

The Life and Death of Socialist Zionism

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In previous decades it was not uncommon for democratic leftists, Jewish ones in particular, to believe that the state of Israel was on the road to exemplifying—as Irving Howe once put it—“the democratic socialist hope of combining radical social change with political freedom.”¹ But times have obviously changed. Today, no one would argue with the assertion that Israeli socialism is “is going the way of the kibbutz farmer,” even if the government continues to be the major shareholder in many Israeli banks, retains majority control in state-owned enterprises, owns a considerable percent of the country's land, and exerts considerable influence in most sectors of the economy.² The kibbutzim themselves, held up as “the essence of the socialist-Zionist ideal of collectivism and egalitarianism,” are fast falling victim “to the pursuit of individual fulfillment.”³ The Labor Party is ever more estranged from Israel's trade union movement, and when it governs it does so less and less like a social-democratic party, and its economic program has become ever more classically liberal. To many Israelis, who remember the years of Labor bureaucratic power, “socialism” means little more than “state elitism.”

In examining “what happened,” it is worthwhile to ask what precisely the content of Israeli socialism was from its inception. There are essentially two narratives of “actually-existing” Labor (Socialist) Zionism. One argues that the most important of the Zionist colonists were utopian socialists who had no intent to be either exploiter or exploited. These socialists set up communistic agrarian communities, *kibbutzim*. But over time Labor Zionists compromised their ideals in order to win the leadership of the

yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine. To achieve this they shifted “to a policy of ‘revolutionary constructivism’ that separated the concepts of class and nation, stressing the development of the *yishuv* as a whole rather than classical socialist goals. This strategy isolated and overwhelmed the Revisionist opposition of the time, but at the cost...of subverting Labour Zionism’s own future.”⁴ In time, the governing Labor-Zionist MAPAI party “subsume[d] the will to revolution [with] the will to normalcy,” as Mitchell Cohen puts it, as the state replaced the working class as the agent of universal interests. However, non-Zionist or “post-Zionist” socialists argue that to claim that Labor Zionism (or more specifically MAPAI, later the Labor Party) “degenerated” fails to acknowledge the content of the “socialism” of the dominant strain of Israel’s founding Labor Zionists. Zeev Sternhell claims that for most Labor Zionist leaders “socialism” was a rhetorical means of legitimating the national project of creating a Jewish state and little else. Universalistic, internationalist socialist principles stood in the way of national and cultural goals and were therefore subverted. MAPAI’s leaders, says Sternhell, never really believed in the idea of the socialist, classless society, or even in the individual rights held dear by liberalism. By the 1920s, the foundations of David Ben-Gurion’s principle of *mamlachtiut*, “the primacy of the nation and supremacy of the state over civil society, of political power over social action and voluntary bodies,” had already been laid.⁵ MAPAI’s ideology did not move from socialism to mere nationalist statism—its “Socialist” Zionism *was* nationalist statism, or more concretely, a nationalism that *used* the working class for statist ends under a socialist guise. The Zionism of Ben-Gurion and his colleagues was, Sternhell argues, a “nationalist socialism” which appeared in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and

preached the organic unity of the nation and the mobilization of all classes of society for the achievement of national objectives...[and held that] the fate of each social group was organically linked to that of all other classes, and all members of the nation were responsible for each other...it refused to accept society as a theater of war...it never objected to private capital as such...If capitalists did not sink their money in production, contribute to the enrichment of society, or employ workers, they were incorrigible parasites, but the fault lay with unproductive capitalists, not private capital itself.⁶

This article will examine and assess these conflicting viewpoints. It will become obvious that the mainstream of Socialist Zionist leaders never really conceived of the working class as “the identical subject-object of Jewish history.”⁷ If Ben-Gurion and his co-thinkers were socialists, theirs was a socialism purely of the state, not the working class.

The Beginnings of Socialist Zionism

In the 1890s, Zionist groups in Palestine emerged that put forth a combination of Jewish nationalism and socialism. What became known as *Po'alei-Tzion* (Workers of Zion), itself part of a world federation of similar parties, began to take shape and developed two wings, one moderately social democratic and the other explicitly Marxist. The main theoretician of Marxist Zionism was Ber Borochov. Borochov posited that the Jews were an “abnormal” people, with a class structure resembling an “inverted pyramid”: “rather than workers and peasants constituting the broad base of their society, and lesser numbers of petty bourgeois and capitalists at the top of the social ‘pyramid,’ among the Jews the masses were in large part urban petty bourgeois, engaged in increasingly marginal occupations far from the point of production.”⁸ As Mitchell Cohen explains,

Borochov's argument is that anti-Semitism, national competition (in which the Jews, lacking a territorial base, are at a disadvantage), and the continuing development of capitalism force a continual pattern of Jewish migration, and make the abnormal Jewish conditions of production more and more insecure. Jewish labour, not employed by non-Jews, follows the migration of Jewish capital, and because of the competition the Jewish petty bourgeoisie becomes more and more proletarianized. Yet if "the Jewish problem migrates with the Jews," then a radical solution that does not simply lead to another inhospitable roadside inn is needed. The solution was proletarian Zionism; the "conscious Jewish proletariat" had the task of directing the migration. In the final analysis the abolition of capitalism *and* national liberation were the salvation for the Jewish working class.⁹

