

ISRAEL AND HISTADRUT: A Great Social Laboratory

by

Charles Cogen,

President

American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO

National Committee for Labor Israel --

Hotel Commodore, New York City

November 26, 1966

\* \* \* \* \*

The visit to Israel last spring, of my wife and myself, as the guests of Histadrut, was indeed an event for which we have been most grateful. We had, of course, heard and read much of the brilliance of the country's spirit and achievements. We had listened to one American citizen after another, Jew and Christian alike, upon their return home from their Israeli trips, give glowing accounts with emotional fervor.

However, the actuality of the view brought meaning, and, I hope, some understanding where previously had been a mystique of wishful believing. And it is an understanding--inadequate, to be sure--which tries to encompass not only the accomplishments, but the pitfalls and the unsolved problems as well.

I see the Israel-Histadrut combination as a great social laboratory in which every phase of life is undergoing crucial experimentation. And experimentation is necessary partly because new and urgent problems are rampant, and partly because old problems of mankind have not been solved by traditional methods. In fact, many of them have not even been attempted to be solved elsewhere, at least until recent years.

These experiments are being conducted, we must always remember, under handicaps that would ordinarily be fatal to the outcome.

We are all familiar with these handicaps, but it is well to repeat them and bear them in mind. A tiny land, with inadequate natural resources; potential resources long neglected by a backward Arab population; a vast Negev desert heretofore left to decay; armed camps on all boundaries, threatening to destroy this infant nation if they could only do so; a mass influx of Jews from African and Asian countries where they had been brought up in extreme poverty, ignorance, and lack of motivation; another influx from European countries where pogroms and genocide had reduced so many of them to sub-human status--these and many more were serious stumbling blocks that would ordinarily seem a combination impossible to cope with and overcome.

#### Experimentation

But the impossible has been realized, at least to a degree that one could rationally never have expected. Through scientific experimentation and sheer human doggedness, the desert keeps turning more and more into arable land and forests. Cities and supporting industries sprout forth almost as by a magic wand. Most important of all, human beings are being rehabilitated through all the means known to psychology, sociology, and pedagogy.

When <sup>one</sup> seeks a single word to sum up what is happening in Israel, I guess "dynamism" does the job fairly well. This was impressed upon me all the more when we took a side trip to another country and then returned to Israel. In that other country--which we shall call X--the tour guides kept constantly referring to the great heritage of the past, with hardly a word about the present or future. In Israel, on the other hand, while one is impressed with the rich heritage from Biblical times, it is the contemporary development toward a brighter future that is stressed by everyone.

And with this dynamism goes a spirit that is irrepressible. A simple example of this is the tremendous verve with which one finds oneself singing the traditional Hebrew and Yiddish songs that really come to life in this land of awe and inspiration.

Ever so many forces have operated to bring forth this oasis in a vast region of backwardness. A pervasive and highly innovative one, in this land of experimentation, is the Histadrut.

Most of us here in this gathering are familiar with the basics of this remarkable institution. It is, of course, fundamentally a labor federation, but it is also very much more.

It may be worth while to review the way in which the Histadrut evolved into the complex and variegated institution that it now is. Even before its official amalgamation in 1920, individual unions had seen the necessity for assisting in the colonization of the land. It soon became apparent that isolated unions were unable to accomplish all that needed to be done, and so the Histadrut was formed with the purpose of building "the Jewish society of labor in the Land of Israel". (More recently, Arabs have also been welcomed into its ranks.) The founding resolution also mentioned "cultural affairs" as a major area of activity. This was natural enough, considering the lack of educational facilities under the pre-Israeli government and considering also the great importance traditionally attached to learning by the Jewish people. A defense system against marauding Arabs also came quite naturally.

Simultaneously, and again out of the necessity of the situation, there developed two institutions within Histadrut that have played such a prominent part in its organizational personality and also in the many disputes that have involved the movement.

## The Labor Economy and the Holding Company

As more and more of the Diaspora Jews came into Israel, it became necessary to provide both dwellings and employment to keep their bodies and souls together. Thus it was that Histadrut entered into the fields of housing construction and industry.

This development brings to the fore one of the serious and yet-unsolved problems of the country. There are so many aspects to this controversy, it would take hours even to deal with them briefly. But it is necessary to touch upon a few of the major ones, by way of approaching the essence of Israel's economic difficulties and at the same time its inner strengths.

