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David De Vries

BRITISH RULE AND ARAB–JEWISH COALESCENCE OF INTEREST: THE 1946 CIVIL SERVANTS’ STRIKE IN PALESTINE

Historians have long recognized post-war Palestine as a society in a state of destabilization. Increasing tension between the population and the Palestine Mandatory government was reflected in political opposition and violence. This was accompanied by the growing role of the United States in the intensive debate on the future of relations between Arabs and Jews, as reflected in the decision in late 1945 to convene the Anglo-American Committee. The transition from a war economy to a period of reconstruction produced immense economic and social problems that added to increasing British debts, which was partly reflected in difficulties in absorbing former servicemen in to Palestine’s economy and increasing unemployment of both Arabs and Jews. Destabilization was also made evident by increasing industrial unrest, focusing significantly on the state sector of the economy—the government bureaucracy, the railways, and the military camps. This post-war militancy was part of the economic and social impact of the war, the associated cycle of wartime labor strikes, and the increasing cooperation between Arab and Jewish workers in labor protest against the government.¹

The labor historiography of Mandatory Palestine focuses on two central factors that shaped and characterized labor lives during World Word II and the post-war period, one relating to British labor policy and the other to labor relations. In terms of colonial labor policy, the war has been seen as reaffirming the basic principles that guided the British authorities in Palestine in the pre-war era. Running Palestine as cheaply and with as low a burden on British taxpayers as possible was paramount. In terms of labor policy, that meant preference for employing low-wage Arab workers over Jewish ones in the state sector, which, when compared with the employment structures of the Arab and Jewish sectors, was the largest employer in the country. The massive intervention of the British government in Palestine’s economy and large-scale mobilization of the population, which were both brought about by the war, and the growth of British debts toward the end of the period further accentuated this economizing principle. Another principle that shaped colonial labor policy, largely taking shape in the 1930s, was the leaning on leading and organized sectors in Palestine’s economy—either for economic investment or, following the British inter-war model of cultivating “sound trade-unionism,” for keeping the country’s economy and employment relations as peaceful as possible. In the early

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1940s, the establishment of a local Labor Department and the cultivation of unionization among Arab workers from above brought further sophistication to this approach. The banning of strikes in essential services effected in Palestine from early 1942, which was modeled on wartime anti-strike policies in Britain, joined the policy of controlled unionization in the attempt to keep the country's employment relations as peaceful as possible.² While the institutionalization of these older labor-policy principles became central in the shaping of the wartime experience of labor, the second aspect was related in particular to collective action. The war and post-war periods saw not only unprecedented workers' militancy (despite the ban on strikes) but also increasing cooperation in strike action—in the state sector, in particular—between Arab and Jewish workers. As shown by recent research, this cooperation (mainly in the British-run railways and military camps) contrasted with the national-oriented restraint of joint Arab–Jewish action in the 1920s and 1930s.³

Basing their work on extensive research on the country's economic history, historians have explained the association between increased workers' militancy and growing Arab–Jewish labor cooperation in terms of the material background for both phenomena: the increased employment opportunities, the wartime inflation, and the decline of workers' purchasing power. From another angle, the political historiography of the war explains growing labor cooperation as a mutual political understanding by both Arab and Jewish labor parties and organizations of their inability to attain further gains for workers without restraining their national-oriented opposition to cooperation. These approaches go a long way toward explaining why militancy and cooperation were invigorated during the 1940s. The centrality of British labor policy in their association, however, has attracted much less attention.