The nationalism of the oppressed Jewish proletariat, Borochov argued, "is emancipatory. If we were the proletariat of a free nation which neither oppresses nor is oppressed, we would not be interested in any problems of national life."¹⁰ What was needed to "normalize" the Jews—and avoid their destruction—was the founding a Jewish state where Jewish capitalists and workers would wage class struggle. Migration to Palestine specifically "was ideal because it would be, in Borochov's view, the only land available to the Jews. It lacked advanced political and cultural development, and would be a land in which big capital would find no possibility while Jewish petty and middle capital would."¹¹ Palestine would then develop along capitalist lines and the Jewish proletariat—in solidarity with the world proletariat—would fight for socialism. However, while Borochov's theories may have been critical to the mobilization of the Zionist labor movement, the actual development and rise to power of MAPAI—the hegemonic Socialist Zionist party—was ultimately "a result of its rejection of Borochov's programmatic conclusions."¹²

Between 1904 and 1914, the mainly Eastern European immigrants of the “Second Aliyah” joined two Zionist labor parties: Po’alei-Tzion, which, though internally divided, called itself socialist and called for class struggle, and *Hapo’el Hatzza’ir* (the Young Worker), which rejected class struggle as harmful to the national cause. It was on the initiative of Po’alei-Tzion that the non-party trade union of guards in the Jewish colonies, *Hashomer*, was founded, which took upon itself the protection and defense of the colonies from attack by their Arab neighbors. Attempts were also made to organize the Jewish agricultural workers and to create cooperatives of workers in city and country.¹³ The founding program of Po’alei-Tzion defined the party as the Zionist wing of worldwide revolutionary Marxism; the “Ramle Platform” declared, “the chronicles of humanity consist of national and class wars.” Sternhell explains this revision of the famous line from *The Communist Manifesto*:

At the beginning of the century, every person...knew that a view of history in terms of class struggle formed part of a complete and comprehensive system of thought. One might criticize this system, but to combine it with a conception of history as consisting of national struggles was absurd. The drafters of the Ramle Platform knew this very well...they were aware that struggles between nations were a recent phenomenon in the history of humankind...If they knowingly decided to commit such a gross error, it was because they had no other means of reconciling the two schools of thought, which at the end of 1906 divided the socialist community in Palestine.¹⁴

Future prime minister of Israel David Ben-Gurion, then a member of Po’alei-Tzion, argued for the Jewish right to the land of Palestine through a version of the labor theory of value: “The source of true rights to a land...is not in political or legal authority, but in the rights of labour. The true, actual owners of the land are its workers.”¹⁵ Though the

echo of the Marxian labor theory of value is obvious, Ben-Gurion would later abandon all traces of what he labeled “proletarian Zionism” after 1919, with the founding of the *Ahdut Ha'avoda* (Unity of Labor) party; indeed, despite his familiarity with Marxist terminology, he never shared Borochov’s conception of Zionism. His was a voluntaristic Zionism that echoed European “organic” nationalism, one that shunned the economic determinism of Borochov.

The views of Hapo’el Hatza’ir more closely echoed Ben-Gurion’s. It shunned strikes, class struggle, and the word “socialism,” and espoused the theories of Aaron David Gordon, who believed that only by physical labour and by “returning to the land” could the Jewish people achieve national salvation. Hapo’el Hatza’ir oriented to the workers solely “because of their national value, not because of working-class issues in and of themselves.”¹⁶ Supposedly the Marxist stress on class struggle was irrelevant to a primarily agricultural country such as Palestine. The party’s leading ideologue, Yosef Aharonovitch, claimed there were no “struggling classes within the Jewish people as a whole and among the Jews in the Land of Israel, in particular.”¹⁷ By the eve of World War One much of the Po’alei Tzion party was espousing much the same view; Borochovism was eclipsed by what was called a “specifically Jewish socialism” which was ever more radically nationalistic and more and more removed from the universal principles of classical social democracy. Furthermore, as Sternhell notes, the dismissal of Marxist categories by both Zionist parties contradicted the fact that “Marxism at the beginning of the century remained...first and foremost a critique of capitalism. It is hard to understand how Marxism could have been relevant to Russia, Poland, and Romania but not to Palestine...[social democracy’s] adherence to [Marxist] principles made the

socialists the spearhead of the struggle against tribal nationalism and the cornerstone of ideological modernity.”¹⁸ It was no accident that Ben-Gurion would later help found a party built on other principles.

The End of Po’alei Tzion

The World Union of Po’alei Tzion met in Europe in 1909. It was then that Borochov’s Marxist paradigm was decisively rejected. Among the opponents of Borochov were the Austrian Po’ale Zionists led by Shlomo Kaplansky. They advocated not only inter-class cooperation within the Zionist movement, but also what was later termed the “constructivist” strategy of Labor Zionism. Kapalansky argued that the working class ought to lead the Zionist movement and “pursue a general strategy of building economic institutions and cooperative settlements in Palestine that would be the harbingers of the future society. This was, in fact, to become Poale Zion policy.”¹⁹ The idea of building cooperative workers’ settlements and the building of a “labor economy” owed much to Nachman Syrkin, leader of the American Po’alei Zion until his death and an avowed anti-Marxist and voluntarist. The “constructivist” strategy of building Jewish Palestine involved collecting funds “to finance socio-economic institutions capable of organizing and settling significant numbers of immigrant workers. The initiative of private capital...was thereby relegated to a secondary status...workers’ settlements, such as the kibbutz, became strategically central in this effort.”²⁰