Histadrut, as a holding company, owns and operates 30% of the economy of the nation. The employees of the various Histadrut industries and of the government total 50% of all employees in the country. Producers and consumers cooperatives, kibbutzim, and the self-employed constitute other important components of Israeli and Histadrut economics. Adding the crucial role of the Sick Fund, we have the constituent elements of the economic uniqueness of Histadrut, namely, its functioning as a major phase of the Labor Economy which characterizes the Israeli economic system. And of course, private enterprises play an essential role too.

While a majority of its people have as their ideal a socialized state, Israel does in fact epitomize a pluralistic economy.

The inevitable problem arises: What should be the distinctive roles of Histadrut and the state as a whole? Fortunately, Israel's approach to the solution has not been dogmatic or doctrinaire. Experimentation and adaptability, as we have indicated, propel the forces that determine the state of affairs. The government, of course, exercises over-all control of central planning, but there is constant contact and correlation with labor's representatives in the Histadrut.

Moreover, the latter is one of the major instrumentalities for implementing the centralized decisions.

Here are just a few of the questions that make for difficult decisions: In order to combat inflation, to what extent will it be necessary to maintain wage-price controls, and will Histadrut and its rank-and-filers accept the necessary self-discipline that is called for? Histadrut's answer is yes, but unlike analogous controls in some other countries, it is conditional upon limiting the profits of private entrepreneurs and tied in with a keen eye for narrowing the gap that still separates the poverty groups from their more fortunate brethren.

Then there is the natural dilemma that arises out of the dual role of Histadrut as management and labor union at the same time. How can it represent both interests, with an eye on wages from both sides of the bargaining table? Here is a most important experiment, one that must be faced within the framework of democratic functioning, as against the relatively simplistic and authoritarian controls in a communist society. Suffice it to say that Histadrut finds itself in need of constant adjustments in the decision-making process within its total organism.

#### The Sick Fund

The other aspect of Histadrut operations that has aroused considerable controversy is the Sick Fund (Kupat Holim). This institution came into being in response to the desperate need to deal with swamp malaria and illnesses that were particularly rife in a poor and undeveloped country, and has since broadened its services. Now 71% of the population, including many of the neediest, enjoy the benefits of this mutual aid fund.

A great public disputation has arisen over the contention that health insurance should be a function of the state. Here again we come to the significance of the dual nature of the socio-economic organization of the state of Israel. It is the contention of Histadrut that, while the government should establish an all-inclusive health insurance plan, it is best to leave the implementation in more than one institution, as is customary in many democratic countries in Europe. Histadrut has developed a viable system, with model medical care, and it intends to fight against any intrusion on this important arm of the labor movement.

### Education

As a former teacher and the president of the American Federation of Teachers, I was particularly interested in Israel's developments in education.

The state has properly taken over this area. It has established free compulsory education from kindergarten through elementary school, which is a great forward step for a new and isolated country in the Middle East. While secondary schools require tuition, a wide system of scholarships enables over 80% of the children to go on to these schools.

There is, however, a high drop-out rate of 50%. This is a major problem, as it is in our own country, and it is being met in several ways. Among the major ones is the vocational training school network established by Histadrut.

We were fortunate to visit these and other educational institutions that Histadrut has set up to supplement the work of the government. Of great interest was the Jerusalem center for students of Middle East origin who suffer from the customary handicaps of the underprivileged, including low home potential. A boarding school houses these children where teachers and specially trained auxiliaries live with them as parent surrogates. While they attend a regular school during school hours where they are integrated with children of Western origin,

when they return to their Center (which is their substitute home), they are provided with enriched cultural programs, and remedial help as needed. The staff makes a conscious effort to fill in the affectional needs of these youngsters.

We visited also a Histadrut "Workers' College", where adult education on all levels is given. The labor movement has been exemplary in facing up to the problems of the underprivileged.

This concern for the underprivileged has spread out on an international scale, with the organization of the Afro-Asian Institute, which is sponsored in part by our AFL-CIO. We visited this Histadrut institution, founded in 1960 in response to the urgent requests of the under-developed African and Asian nations. The Israelis, burning with the zeal of their own experiences, have been ready and anxious to share the fruits of their experiments and know-how with their hard-pressed neighbors.

In the Afro-Asian Institute young leaders from these newly emerging nations are given the benefit of Israel's experience, particularly in the areas of trade unionism and cooperatives in developing countries. They all come on full scholarships, plus incidental expenses. When these students return to their respective countries, which had been kept in a state of retardation by their rulers, domestic and foreign, they are prepared and motivated to exercise more progressive forms of leadership toward a better society. Thus does Israel, itself still dependent on foreign aid, make this vital sacrifice and contribution to the rising nations of two continents so needful of understanding and assistance.

