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WAC - MAAN: From Advice Center to Trade Union

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How we started

In 1998 the Workers Advice Center took its first steps at a small office in Nazareth. Since then, WAC (MAAN in Arabic and Hebrew) has opened branches in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Kufr Manda, Kufr Qara, Baqa al-Gharbiyeh and is preparing to open a new branch in Haifa. This growth has been matched by an increase in activities. Over the years, WAC has assisted thousands of workers – men, women and youth, Arab and Jewish – and led campaigns in various fields: a long-standing struggle for the Arab unemployed; fair employment terms for Arabs in construction and agriculture; a campaign against privatization of the employment services (the “Wisconsin” program); and assistance to the victims of this program. With "Video 48," we have produced documentaries about these struggles. We have gained experience in addressing individual and collective cases, negotiating with employers and appealing to labor courts. We reached an excellent pension agreement for our members with one of the leading insurance companies in Israel. At first we concentrated on Arab workers, who are the weakest link in the Israeli labor market. In recent years we have expanded to organize Jewish workers as well. Our leading activists and spokespersons are both Arab and Jewish. We have organized quarries and lecturers, and we are currently organizing truck drivers. We are, in short, a workers movement for all.

The background: A deep social and economic change in Israel

During the last fifteen years, Israel has undergone social and political change led by economic reforms of an extreme neo-liberal bent. These reforms, which took off during the mid-1990s, led to the privatization of the public sector and the transfer of state assets to the hands of some twenty wealthy families, who control the banking, communications and transportation sectors, as well as a large share of industry.

Israel's economy has grown with the ICT (“hi-tech”) sector. In parallel there developed a middle class which has linked its fate to the privatized economy. At the same time, more than a million workers (about half the labor force) have been pushed below the poverty line. The economy is flourishing at their expense. They are producers, cleaners, drivers, teachers and providers of various services, and they all have one thing in common: they earn the minimum wage (€ 687 per month). In addition, some 250,000 migrant laborers, lacking protection and social benefits, toil at their side for even less.

WAC's development has coincided with a growing awareness on the workers' part concerning the implications of privatization. The latter promised efficiency and rising living standards for all, as an alternative to the lumbering collective economy that controlled Israel up to 1985. But the opposite has occurred. Class divisions have become ever sharper, and with them demographic divisions. The “Center” (Tel Aviv and its environs) has become extremely affluent, while the periphery has sunk into poverty – not because it is not producing, but because it gets little in return for its labor. This periphery includes the Arab population, most mizrahi Jews (those with roots in Arab and North African countries), and many Jews from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia.

The wage gap has increased. The average monthly wage in the ICT sector is € 4464, but a growing number of workers earn the minimum of € 687. Even a professional worker in the traditional branches gets an average of only € 892. The “positive” aspect of these developments is that class divisions have placed Arabs and Jews on a similar level, at least in terms of employment.

WAC and the Histadrut

WAC originated in response to two major developments. The first, described above, was the deep change in Israel's economy that resulted from neoliberal policies. The second was the weakening of the Histadrut (General Federation

of Labor), which led to a weakening of the organized labor. In 1994 Haim Ramon and Amir Peretz became the elected heads of the Histadrut, initiating major reforms. One of these was to transfer health insurance from the Histadrut "sick fund" to the state. The Histadrut's control of the sick fund had given it a near monopoly over organized labor: to have health insurance, you had to be a member. After the reform, its membership dropped from 1.8 million in 1994 (85% of the labor force) to 600,000 (20%) today.

The Histadrut is still very important in the labor scene, because it continues to represent those groups of skilled workers who have remained unscathed by privatization. But as the country has shifted toward the free market, other workers—those who lost contact with the Histadrut—have been left without protection. These include most Arabs, many Jewish "minimum wage" workers, and temporaries.

WAC has entered the vacuum, along with other organizations. Among these, however, WAC has set a unique objective: beyond mere assistance, it aims to organize workers into a new trade union, which will organize all workers without regard to national or ethnic divisions. The intention is not to work against the Histadrut or take its place, but to unionize those left outside its gates. Even though this goal has seemed overly ambitious at times, it has become increasingly important and increasingly achievable.