The socialist content of such a strategy seems obvious, as its goal appears to be the bypassing of capitalism in favor of building directly socialist institutions, something that even Marx and Engels had hoped to be possible in Russia on the basis of peasant

village communes. Cohen argues that “constructivism meant the possibility of identifying the interests of the emerging workers’ movement and its institutions with the interests and needs of the Jewish people as a whole...this allowed a Zionist reworking of the classic Marxist theme of a universal class.”²¹ But if constructivism owed much to Syrkin,²² then it is worth noting the problematical aspects of Syrkin’s thought:

[Syrkin’s] anti-Marxism went hand in hand with a belief in the determinant role of heroic characters in history...[he believed that] human progress occurred as the result of an ideological revolution that took place from time to time among minorities. He sought explanations in places that social democracy avoided like the plague: the collective national soul, the Volksgeist, and the various peoples’ mysterious cultural and historical symbolisms...The true test of a political strategy, wrote Syrkin, is not the degree to which it corresponds to the situation or to reality but its power to penetrate the souls of the masses and to activate the will of the people...Unlike the democratic socialists, Syrkin believed that a nation is a fact of nature. Thus in his system of thought, the nation is given greater importance with class interests...his view that “Zionism, being the Jewish enterprise of national construction, does not conflict with class warfare but simply transcends it,” is a classic nationalist socialist formulation.

Syrkin’s cooperative program—along with that of Franz Oppenheimer and Shlomo Kaplanski—played a major part in moving Po’alei Tzion away from Borochovism. This program was, in fact, explicitly non-socialist. Syrkin argued that “We wish only to build cooperatives...A socialist society is...impractical, because people have been talking about it for a hundred years, and we still do not know what it is. Cooperative experiments, however, have already been made in present society, and we are able to build on them.”²³ Neither the labor movement nor the Socialist International could

provide the funds; that would have to be “the affair of the whole Jewish people,” with the Jewish workers as the main agent of cooperative construction.²⁴

Though he was less concerned with cooperatives, Ben-Gurion’s thinking largely echoed Syrkin’s. He believed that the creation of a specifically Jewish working class in Palestine was necessary for Jewish “redemption.” Should the “petit-bourgeois” socioeconomic practices of Jews in the diaspora be repeated in Palestine, it would mean the death of the Zionist enterprise. “A distinction between the needs of the individual and the needs of the nation,” Ben-Gurion argued, “has no basis in the lives of the workers of Eretz Israel...Our movement makes no distinction between the national question and the socialist question...we have fused the working population into a single unit.”²⁵ Socialist and nationalist aspirations were harmonious, but the latter took priority; Ben-Gurion said little in his programmatic speech at the Po’alei Tzion convention in 1919 on socialism, save that cooperatives would reduce—not abolish—dependence on private capital. This runs contrary to the assertion made by latter-day Socialist Zionists that Ben-Gurion, at least initially, set out to create the institutional framework for a Jewish workers’ state in Palestine.

That year the World Union of Po’alei Tzion began to split between right and left over whether or not to apply to the Communist International or participate in the bourgeois-led international Zionist organizations. In the final split the right wing majority of the Palestinian Po’alei Tzion party merged with independent left Zionists to form *Ahdut Ha’avoda* (Unity of Labor), with Ben-Gurion and other significant labor movement figures among its leaders. This organization was less a party than a federation

(*histadnut*) intended “to mobilize all wage earners by providing for their needs and all the services they required in order to facilitate the construction of the nation.”²⁶ Though for some years it used the rhetoric of the class struggle and was officially “socialist,” it is notable that at its founding convention the principal speech given by Berl Katznelson stressed that the labor movement in Eretz Israel aimed “not just to lead a class but to lead the nation...to be the whole nation, to create a working Hebrew nation”; “socialism” was described purely as a matter of shared “existence” by Jews and not an alternative to capitalism, or even as an ideology which critiqued capitalism.²⁷

“From a Working Class to a Working Nation”

In 1920 the *Histadrut*, or General Federation of Jewish Labour in Palestine, was founded as a united project of Ahdut Ha’avoda, Hapo’el Hatza’ir, and other Left Zionist parties. Membership was open to all Jewish workers regardless of political beliefs. Ben-Gurion became the Federation’s first Secretary-General. In Cohen’s interpretation—often repeated elsewhere²⁸—Ben-Gurion “acted forcefully to centralize the Histadrut’s resources and power structure as a nascent workers’ state within the state of Mandate Palestine. For a short period he championed the idea of turning the entire country into a single commune.”²⁹ Through its building of a vast array of institutions such as a sickness and disablement fund (*Kupat Cholim*), labor exchanges, building firms (*Solel Boneh*), a company for the sale of agricultural products (*Tnuva*), a wholesale sales cooperative (*Hamashbir Hamerkazi*), a labor schools network, housing cooperatives, and kibbutzim, Ben-Gurion argued that the Histadrut was “an organization of the working class *in the making* as distinct from the Trade Union which is the classic form of organization of a