We also visited several nurseries for children of working mothers, conducted by our sister-organization, the Pioneer Women. My wife, who is quite knowledgeable in this field, assured me enthusiastically that the functional equipment and the care provided these children compare favorably with private middle-class nurseries in the United States.

I return now to the triple problem of minority groups, the poverty children, and the culturally deprived, or what we are lately accustomed to designating the "disadvantaged" in the United States--a problem which I have touched upon peripherally thus far.

We are all familiar with the portentous fact that Israel has had to absorb, within a relatively short period, hundreds of thousands of Jews from 87 different countries, and speaking 100 different languages. Increasingly they have come from the largely Islamic nations of North Africa and Asia, where secular education is practically non-existent. Today it is the children of these disadvantaged families that constitute 60% of all elementary school students in Israel. Their families' physical and social environment constitutes a state of deprivation that mitigates against general absorption into community life, and they are generally resistant to change.

The improvement of their status--social, economic, and cultural--is one of the prime aims of the government, of Histadrut, and of many other agencies. I have already mentioned the special boarding house center for these children, to remove them from the dragging influence of a lethargic home atmosphere and at the same time provide them with the opportunity to integrate with their Western-origin brethren. Adults are encouraged to attend evening classes. Of special interest is the "peace corps" or "vista" type of volunteer service where many hundreds of young tutors go into the homes of these people--who for various reasons are unable or unwilling to go to a school--and bring to them the special type of education that they may need, be it Hebrew, homemaking, or special skills. Vocational training and upgrading of skills are among the many techniques used to help these people out of their poverty status.

In the Saturday Review of October 15, 1966, appears a fascinating article entitled "Fighting Deprivation in the Promised Land", by Professor Moshe Smilansky, chairman of the Department of Educational Sciences at Tel Aviv University, Research Advisor to the Minister of Education, and former director of the Szold Institute of Jerusalem. The Szold Institute has for seven years carried on extensive researches in the methods of overcoming cultural disadvantage.

Smilansky, while humbly admitting the primitive state of knowledge in this area, cites positive evidence of the substantial increases in the I. Q. of culturally deprived children who are given the benefit of pre-school education, and of adolescents who continue to receive a proper education. Note the influence of our much-vaunted Head Start Program, as well as other programs of recent vintage. Smilansky emphasizes what all liberal educators now realize--that to overcome deprivation, equality of education is not enough, but rather the disadvantaged must have preferential treatment in order to catch up. He enumerates various measures of compensatory education that have been tried in Israel and that have been effective: free nurseries, allocation of special funds for building, equipment, and supplies, adaptation of the curriculum, special tutoring for teachers, and so on.

Having mentioned the last item--special tutoring for teachers--it is necessary to note that Israel has found it necessary to employ many unqualified teachers. (Let us not be supercilious about this, however, since this is a very common ailment in our country too.) I was struck particularly by an article in the United Teacher of September 23, 1966, in which a young New York City teacher who had spent her summer teaching English in Israel, reports on the generally inferior background of the elementary school teachers of English there.

The Israeli Teachers Union

I could not conclude my discussion of Israel, and particularly Israeli education, without a word about my union's counterpart--the Israeli Teachers Union. It is, of course, affiliated with Histadrut, and plays an important role in its affairs. It is practically 100% unionized. It engages in considerable educational activity, including particularly courses for teachers to fulfill requirements. It cooperates closely with the ministry of Education. Of special interest is the fact that it was responsible for the teaching of Hebrew as the universal language in all the schools, in place of the language of the country of origin of each particular school population; this was forced upon the Jewish community by a teacher strike in 1913.

I want to raise a few questions for the future?

- 1) Can Histadrut overcome the natural dilemma of its dual role of employer and trade union?
- 2) Will the problem of poverty be solved?
- 3) Will the idealism of the early years of settlement be sustained (or regained)?
- 4) Will Israel be able to return the cultural and social values of its founders?
- 5) Will the multi-ethnic problem be solved?

If we look back upon my remarks, we can see the justification for the emphasis on Israel and Histadrut as a social laboratory. Remarkable achievements have come out of this laboratory, especially when one considers the many handicaps, as up-to-date as the Syrian military infringements on Israel territory.

But we can remain confident that Israel will survive and flourish, despite all obstacles. For it is a country based upon high ideals, a determination to entrench itself in the land of its ancestors, and a readiness to experiment with the times. The future is one of progress--spiritual and industrial--and a future, we hope, of peace.

CC:mlr  
opeiu-28  
afl-cio