That the Mandatory government in Palestine played a formative role in labor lives has long been recognized. Its abstention in the 1920s and 1930s from active labor legislation and its paternalistic and authoritarian attitudes toward labor organization are known to have had deep social and political implications. The government's economic role as a large employer—during World War II, in particular—affected the fate of workers in such government workplaces as public works, railways, and administration. Significantly, it affected the Arab and Jewish economic sectors in determining wages and the norms that regulated working conditions and employment relations. Recent research has also exposed the indirect part played by the British authorities in facilitating the attempted closure of the economy of the Jewish community (the *Yishuv*) and the segmentation strategies of organized Jewish labor (the *Histadrut*). In this, the much needed emphasis on the impact of British rule on Palestine's labor history joined with recognition of the colonial impact on the country's development, urbanization, law, and social relations.⁴ This recognition focused, however, on the British impact on relations between the workers of the two communities as being mainly contextual. Its presence as an employer, labor legislator, and economic regulator was perceived as providing a mere framework that was much less influential than the agency of workers' and labor-political organizations of both communities. Solely on the latter, it has been argued, depended the relations between Arab and Jewish workers. Consequently, defining the British impact as contextual and indirect has cemented the notion of the hegemony of labor Zionism, whose nationalism affected, almost single-handedly, the absence of cross-national workers' collective action. This is evident in particular in the treatment of

workers employed in the British sector, which has refrained from naming the government as the key factor in affecting these workers' militancy and their ability to transcend their national divisions.

The argument that follows is that, to explain the association between growing workers' militancy and Arab–Jewish labor cooperation, the Mandatory state and its labor-policy principles must be brought back into the discussion. Resembling policy contradictions in other parts of the British Empire, the Palestine Mandatory government created a discrepancy. On the one hand, its interventionist economic policy sought to deal with the effects of the war on the population by getting more involved in determining labor incomes and working conditions. On the other hand, the government was unwilling to adapt its long-standing principles of economic thrift and "sound unionism" to the needs that its policy created. The clearest manifestation of this discrepancy was in the relations between the government and its employees. The 1946 strike that transformed these relations therefore serves as a micro-historical lens through which one can view neglected dimensions of the principles that governed British rule and accompanied the approaching dismantling of Britain's presence in Palestine.⁵

THE BREACH

In April 1946, Palestine experienced its largest strike since the beginning of British rule. In terms of the number of strikers, the strike's length, and its paralyzing effects, it was an unprecedented event. For the first time, the mass of low-grade government civil servants, with an overwhelming Arab majority, used the weapon of a general strike in Palestine's public sector. Moreover, in contrast to any earlier collective action in either the Jewish or the Arab sector, it combined comprehensive cross-national cooperation with joint action by office and manual workers. That such an unusual strike occurred in the midst of the politically turbulent year of 1946 and the deliberations of the Anglo-American Committee on the future of Palestine made the event and the cooperation it entailed even more dramatic. Despite growing militancy during the war and a similar post-war strike wave across the British and French empires, the strike in Palestine came as a surprise. Politicians in Britain and Palestine did not expect such focused militancy from government civil servants or such enthusiastic, cross-national, and grass-root cooperation. Arab and Jewish activists in political parties and labor unions were confounded by their lack of influence over the strikers, and they found it difficult to place the strike and its symbols of resistance and solidarity within their understanding of ethnic relations in the public sector. The Arab and Jewish press wavered between enthusiasm and confusion in the face of what seemed to be a natural and unconflicted coalition of nationally oriented workers. More dramatically, the episode ended with the government's uncharacteristic submission to the employees, who traditionally had been weakened by neglect and lack of an organizational voice. Only a few expected such a complete *volte-face* by the administration, and on the outbreak of the strike only a few could visualize such an ending to the confrontation by a government known for harsh treatment of its challengers.⁶

Arab–Jewish collective action during the Mandate was not an entirely unusual feature of employment relations in the government sector. As a joint workplace, the administration lacked the features that hampered joint action in the Arab and Jewish economies.