working class *in being*.”³⁰ But what this truly meant, as Michael Shalev notes, was that the Histadrut “did not emerge out of the class struggles contingent upon capitalist industrialization and political democratization; it was primarily concerned with the realization of national interests in the rural sector rather than with the class interests of urban wage-earners; and it was founded from the top down rather than crystallizing and aggregating spontaneous processes of working-class formation.”³¹ It may have been a means to achieve political and economic supremacy for labor, but it did so not through class struggle but through attempting to realize objectives that were primarily national, i.e. cross-class. Though the Histadrut may have been meeting the needs of the “Jewish nation,” it excluded Arab workers and encouraged the various campaigns to replace Arab with Jewish labor; it was argued that “the unorganized and poorly-paid Arab workers were a threat to the organized Jewish workers, and a trade union must protect its members.”³² Ben-Gurion may have said that he was “for Bolshevism,” but in practice what this meant is that he was for a strongly centralist orientation for both the Histadrut and Ahdut Ha’avoda.³³ He was opposed to the traditional Marxist belief that the solution to the problem of competition from rural, unorganized labor working for miniscule wages was to organize the backward workers together with the unionized workers.³⁴ Though they did not make it explicit, the Histadrut labor elite feared that “the logic of collective action in the market arena might lead Jewish workers to join with their Arab counterparts in struggles against Jewish employers. This would have contradicted the core commitment of the labour movement...to place the Jewish working class at the head of the nation-building struggle,” even though it would have been consistent with the socialist principles to which Ben-Gurion and his colleagues supposedly adhered.³⁵

In the 1920s there were left wing Socialist Zionists led by Menahem Elkind whose “Bolshevism” differed greatly from that of Ben-Gurion. They criticized the top-down character of the Histadrut and became involved with the *Gdud Ha'avoda* (Labor Battalion), an attempt to promote the development of the Jewish state through “establishing a General Commune of Jewish Workers in Palestine.”³⁶ Sternhell argues that “the Gdud represented a new departure and had real revolutionary potential. Its idea of a single countrywide commune was the only chance of building a true socialist society.”³⁷ Ben-Gurion may have once advocated the idea of the Histadrut as a general commune³⁸—albeit as a way to concentrate economic power and the reserves of manpower into the hands of the Agricultural Center and the Bureau of Public Workers³⁹—but he vigorously opposed Elkind and his “impractical” supporters:

[Ben-Gurion] wanted to concentrate power in the hands of the executive, whereas the latter defended the autonomy of the settlers...values such as individual freedom and the hope for a better society were subordinated [by Ben-Gurion] to national interests. The Gdud wanted to apply the principles of equality to the urban sector...whereas the leadership of the movement wished to restrict public ownership of the means of the production to agricultural settlements...freeing the urban sector from the yoke of communal ownership put an end to all hope of large-scale social change.⁴⁰

Gdud leftists acted as a left opposition within the Histadrut for a few years, arguing for its democratization, for a complete equalization of salaries and “the delegation of work to organized kibbutzim on their full responsibility.”⁴¹ But the Gdud did not exist for long. By 1927, after campaigns by Ben-Gurion which included economic pressure and

expulsions,⁴² and a deep recession which undermined the left,⁴³ this alternative society which took the socialist pretensions of Socialist Zionism seriously was no more.

MAPAI and the “Class Warfare” Debate

Ahdut Ha'avoda's main rival was Hapo'el Hatza'ir, whose main theoretician was Haim Arlosoroff. Before moving to Palestine he had written a pamphlet explaining what he called Jewish *Volksozialismus* (People's Socialism), an outlook that opposed class-struggle theories of socialism (such as Marxism) and echoed the ideas of Aaron David Gordon and Russian populism. In a 1926 speech, “Class War in the Reality of the Land of Israel,” he argued that

[t]he two facts that Palestine was a British colony and a bi-national society...subverted the application of class struggle...The ‘state’ in Palestine was the Mandatory authority, and rather than being a reflection of indigenous class forces and relations, its political character was due to the ‘class forces of English society’...the horizontal cleavages of class in Palestine were cross-cut and undercut by a vertical national cleavage [Arabs and Jews]...‘The organized workers’ movement’ in Palestine could not even be classified as ‘proletarian’...because the Histadrut represented the ‘aristocracy of the settlement’ and the worker was ‘the leader of the Yishuv’...Furthermore, the Yishuv was still in the process of self-creation; the Palestinian Jewish workers were constantly renewing their ranks by means of immigrants, most of whom came from non-proletarian backgrounds and were in the process of being transformed into workers; the Jewish economy...had no normal cycle of production or division of national income within a cycle. These were characteristics of a society-in-the-making—a society entirely unsuited to Marxist theories of class warfare.⁴⁴

Arlosoroff claimed that the inapplicability of class struggle to Eretz Israel did not make the socialist idea inapplicable. Yet urbanization was continuing apace in Palestine, and the emergence of a wage-earning proletariat—as well as a Jewish bourgeoisie—was bound to lead to class struggle. Despite the “socialist” label, mainstream Socialist Zionism “did not deny the legitimacy of private property or seek to change society but wanted only to control it, and at the same time was unwilling to acknowledge the ability of the private sector to implement Zionism,” i.e. build the infrastructure of a Jewish state.⁴⁵ And despite the moral claims made for the kibbutzim, as late as 1936 no more than 8.4 percent of Histadrut members were living in one.⁴⁶ As Nathan Weinstock explains, “although the sacrifices and the socialist convictions of its militants are not open to doubt, the kibbutz movement has never...represented a threat of any sort to the Zionist bourgeoisie; quite the contrary. Thus the Jewish Agency subsidised these ‘socialist oases in the capitalist desert’ to the best of its ability...the Jewish working-class movement was led to substitute itself for a Jewish bourgeoisie which was almost non-existent as a class in Palestine in the Twenties in order to lay the foundations of Zionist capitalism through the economic organisations of the Histadrut.”⁴⁷ The selfless idealism of the kibbutzim “relieved the Zionist bourgeoisie of the need to make unprofitable investments”⁴⁸ and thus contributed to Zionist national goals without affecting the class character of the economy as a whole.

