations. Nobody expects it to lead a progressive social struggle now. It is no secret that, for the last decade, the heads of Histadrut served as mediators between the Labour Party and the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, of Likud. Histadrut's former chair, Ofer Eini, cooperated with Netanyahu and Likud, and in 2009 facilitated the entry of the Labour Party under Ehud Barak into Netanyahu's second government. The current chair, Avi Nissenkorn, publicly joined the Labour Party two years ago, and mediated between (at the time) party leader Isaac Herzog and Netanyahu, using his contacts with current Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon. In the run up to Histadrut elections in 2017, Nissenkorn added Kahlon's supporters to his election list and made positions and budgets available to them.

In this way Histadrut contributed to strengthening the extreme right and the settlers. It prepared the way for the current extremist, racist government coalition, which has consolidated its power by fanning the flames of Jewish nationalism and incitement against Israel's Arab citizens (Winer, 2016). The close symbiosis that has developed in the last decade between Histadrut and Netanyahu explains Histadrut's silence in the face of the deportations. This is in spite of the fact that, among its members, Histadrut has about 3000 of these asylum seekers, who work in hotels in Eilat and the Dead Sea and pay membership fees, and despite the fact that hotels and

¹ WAC MAAN's position is available at <http://eng.wac-maan.org.il/?p=2037>

For more on WAC MAAN see here http://eng.wac-maan.org.il/?page_id=8

restaurants throughout the country want to continue to employ them. An organisation which refuses solidarity to Palestinian workers does not find it hard to turn its back when a few thousand asylum seekers are being deported.

A puzzling position

The silence of the social democratic Koach La Ovdim on the issue of refugees as well as regarding the broader fight against racism and the occupation is more puzzling.

Koach Laovdim was established about ten years ago and aspired to represent a democratic and dynamic union movement which would offer an alternative to what they said was the corrupt Histadrut. Koach Laovdim did not hide the fact that it adopted the Swedish social democratic model, and its leaders publicly associated themselves with the social democratic wing of the Labour Party and Meretz. Two of the organisation's officials who were central in the founding of the organisation identified themselves as members and supporters of Labour and Meretz. Attorney Itai Swirsky tried (but failed) to be nominated for the Meretz list of Knesset members before the elections in 2015, and Dr. Ami Vaturi, supported Amir Peretz in the Labour Party's internal elections of 2017.

Koach Laovdim wrote on its platform, 'Throughout the world, strong trade unions are the key to policies of social justice.' Yet it says nothing in the face of political injustice. Facing the deportation of refugees it refused to take any position and then, in response to public pressure, Koach La Ovdim issued a vague statement (at the end of February) that opposed the deportation but failed to mention the Government's racist campaign and the need to stand up to it. This is a continuation of the longstanding failure of this federation to take a clear stand against the elephant in the room – the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and the struggle for freedom of the Palestinians.

It seems that Koach Laovdim was also hesitant to take a stand on deportations because it fears that it could drive away the workers' committees that represent the basic unit of the union in every workplace. A recent poll conducted by the Israeli Democracy Institute indicated that two out of three Israelis support the deportation of African refugees (Maltz, 2018) and that Netanyahu continues to be very popular. It is clear that certain segments of workers would resent a union that stands against deportation. Thus the organisation's much trumpeted internal democracy becomes, in practice, submission to the racist rightward shift led by the Government.

Unions face a crucial junction

Workers' organisations which aspire to create a just and egalitarian society make a grave mistake when they limit their agenda to narrow 'worker' issues. In the face of this foul wave of xenophobia, racism and nationalism led by the extreme right wing government, public courage and a civic stand are crucial. This includes issues of war, peace, occupation and equality, but also the issues of human rights and deportation of asylum

seekers. Organisations which fail to take a stand contribute to Israeli society's continued slide towards brutality and callousness. If Israeli unions aspire to live, they must struggle for a liberal, open society that is willing to take in human beings of different languages, nations, races and genders.

We live today in a polarised world that demands that we choose sides. Against the background of a serious financial crisis and the waves of migration sweeping Europe, we are witnessing the rise of a new fascist right. Israel's right wing government identifies with and cooperates with dark forces such as US president, Donald Trump, and right wing governments in Central and Eastern Europe. In the face of growing nationalism and racism, unions that make cynical tactical choices to maintain internal unity or avoid being seen as 'leftist' will become irrelevant. A workers' organisation which operates as a closed group for its members alone pulls the rug from under its own feet and loses its reason for existence.

Trade unions cannot be silent now. They must make their voices heard clearly and loudly against the deportations.

Assaf Adiv is the National Director and one of the founders of the Workers' Advice Center, WAC-MAAN, an independent, representative workers' organisation in Israel that defends both Jewish and Arab workers as well as Palestinians. Adiv has been active in the movement against the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territories since the 1970s and spent 18 months in jail on political accusations after Israeli authorities closed the Arabic/Hebrew newspaper Tarik Al-Sharara.

**Translated from Hebrew by Yonatan Preminger.*

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Society, Work
& Development Institute
'the making and unmaking of social order'

SWOP, University of the Witwatersrand

Contact the editors for
questions or contributions:

Nicolas Pons-Vignon
Nicolas.Pons-Vignon@wits.ac.za

Mbuso Nkosi
Mbuso.Nkosi@global-labour-university.org