Toward a new labor union

WAC-MAAN has gained extensive experience and a good reputation among workers, government ministries, Knesset (Parliament) Committees and decision-makers, as well as in the press. Our name is familiar to central figures in the Bank of Israel, the Finance Ministry, the Agriculture Ministry and the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Labor. They know us especially for our struggle against the policy of importing unorganized migrant labor, which breaks the back of local labor—a struggle extensively covered by the press.

Toward 2009, as a result of experience gained in negotiating with employers and the state, we came to the conclusion that WAC is ready to become a representative organization. This decision came as a natural addition to other aspects of WAC's activity, such as legal advice, representation in the courts, and support for the unemployed. Legally, a body that organizes workers, enters negotiations and reaches collective agreements can be recognized as "a representative workers organization."

We have organized workers in various sectors. Our first collective agreement was achieved with Minshar College of Art, Tel Aviv, in 2008.

Another important experience has been organizing Palestinian workers in the Salit Quarry at Mishor Edomim, east of Jerusalem owned by an Israeli Jewish employer from Jerusalem. The workers there are from East Jerusalem and the West Bank. The management was at first absolutely negative. For two years we had to meet with the workers outside the quarry, because the manager refused us entry. Struggling together with 40 workers—a struggle that included a court case against the employers—we convinced management to let us organize a workers committee and enter negotiations toward a collective agreement. The election of the workers' committee on October 13, 2009, was a milestone on WAC's path to becoming a union.

Presently we are attempting to organize truck drivers. First, various drivers turned to WAC. Investigating, we discovered their shameful employment conditions. We then began a wide campaign of organization. We published a leaflet in Hebrew, Arabic and Russian. (The drivers come from various groups: local Israelis, Arabs who have difficulty with Hebrew and drivers of Russian origin who do not read Hebrew at all.) Beginning in September 2009, WAC activists and volunteers undertook a campaign of leafleting at ports and quarries, calling on drivers to join WAC and its initiative for starting a new drivers' union. The response has been very positive. Within two months we have signed up hundreds of new members. On November 14, we held the first meeting of the "Truck Drivers Parliament," attended by drivers from all three ethnic groups. This step was a good beginning. We know the road is long: The transport industry touches on a strategic nerve of any economy, let alone, Israel's neo-liberal one. The company managers will do anything to break the drivers' struggle.

A union cannot be created, however, unless workers are involved from the grassroots up. In our Annual General Meeting of July 2009, we adopted a new constitution stipulating how the union should be built. This document provides a format that gives each Workers' Committee, at the factory or branch level, the powers of decision concerning collective agreements and labor disputes.

Regarding membership dues, WAC's new constitution has opted for a procedure which will allow a more dynamic and healthy relation with the ranks. The member has the right to join or leave the union voluntarily. When a worker cannot leave the union, this tends to corrupt the union and drive the worker to apathy.

A union for all

Through its activities in the last decade, WAC has become a significant player in the labor relations of Israel. It gives a voice to young people of both genders, Jews and Arabs, who have lost their dignity and their rights in a state that worships capital. Our position is gaining ground, moreover, in the mainstream media. WAC's ability to attract truck drivers, lecturers, construction workers, Arab farm workers and others is a reflection of the wide support we have from sectors of the working class that are fed up with the current social order.

We are creating a new union, which expresses clear solidarity with the Palestinian people and workers. We are opposed to the Israeli Occupation of 1967 and believe that true peace can be reached only upon the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. WAC identifies with the struggles and the culture developed over the years by the international labor movement. We also aim to cooperate with the Histadrut, while maintaining our independence as an organization created democratically from the bottom up.

We are guided by the aim of transforming WAC from an Advice Center into a Trade Union. We call on the general public to quit pandering to capital, banks and major firms at the expense of the productive population. We favor far-reaching social change, and we believe that solidarity between Jewish and Arab workers in the framework of a new union current in Israel must be at the basis of that change.

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