On one hand, Labor Zionists such as Ben-Gurion declared, “If all the capitalists in Palestine were Jews...the country would be no more Jewish than it is now...If the workers in country were Jews...it would be a Jewish country.”⁴⁹ On the other hand, Ben-Gurion wrote that class conflict in Palestine was “only about the *use of capital*...It is not

capital itself that is the subject of dispute, but only its destination”—the private sector or collective settlement administered by the Histadrut.⁵⁰ “Class warfare” was a code word for this struggle over resources; it was not about the struggle between labor and capital at the point of production, let alone socialization of privately-owned industry. “Class warfare” was a means towards “national unity”; while socialist parties of other nations were, by definition, concerned only with the interests of the working class and believed (at least in theory) that those interests were in conflict with those of the capitalist class, the dominant strain of “Socialist” Zionism—Ben-Gurion’s strain—was of a wholly different character: “Our movement has always had the socialistic idea that the party of the working class, unlike the parties of other classes, is not only a class party solely concerned with matters affecting the class but a national party responsible for the future of the entire people. It regards itself not as a mere part of the people but as the nucleus of the future nation.”⁵¹ This was a peculiar “movement of the universal class,” as it effectively denied that the interests of the workers alone were truly universal.

The mutual commitment to “constructivism” by Ahdut Ha’avoda and Hapo’el Hatza’ir made possible their merger in 1930 into a single party, MAPAI (a Hebrew acronym for *Miflegeth Poalim Eretz-Israel*, Palestine Workers’ Party). It controlled the Histadrut and became the largest party in both Palestine and the Zionist Organization. To achieve this position in the ZO, Ben-Gurion worked towards an alliance with the moderate Zionist bourgeoisie (though not their uppermost ranks, which were few in number). Cohen explains the strategy undertaken by MAPAI:

Labour’s strategic shift...was occasioned by a bitter battle with the far right; consequently, in order to vanquish the latter, Labour sought to head as broad a coalition

as possible. This, in turn, implied a new relation with groups it had previously fought, together with acceptance of a ‘compromise equilibrium’ and an ‘economic corporate’ sacrifice, in particular accepting the Histadrut as one pillar among others...even though Labour frequently continued to employ its class rhetoric of the past, its operative assumptions, implicitly, had been very much transformed.⁵²

This shift by MAPAI “signified the abandonment of the concept on which Labour power had been built in the first place: the identity of the interests of the working class and the nation. This was an important departure from the past and from a fundamental element of socialist politics.”⁵³ A departure from socialism it indeed was, but the “break with the past” was not as great as might be imagined; neither Ahdut Ha’avoda nor Hapo’el Hatza’ir had had a commitment to the socialization of capital. Cohen deplores MAPAI’s acceptance of the principle that “class, nation and state were separate, if not opposed, categories, things unto themselves above and beyond the project of Labour Israel—which henceforth became a particular, not a universalizing, endeavour...the working class los[t] its role as the subject-object of Zionist history.” But it seems more correct to say that for Ben-Gurion and his co-thinkers the working class was never more than the object of Zionist history; it was the Histadrut elite that was the real subject. The Jewish working class might build the Jewish nation-state, but it was not going to own and control that state’s means of production, distribution and exchange. Both before and after MAPAI’s “historic compromise,” “socialism” was a myth used for mobilization.

Socialist Zionist parties whose socialism was more than rhetorical also found their nationalism eating away at their commitment to universal, democratic principles. *Hashomer-Hatzair* (The Young Guard) sought the “integration of pioneering Zionism

with revolutionary socialism, colonization with class struggle,”⁵⁴ though in its view the realization of socialism could only occur after the realization of Zionism. Though it put forth the idea of a bi-national state in Palestine—one neither exclusively Jewish nor exclusively Arab—it participated energetically in the effort to exclude Arab workers from Jewish firms. It oriented almost exclusively towards the kibbutz, and while it stressed the practical tasks of building up the material basis of the Jewish home (constructivism), some of its kibbutzim were on land taken from Arab peasants. One of the party’s leaders even argued that Zionists, like the British, had been entrusted the “historical and humanitarian mission” of settling among “backward and hostile natives.”⁵⁵