Prominent among these features were the economic separation of these national sectors, Arab opposition to the Jewish labor movement, the Jewish labor movement's segregationist ideology, and the restraining impact of the Histadrut (the umbrella organization of Jewish labor) on joint organization in the British-run railways. Indeed, in contrast to Jewish and Arab workplaces, the government sector brought about a lingering co-existence of employees of different national identities, enhanced by the consistent enlargement of the colonial administration and its attraction for Arab and Jewish manual and white-collar workers.⁷

While the top echelons of the Mandate administration were mostly staffed by British high officials, the mass of employees were either manual workers in the railways and public-works department or low-grade white-collar workers. In contrast to manual work in agriculture, construction, and industry, a position in the Mandate bureaucracy promised Arabs and Jews social mobility, a relatively greater degree of job permanence, and a monthly salary, which was envied by many white-collar-job seekers. Furthermore, working for the bureaucracy conferred certain social standing, as the employees were considered part and parcel of the daily governing of Palestine. In the absence of common Arab-Jewish institutional frameworks, exemplified by the failure to establish a country-wide legislative council, the government employees were often perceived as mediators between the ruling power center and society at large, operating in parallel to the formal institutional representatives of the two national communities. For the growing middle-class elite in Arab towns and for urban Jewish immigrants, these advantages turned the government sector—in particular, before World War II—into a relatively attractive workplace. Moreover, despite prevailing Zionist cultural preferences for manual work, the pre-war material advantages of government jobs attracted segments of the Jewish labor force that had been ridden with chronic unemployment and the unchallenged power of office employers in the Jewish private sector (Table 1).⁸

The office-work culture that evolved in the administration, expressed by bureaucratic loyalty to civil service that the British authorities were keen to cultivate, allowed a cross-national co-existence that Arab and Jewish politicians often found suspect and the nationally-oriented labor organizations criticized. This co-existence was partly due to the non-competitive nature of government employment, despite its attraction and the long-standing efforts of the Histadrut to increase the number of Jews employed. In contrast to Palestine's agrarian, building, and industrial labor markets, ethnic tensions among non-British personnel in the administration were thus restrained. Growing communal

TABLE 1. *British government employees in Palestine; December 1945 (excluding police)*

| | Employees | Permanent | Casual |
|--------|-----------|---------------------|--------|
| Total | 28,928 | 18,224 ^a | 10,704 |
| Arabs | 22,183 | 12,649 | 9,534 |
| Jews | 5,399 | 4,468 | 931 |
| Others | 1,346 | | |

^a Among these were 493 British personnel.

Source: Based on Reuveni, *Mimshal*, 236.

opposition to colonial rule, espoused by the Jewish and Palestinian national leaders in the 1940s, hardly harmed this attractiveness and the relative privileges that government work conferred. Thus, as a joint workplace the bureaucracy provided a work culture based not only on notions of service and local prestige but also on a sort of non-national community of interest among the employees that evolved in parallel with national affiliation and often defied it. This was due mainly to a balance, noted by one historian of Arab labor in Palestine, Rachele Taqqu, between an employer providing economic privilege and status and the restraint of the low-level white-collar government employees. This balance was further stabilized by the outbreak of World War II and the economic changes it brought about, which the further enlargement of the civil service reflected. However, it was due to the economic conditions wrought by the war and British economic considerations that the potential to turn this “island” of co-existence into joint action ripened.⁹

The fact that World War II hit the government employees more than any other laboring sector was crucial in this ripening. As in many parts of the empire, the urban population of Palestine was deeply affected by the war. First, the war produced an inflationary process that caused prices to triple between 1938 and 1945. Second, a black market resulted from the dearth of essential commodities. Finally, real wages and the purchasing power of the lower and middle classes declined. Although inflation and the black market affected many people, it hurt government employees in particular, because their salaries were fixed and the government, as their employer, was able to resist the kinds of wage demands advanced by industrial workers and the Histadrut, which backed them. Thus, between 1939 and 1945, the purchasing power of salaried civil servants decreased by 60 percent, and their standard of living relative to industrial workers greatly diminished.¹⁰

