

<http://divergences.be/spip.php?article2633>



Michal Schwartz

Israel. Agricultural workers and social protest activists link arms

- Archives - Archives Générales 2006 - 2022 - 2011 - N° 28. Novembre 2011 - English -

Date de mise en ligne : Tuesday 15 November 2011

Copyright © Divergences Revue libertaire en ligne - All rights reserved



At first they marched hesitantly, astonished, perhaps even with envy, as they beheld the typical Tel Aviv scene of wide green boulevards, bustling cafes, children in playgrounds, mothers with strollers, young women riding around on bicycles, and the press. It was Friday, October 28, 2011. Over 70 women agricultural workers in long dresses and headscarves marched along Rothschild Boulevard together with the same number of activists from the protest movement in Tel Aviv and the Workers Advice Center (WAC-Maan, hereinafter WAC). They didn't know what kind of welcome to expect from Tel Aviv. But step by step, their self-confidence grew, and they began responding to the slogans Asma Agbarieh-Zahalka bellowed into the megaphone, at first shyly but later with all their strength: "Work, yes! Unemployment, no!", "Bibi, resign, you're not wanted anymore!", and in Arabic, "Freedom, democracy, social justice!"

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L350xH232/three_women_28-11_erez_350_b-2ffb4.jpg

This march preceded a moving meeting held in Beit Ha'am ("the people's house"), which has been the social protest's activism center on Rothschild Boulevard since the last of the protest tents was taken down. WAC's Women's Forum initiated the event. Each year the Forum organizes a conference on the issue of employment to raise awareness about the status of Arab women working in agriculture. Some 80% of Arab women do not work outside the home because of the lack of jobs, transport and childcare facilities. Even though the Finance Ministry and the Bank of Israel note the absence of Arab women in the labor market as one of the Israeli economy's main problems, the government does nothing to change this bleak situation. On the contrary – instead of creating jobs for them as it promises to do from time to time, it in fact encourages unemployment by enabling manpower contracting agencies to import migrant laborers from Thailand, who take 60% of the jobs in the agricultural sector.

This year WAC decided that instead of holding the conference in an academic setting or in a closed hall, it would hold it on Tel Aviv's chic Rothschild Boulevard, the heart of the social protest. Thus the conference would achieve a number of aims: Firstly, it would put the issue of Arab women's situation on the protest agenda. WAC maintains that the demand for social justice is untenable if it concentrates only on the middle strata and ignores those living in poverty and the Arab population.

Secondly, it would bring the Arab women into the circle of protest, thus broadening the protest movement which until now has included very few Arabs. Thirdly, it would create a new discourse between Arab and Jewish women which, instead of emphasizing the national differences, would promote solidarity on the basis of their common ground as exploited working women in the capitalist economy. The dialogue between social protest activists and agricultural

laborers was held in eight discussion circles, each of which was led by a social protest activist together with a translator from WAC. Each circle included agricultural workers and social protest activists.

Before the discussion circles began, a panel was held led by WAC's Asma Agbarieh-Zahalka who said:

"It's not just the poverty and marginalization, and it's not just the empty refrigerator. It's not just the fact that one in every two people in our society is poor, that two of every three of our children are hungry. It goes beyond this. We, Arab women, some 200,000 of us, who make up 80% of women of working age – want to work because we want to feel human. But they've forgotten us, and we've been left stuck somewhere in the 19th century, in another world where time has stood still, lacking work, without a voice, without the right to choose, unable to decide our own fate or future.

"We want to work because we are sick of watching the world from behind the window shutters as they collect endless dust. We want to experience the world without mediation, and that's how we want to work too – without contractors, without the ra'ises, free of exploitation and those who would exploit us.

"For some tens of thousands of us, there is a simple employment solution. We demand that the 'skies' be closed – that the import of migrant labor for the sake of profit be stopped. Those large farms which benefit from this import employ more than 26,000 migrant laborers who work for NIS 14.5 per hour and are available 24 hours a day. It's extremely difficult to compete in a market based on quasi slavery.

"We believe in the justice which the people demand, but we believe it cannot be achieved as long as the Arab population is ignored, especially Arab women – those who struggle to overcome the darkness of the periphery, who struggle to lift Arab society as a whole out of the poverty, oppression and backwardness that have been thrust upon it, those same women who fight to be part of the center of life and take part in shaping our common future in this country.

"We want to build a different future, and for us work is the mightiest path to empowerment. That's why we march here today, as we have marched for the last five years on International Women's Day and International Labor Day (May 1). We hope that this year, contrary to previous years, our call will not sound strange to the Israeli public, because we too demand social justice."

Science teacher and social activist from Hebron Ayat al-Jabri then spoke. She received a one in a life time permit to leave the city. The participants were greatly moved when Ayat told them about conditions in "H2" in the heart of Hebron, an area under the control of settlers and the army. "I'm a science teacher but I am unable to teach because entrance to and exit from H2, with all the checkpoints and searches, prevent me and my colleagues from reaching school regularly. Our life is lived out between the checkpoints, accompanied by wasted time, by humiliation, sometimes by violence, and we cannot maintain any kind of normal social or family life. We can't even work." Ayat spoke about how excited she was to see the sea, how terrified she was of going back to her city through all the roadblocks, and how she longed for normal life.

Wafa Tiara, coordinator of WAC's women's project in the Wadi Ara region, explained that unemployment among Arab women is no less than a social catastrophe, and that the government must take responsibility and stop the import of migrant labor. "The women who came here are living proof that the government lies when it claims Arab women don't want to work. Today, we have among us workers, young and old, who travel two hours to work and two hours back home in order to earn their daily bread, because there is no work in their villages. The unemployment makes it easy for the contractors and subcontractors to exploit working women and increase the socioeconomic disparities between the poor and the wealthy." Wafa called on the workers, men and women, Jews and Arabs, to unionize and link arms in the struggle for workers' rights.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L350xH232/wafa_350_b-4c67d.jpg

Wafa Tiara of WAC

The next speaker was Maya Eisen, drama therapist and leader of empowerment workshops for women, who coordinates the struggle for better employment conditions by organizing art therapists. Maya spoke of their difficult work conditions.