The Labor Bureaucracy in Power

Israeli governments were formed by coalitions led by MAPAI from 1949 to 1977. Ben-Gurion served as prime minister until 1963. From the start of its reign there was unease within MAPAI that its socialism “was being forsaken in the din of state-making”; Ben-Gurion had already labeled the kibbutzim as a “socialist aristocracy detached from the needs of the state.”⁵⁶ He went on to declare that the Israeli state was neither socialist nor capitalist (i.e., it was above classes), that the term “socialism” was of no relevance, and that

the working class’s interests and its institutions could no longer be seen as general. For many Histadrut members...their interests in the Labour organization were private, i.e. what it could give them in terms of services. The working class’s vision, unity and pioneering spirit had faded, and a particularism had asserted itself instead. Consequently, ‘In the state there exists a more efficient and comprehensive tool than the Histadrut. It is

up to use to draw the proper conclusions from these two facts'. The conclusions were that the state's institutions, not the working class's, were universal, and that 'The Histadrut is neither the state's rival or competitor, but rather its faithful aid and loyal supporter'.⁵⁷

To argue that any Israeli institution should be purely for workers was denounced by Ben-Gurion as "partisan." Shalev explains the difference between the Israeli version of social democracy and that of the European social democrats:

[European] social-democratic parties made the particularistic interest of the working-class in higher wages synonymous with the general interest of all classes in stimulating production. In contrast, the material basis for the status of Jewish labour in Palestine as a *universal class* did not rest solely on the positive implications of working-class prosperity for other classes. It also relied on the shared interest of workers, the middle strata, and much of bourgeoisie in the economic separation of Arabs and Jews; and on the crucial role of the labour movement in guaranteeing the present security and future of the entire Zionist community in Palestine.⁵⁸

Though Minister of Labor Golda Meir might have spoken of "socialism in our time" in 1950, MAPAI's economic policy increasingly allowed for income inequality. Ben-Gurion insisted that full employment and housing depended on attracting foreign capital, and MAPAI's socialist rhetoric masked the development of a "restricted capitalism...propelled by a large influx of desperately needed foreign investment capital, particularly in the form of loans from foreign governments and banks, private funds through the sale of Israeli Bonds, Jewish contributions from abroad and German reparations...there was no attempt at nationalizations of the private sector and wage policy shifted from...principles of need...to one based on professionalism and less

socialist or egalitarian criteria.”⁵⁹ Where rival parties came to be supported by elements of the working class, MAPAI earned the support of the “state made middle class”—a generously treated (by MAPAI) group of “entrepreneurs and middlemen who made their fortunes through government concessions and subsidies, as well as the considerable salariat of managerial and professional workers in public employ.”⁶⁰ Over the first twenty years of MAPAI’s rule, a technocratic group of army officers who entered the economy as administrators and specialists emerged in the party and came into conflict with its “old guard”; statist technocracy would come to define MAPAI and its successor, the Labor Party. Indeed, aside from the fact that there were still opposition parties and some degree of freedom for non-Arab minority opinion, Israel under MAPAI had aspects that were eerily reminiscent of Stalinism. One small group of leaders (MAPAI) controlled the political party of the workers, the trade union of the workers, the state-owned industry (“of the workers”), and through a series of coalitions, the government (also “of the workers”). This “workers” state could break strikes (how could workers sensibly strike against “themselves,” after all) and then deny strikers further employment in the “socialist” sector by a labor court presided over by appointees of MAPAI.*

Israel’s welfare state also varies greatly from social-democratic norms. In terms of social security spending it has been dubbed a “welfare-state laggard.”⁶¹ Its social policy has favored benefits to children over pensions for the retired. Most notable in its defiance of universalistic social-democratic principles is the difference in policy provisions for Arabs and Jews; the latter get all the benefits and the former only some,

* As Barry Finger has informed me, this is more-or-less what happened to Akiva Orr, later a founder of the independent Marxist group Matzpen, who thought that the state-owned merchant marine should be run along socialistic lines and participated in a strike action that rendered him unemployable by means of the above process.

while Arabs in occupied Palestine “are entitled to virtually no income maintenance support and are offered a limited range of public social services which bear no comparison with those of Israel proper.”⁶² Even among Israeli Jews there is a two-tier system of welfare:

Essentially, the upper tier was reserved for the veterans of the period before sovereignty, most of whom were Ashkenazim...Here social protection depended primarily on the employment relationship. The veterans had access to the best job and enjoyed a high degree of job security...[and] entitlements to a variety of insurance-based income maintenance schemes...In contrast, recent arrivals naturally lacked job seniority and a great many were unemployed, in temporary jobs, or administratively barred from entering the labor market...they were dealt with harshly by means of a ‘residual’ system of niggardly means-tested benefits and manipulative forms of so-called treatment and rehabilitation. The ones who suffered the most were...mostly the ‘Eastern’ Jews who immigrated to Israel from North Africa and the Middle East.⁶³

MAPAI attempted to simultaneously retain the loyalty of its traditional supporters while winning over other constituencies, such as the new middle strata. Had it governed in a more universal, traditionally social democratic fashion, this would have undermined the clientelism on which the party so heavily relied. Hence MAPAI’s welfare state policy—more properly defined as *dualist* than socialist.⁶⁴

