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Israeli state

Revolutionary democratic: Israel's new workers' union

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Israel's labour policy was dominated for decades by a single, state-aligned trade union with a strongly nationalist tradition. Only six years ago, the first independent, democratic trade union was founded in Israel. Koach LaOvdim – Power to the Workers – has since been able to mobilize tens of thousands of workers and lists over 12,000 members as of 2013. On the occasion of International Workers' Day, the AIC has asked Yaniv Bar Ilan, official spokesperson for Koach LaOvdim, about the state of workers and unions in Israel.

It is workers' day – and yet a working day in Israel. What does May Day mean in Israel and what is the situation of workers in the country?

May Day in Israel has some unique traits: It does not necessarily carry very positive connotations for workers here. The 1st of May is partly associated with a political agenda. The main reason is historical: For its first 30 years, the State of Israel was ruled by the Labour Party. Labour took the support of workers for granted. May Day represented the monopolisation of power by the party.

When Labour lost power for the first time in 1977, the country took an about-turn. Ever since, the political mainstream agenda follows a vision of idealised capitalism, looking up to America. A massive campaign of privatisations changed the country, and traditional pride in the social democratic foundations of society vanished. Workers' Day gained another negative connotation.

Israel traditionally only had one trade union, the Histadrut, very close to the state and the Labour Party. Membership was basically forced on the workers, as receiving social services was dependent on being a union-member. When social services were drastically downscaled with privatisation, membership declined. Today only 25 percent of workers in Israel are organized, compared to 75 percent in the mid-1990s.

Koach LaOvdim breaks with the tradition of a state-union, the Histadrut. How did Koach LaOvdim develop and what characterises the union?

Histadrut was not the only trade union in Israel, technically speaking. A second union was founded as early as 75 years ago, associated with the right-wing Likud party. That was perhaps the only union in the world with a nationalist agenda, developed in response to the Histadrut. Really it was not very effective as it disagreed with strikes and thus prevented true pressure from workers.

Koach LaOvdim was founded only six years ago. It is the first and only organization that truly competes with the Histadrut, as it offers workers a real alternative. It was founded by social leaders, some from academia, some from the field. Some of them had made their own experiences working in more precarious jobs where – typical for Israel – they had no chance whatsoever of organizing for their rights and fair pay. They wanted to create a meaningful alternative to the complacent Histadrut.

What is alternative about Koach LaOvdim? Most importantly, it is the first union in Israel that is democratic. It stresses that workers must have their say in all major decisions concerning their working conditions, including decisions to strike, over collective agreements and so forth. In the Histadrut, even basic workers' participation was not given. We did not invent the democratic model, of course, but orient ourselves towards the models of northern Europe, where participatory unions are the norm.

The democratic set-up seems very basic, but for Israel it's a novelty. What is amazing is that Histadrut had to acknowledge the difference. They, too, start seeing things differently.

The new government has just presented its proposal for a reformed social budget. How will workers be affected?

Unfortunately, the new budget is not at all social. They use social as a slogan, and they do verbally acknowledge the social protests [of summer 2011], but in fact they do not intend to change anything to the more social. Quite the opposite: It was recently reported that the prime minister is attempting to issue legislation reducing the possibility for strikes and limiting the labour courts. He is thus seeking to restrict union work.

There is a huge gap between the new government's slogans and the reality of policy. The left has to be alerted to this: Parties, unions should be prepared to defend their rights.

Israel's workers come from very different, very polarised social groups. How does Koach LaOvdim cope with such vast differences?

It is always amazing to see that mutual goals help in making people work side by side. We recently worked with kindergarten teachers, for example, who in Israel really come from very different social groupings: Jewish religious, Arab, new immigrants, Bedouin. When it came to organizing them for better working conditions, people came together, joined forces, and backgrounds did not play such a big role anymore. Overcoming difference usually starts in the field: You work with the groups involved and then bring people together.

Koach LaOvdim does, I have to say, give special consideration to such issues and actively works on them. We are always careful to respect each group's respective needs. And we do pay attention to make sure that all groups are represented in the leadership. That is action in very practical terms: Translating all relevant documents into Arabic, for example.

What is Koach LaOvdim's relation to the Histadrut today?

Officially, Histadrut has never acknowledged our existence: In interviews, officials never mention our name. Unofficially, of course they feel our presence, as competition. In several cases they did their best to pull workers away from our actions, even cooperating with management. We for our part try our best to prevent confusion: Workers' organisation should be clear and not mixed up between Koach LaOvdim and Histadrut.

A success: Histadrut has become a bit more democratic following our model. Union veterans, for example, now know they can demand a little more say in the process before accepting agreements for wages, for example. More engagement does not happen on a daily basis, but the atmosphere in a wider sense has changed.

Thank you very much for this interview, Yaniv Bar Ilan.