“Many of them start working, after seven years of study, for just a little over the minimum wage. They are required to accept a higher quota of patients than the hours they are given, so they are compelled to fit more than one patient in a session regardless of their professional opinion and the needs of the patient. They are also compelled to volunteer many hours and sometimes even to pay for guidance which costs a hundred times more than their wages. Many are employed via not-for-profit organizations and are dismissed each year so their employer can avoid being responsible for their peripheral benefits, thus they are compelled to cope with the lack of employment security, on top of all the rest. These conditions hurt them as well as their patients...

“We, the working people, demand to be allowed to earn a living in dignity, and call for an end to the cynical exploitation... We demand that our trade union supports the younger generation... We demand that our employers quit exploiting us in a way that has almost become socially acceptable. And finally, we demand solidarity and activism from ourselves!”

Social worker Tami Farber spoke about the social workers' struggle during the summer of this year, which ended with a shameful collective agreement and caused despair among the social workers. She said some articles written by WAC Secretary-General Assaf Adiv caused her and some other social workers to understand that the struggle had not ended. Today, she and others are considering alternatives to the struggle within the social workers union. She said that because of her contact with WAC she finally sees the discrimination against the Arab population, which is granted a quarter of the budget the Jewish population receives, even though it may need it even more. She also noted the importance of joint organization of Jewish and Arab social workers.

Social protest activist Noa Savir and WAC's Samia Nasser spoke about the experience of the Jewish-Arab tent encampments.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L350xH232/noa_savir_350_b-65f25.jpg

Noa Savir, social activist talks in work shop when we talk about the work shops

The discussion circles lasted about an hour, which went by too quickly and left all wanting more. The agricultural workers spoke about the hardships at work, and about employment without stability which does not enable them to earn a proper living. They spoke fervently about discrimination, about the racism and violence directed at young people who speak Arabic, about the lack of employment opportunities for Arabs, about teachers from the Wadi Ara region (in the north) who are sent to work in the Negev area (in the south), or who sit at home unemployed, and about engineers and doctors who can't find work. For many of the Tel Aviv residents sitting in the discussion circles, this was the first “eye-opening” meeting with Arab women – “an opportunity to hear first-hand about the existential struggle in neglected areas hit by discrimination and unemployment,” as one participant said.

Social protest activists spoke of their struggle and hardships, and their common ground as working women. They asked questions, referred to the language barrier and the need to learn Arabic, and expressed their solidarity. Maya Eisen led a social theatre workshop and dramatized the story of one of the agricultural laborers who worked via a contractor. After she had given birth, the contractor refused to give her or her elder daughters any more work. Maya said, “We dramatized this situation, and the girls took the mother's place and felt how it was to be in her shoes... The

participants' openness was very evident, as well as their desire to share and learn from one another."

The agricultural workers were left deeply moved, some almost to tears. These are some of the responses we received:

Saria Abu Wasal (54), from Kufr Qara, married with children: "Jewish-Arab partnership is vital, because in fact we're all suffering from the same crisis, and when we cooperate we'll be able to achieve our aims. I noticed that the passersby on Rothschild Boulevard accepted us happily, and we didn't encounter any kind of hostility or reserve. It's important that the happy and contented people we met on Rothschild know there are citizens just like them only exhausted and exploited."

Wajdan Taher (42), from Arara, married with eight children: "When I was marching I felt I was a citizen with equal rights, and nobody has the right to take advantage of me. I felt I had the ability to revolt against those who would exploit me, and that I can express criticism about anyone, even about the prime minister. WAC gives us power and the feeling that we can articulate our demands and our pain. It is unacceptable to me that some people be rich while the rest are marginalized. I felt self-confident when marching in Tel Aviv, saying loudly whatever I wanted to say; even though not everyone understands my language, they translated what I was saying. I really, really enjoyed it."

Fatima Jazmawi (34) from Ara, married: "I particularly liked the discussion circles, where we expressed our opinions and feelings. I discovered we have similar demands, and we didn't notice how time flew by. I like the way WAC defends the status of women and women's wages, even if they're minimum wage. I was a bit nervous about the march, and tried to avoid being photographed, and when I got home and told my husband, he laughed about this. I felt he wanted me to be brave. It was WAC's Wafa Tiara who encouraged me, who lifted up her voice and shouted out the slogans during the march, so that everyone would hear her. I liked the cooperation between Jews and Arabs; there was no fear between us. I saw they were surprised to see religious Arab women marching in Tel Aviv, but they didn't try to pressure us or prevent us from protesting."

Kifah Aru, from Jatt, who didn't want to take part in marches or appear in the media, even though her husband is actually supportive of this, said: "The discussion circles were very serious. I was surprised to see the Jews shouting demands even louder than us, and I told my husband that the Jewish participants encouraged us Arabs to shout and applaud, and that they take an interest in us more than we take an interest in ourselves."

Following the meeting in Tel Aviv, a delegation from Beit Ha'am is soon to visit the agricultural workers in Baqa al-Gharabiyeh.

8.11.11

Post-scriptum :

Michal Schwartz is coordinator of the Women's Forum of the Workers Advice Center

Amani Kitani from the WAC branch in Baqa al-Gharabiyeh also contributed to writing this article



http://www.wac-maan.org.il/en/article_227

Israel. Agricultural workers and social protest activists link arms

All Photos: ©Erez Wagner