A result of such policies were that many Israeli workers came to see “socialists” as the society’s elite, with many second-class Sephardic and Eastern Jews opting to support the right-wing Likud Party. The control of the Labor bureaucracy over the flow of foreign capital allowed it “to exercise a far-reaching control over the broad masses of the population, not only in political and economic matters, but even in aspects of

everyday life. The majority of the Israeli population depend[ed] directly, and daily, on the goodwill of this bureaucracy for their jobs, housing and health insurance. Some of the workers who...rebelled against the bureaucracy, like the seaman in the great strike of December 1951, were denied employment, and some who refused to surrender were forced in the end to emigrate.”⁶⁵ In the Histadrut, blue-collar workers came to constitute “only a minority of the Histadrut’s constituency, which includes all grades of white collar and professional workers, and even many of the self-employed.”⁶⁶ Left opposition to MAPAI was weakened when the party took into the state functions of the Histadrut that were important leftist power bases (the Palmach military force and the labor school system). The Histadrut’s social services and its affiliated economic enterprises “were permitted to remain [non-state] and came to enjoy substantial informal privileges, on the understanding that they would continue to serve the needs of the party.”⁶⁷ Those enterprises had always functioned according to market logic and were managed in traditional capitalist fashion. Histadrut leader and Minister of Agriculture Haim Gvati admitted in 1964 that

We have not succeeded in transforming this immense richness into socialist economic cells. We have not succeeded in maintaining the working-class nature of our economic sector. Actually there are *no* characteristics to differentiate it from the rest of the public sector, and sometimes even from the private sector. The atmosphere, work-relations and human relations of our economic sector are in no way different from any other industrial enterprise.⁶⁸

Pinhas Lavon, General Secretary of the Histadrut, argued that the federation had no specific class character: “Our Histadrut is a general organization to its core. It is not a

workers' trade union, although it copes perfectly well with the real needs of the worker.”⁶⁹ Employment in the public or Histadrut sectors “often meant having the right connections in MAPAI. As major employers, the Histadrut and the state had an interest in restraining working-class militancy, and since they were controlled by the same party, they generally cooperated to do so.”⁷⁰ While restraint of militancy is hardly unknown among social democratic parties and trade unions, the alienation that Israeli workers felt towards the Histadrut was notable; by the mid 1960s, few of its members said that they had joined because of ideological reasons or because the Histadrut defended workers' interests, many felt that the Histadrut made no difference in their work situations, that the local trade-union branches in their workplaces should be independent of the Histadrut, and that the trade-union conference had no influence on the functioning of the central body—i.e., that the ordinary trade unionist had little influence.⁷¹ Beginning in 1952, it became official Histadrut policy to put “the good of the state” and “the needs of the economy” above the needs of workers—it traded off wage concessions “not only, or even mainly, in return for compensatory material benefits for the working class,” but in return for state subsidies for the Histadrut-owned sector of the economy and its health clinics and pension funds.⁷²

Conclusion

The Labor Party in government implemented policies that ultimately weakened the institutions that supported it, most notably the Histadrut. Today, it is no longer guaranteed an authoritative role in government or of hegemony over the Histadrut, and as

mentioned before, its political program has ever less resemblance to traditional social democracy.

Years of supposed socialism in Israel have not left any positive legacy where Israel's labor laws are concerned. The law allows only a very limited, very specific strike, against a particular employer who fails to respect the promise of good working conditions. This kind of strike must be approved beforehand, as it is already considered a violation of contract. In collective bargaining agreements, the worker agrees to industrial peace and is obligated to not strike. Solidarity strikes with other workers are illegal, as are strikes against government policy or Knesset decisions. If the government is about to discuss raising taxes, or privatization, or cutting subsidies, the workers are not allowed to strike—it would be considered a “political strike,” forbidden by law. The courts do permit a “semi-political” strike of no more than three hours if the workers believe that a particular policy may hurt them directly, but the possibility that a three-hour strike might have any kind of effect is quite small.⁷³

A 1997 general strike in the public sector gave hints of a possible long-term realignment of Israeli politics that might ultimately displace the current hawk/dove division by a new politics based on social class. That year saw the first serious talk in decades of the formation of a new workers' party in Israel, as many Labor Party leaders are estranged from the trade union movement; some of them even supported the Netanyahu government against the strike. Today there exists the *Am Ehad* (One Nation) Party, headed by Histadrut Chairman Amir Peretz, which presents itself as Israel's only “real” social-democratic party and “aspires to economic and social equality among all

citizens of the State of Israel.”⁷⁴ But this party is not yet anywhere near majority status. Nor does it claim to be anything other than a party of social reform, though by doing so it has avoided the misleading rhetoric—along with the ethnonationalism—of classical Labor Zionism.

As a mass movement, Socialist Zionism is finished. One might say that it accomplished its actual goal—the building of the Jewish state—without falling prey to the illusion that it “failed” to ensure that the state was a socialist one. For unless one identifies “socialism” with statism, socialism was never a goal of Ben-Gurion and his co-thinkers. One cannot compromise ideals one does not have. It will doubtless be a long time before the majority of the Israeli working class—or for that matter most other working classes—embraces internationalist democratic socialism. In the meantime, however, no tears need be shed over the death of Labor Zionist nationalist socialism.

¹ Quoted by Norman Finkelstein in “Palestine: The Truth About 1948,” <http://www.nimn.org/history/finkelstein.html>.

² Lori Epstein, “Socialism doomed, business interns say here,” *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California*, May 29, 1998, <http://www.jewishsf.com/bk980529/sfadoom.htm>.

³ Geoffrey Wheatcroft, “Death of the Kibbutz,” *The Guardian*, Monday, May 14, 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Print/0,3858,4186081,00.html>.

⁴ Alan Dowty, *The Jewish State: A Century Later* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 56. “Revisionism” refers to the movement led by Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky in the 1920s, which asserted the exclusive right of Jews to all of Eretz (Greater) Israel, and explicitly upheld order, discipline, and authority over democracy and individual rights.

⁵ Zeev Sternhell, *The Founding Myths of Israel: Nationalism, Socialism, and the Making of the Jewish State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.

⁷ Mitchell Cohen, *Zion and State: Nation, Class and the Shaping of Modern Israel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

⁸ Zachary Lockman, “The Left in Israel: Zionism vs. Socialism,” *MERIP Reports*, 49 (July 1976), p. 4.

⁹ Mitchell Cohen, “Ber Borochov and Socialist Zionism,” in Mitchell Cohen, ed., *Class Struggle and the Jewish Nation: Selected Essays in Marxist Zionism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1984), p. iv.

¹⁰ Quoted in Cohen, *Zion and State*, p. 91.

¹¹ Cohen, “Ber Borochov and Socialist Zionism,” p. iv.

¹² Cohen, *Zion and State*, p. 92.

¹³ Lockman, *op cit.*

¹⁴ Sternhell, p. 84.

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- ¹⁵ Quoted in Cohen, op. cit., p. 94.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 97.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 96.
- ¹⁸ Sternhell, op. cit., pp. 91-92.
- ¹⁹ Cohen, op. cit., p. 99.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 101.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 102.
- ²² “In 1919, Syrkin...was the key figure in the World Poalei Zion Conference in Stockholm, which assigned him the task of heading a study commission to visit Palestine to draw up a plan for mass cooperative settlement” (<http://www.us-israel.org/jsource/biography/nsyrkin.html>).
- ²³ Quoted in Sternhell, op. cit., p. 104. Syrkin was either unaware or uninterested in the outlines of socialist society provided by Karl Kautsky in *The Social Revolution* (1902) or the writings of British Guild Socialists such as G. D. H. Cole.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Quoted in Ibid., pp. 93-4.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 108.
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 112-13; Lockman, op. cit., p. 5.
- ²⁸ An example, from <http://jewishpeople.net/labourzionism.html>: “Beginning in the 1920s, [Ben-Gurion] set out to create the immense institutional framework for a Jewish workers’ state in Palestine.” Excerpted from Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Israel: A Country Study* (Washington, D. C.: Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, 1988).
- ²⁹ Cohen, op. cit., p. 109.
- ³⁰ Quoted in Cohen, *ibid.*, p. 110.
- ³¹ Michael Shalev, *Labour and the Political Economy in Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 27.
- ³² Lockman, op. cit.
- ³³ Cohen, op. cit., p. 111.
- ³⁴ “This organization of the proletarians into a class...is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves. But it ever rises up again, stronger, firmer, mightier.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Communist Manifesto,” in David McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 228.
- ³⁵ Shalev, op. cit., p. 40.
- ³⁶ Cohen, op. cit., p. 112.
- ³⁷ Sternhell, op. cit., p. 199.
- ³⁸ Cohen, op. cit., p. 113.
- ³⁹ Sternhell, op. cit., p. 202.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 198.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 205.
- ⁴² Ibid., p. 212.
- ⁴³ Cohen, op. cit.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 117.
- ⁴⁵ Sternhell, op. cit., p. 220.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 220.
- ⁴⁷ Nathan Weinstock, *Zionism: False Messiah* (London: Ink Links, 1979), <http://www.marxists.de/middleast/weinstock/10-wclass.htm>.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Quoted in Cohen, op. cit., p. 125.
- ⁵⁰ Sternhell, op. cit., p. 224.
- ⁵¹ Quoted in Ibid., p. 225.
- ⁵² Cohen, op. cit., p. 128.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Lockman, op. cit., p. 6.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 8; Weinstock, op. cit.
- ⁵⁶ Cohen, op. cit., p. 212.
- ⁵⁷ Quoted in Cohen, *ibid.*, p. 217.

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- ⁵⁸ Shalev, op. cit., p. 117.
- ⁵⁹ Cohen, op. cit., pp. 249-50.
- ⁶⁰ Shalev, op. cit., p. 110.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., p. 241.
- ⁶² Ibid., p. 242.
- ⁶³ Ibid., p. 244.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 252.
- ⁶⁵ Haim Hanegbi, Moshe Machover, and Akiva Orr, *The Class Nature of Israel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Middle East Research and Information Project, 1971), pp. 16-17.
- ⁶⁶ Shalev, op. cit., p. 85.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 104.
- ⁶⁸ Quoted in Hanegbi, Machover, and Orr, op. cit., pp. 13-14.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 15.
- ⁷⁰ Joel Beinin, *Was The Red Flag Flying There? Marxist Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict in Egypt and Israel, 1948-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 72.
- ⁷¹ Hanegbi, Machover, and Orr, op. cit., p. 17. The Histadrut was not controlled by workers at the shop level, but governed by “parliamentarily” elected party lists.
- ⁷² Shalev, op. cit., p. 194.
- ⁷³ Information received through Eric Lee of Labourstart (www.labourstart.org), who has lived in Israel.
- ⁷⁴ See http://www.aml.org.il/eng_platform.html.