Civil servants were also particularly affected because of long-standing government labor-policy principles and inaction. Employing an economic policy of self-sufficiency, reliance on export of primary products, and few investments, the government responded to the war-induced inflationary process by instituting wage indexation, which was far from effective. The acute shortage of essential commodities, the fact that the index did not reflect real rises in prices, and the actual level of the cost of living demanded far greater adjustment of the index and greater allowances than the government was willing to concede. Furthermore, while the government conceded to the Histadrut-backed demands of industrial workers to increase cost-of-living payments, it neglected its own salaried staff, causing that staff’s real wages to fall considerably behind those of workers in industry. This redistribution of income was worsened by slackness in the government’s control of prices and the black market, by its decision to increase taxation, and, as the anxiety of old-timers in government offices testified, by its restriction of the number of the employees entitled to government pensions.¹¹

The consequences of these failures far exceeded the problem of decline in purchasing power. The employees expressed a growing sense of neglect by the government and the lack of backing by organized Jewish labor and by Arab unions. Comparing themselves with industrial workers who enjoyed increased wages and allowances (affirmed by government wage committees), with clerks outside the government who received greater salaries and increased cost-of-living allowances, and with the ameliorated conditions of higher officials, the civil servants felt growing deprivation. Their social standing, as expressed in their proximity to power and by their loyalty to service, could not compensate anymore for this decline in living standards and growing desperation. Furthermore,

they interpreted their impoverishment, decreasing ability to pay for accommodations (because of high rent paid to government-leased buildings), and appalling state of health of their families as paying the cost of the government's long-standing economic policy of maintaining a low-cost administration. In this interpretation of their economic plight, references to loss of dignity and to the authoritarian attitudes of British department managers came increasingly to play a central role, thus noting a sort of cultural breach in the atmosphere of the civil-service workplace. These pressures and the violation of the reciprocal relations between the civil servants and the government turned the co-existence of Arabs and Jews into a coalescence of interest, focusing on the government as a common adversary—the cause of their plight and of the destabilization in their social status. Sensing a breach of the social contract that had evolved in the civil service, they became united not just as employees at the point of their workplace, where they shared a common loyalty to public service, but as consumers who were suffering the effects of war and government inaction.¹²

In these circumstances, anti-government action was expected, in particular as ventilation of social anger was widespread across the empire and was known to the employees in Palestine from the daily press. In practice, there were various means through which the civil servants could protest—in particular, as the government itself encouraged unionization among Arab workers in the early stages of the war. Among these unions was the International Union of Railway, Post and Telegraph Workers, established in 1919. The government was slow to give this union formal recognition, conditioning such recognition on the union's severing its ties with the Histadrut and with the international union of transportation workers. Since the late 1920s, most of the union's Arab members had been associated with the Palestine Arab Workers Society (PAWS), leaving their original organization under Histadrut control. Furthermore, government restriction on formal affiliation of the civil servants with this organization determined the absence of many government employees from joint Arab–Jewish labor disputes. Another organization was the Palestine Civil Service Second Division Association (SDA), which since the late 1920s had brought about Arab–Jewish cooperation but was not affiliated with either the Histadrut or PAWS. The question of representation, which these alternatives presented, was no less a cause of the strike, and again the government was involved in creating it.¹³

The character of the SDA reflected British attitudes toward unionism and industrial relations in the United Kingdom and the empire. In accordance with the way of thinking in inter-war Britain, government involvement in industrial relations and labor legislation was to be minimal. Cooperation between the “state” and private capital was sought after; strong workers' sectors were to be cooperated with, thus obtaining industrial peace by siding with “responsible” and “sound” unions. The outbreak of World War II, and the need to maximize war output and ensure the smooth and efficient running of the economy cemented the quest of the British government at home and across the empire for alliance with organized labor. Furthermore, these needs strengthened the intervention of the state in regulating production and labor, as was reflected in attempts to control prices, the encouragement of collective bargaining, and the 1942 banning of strikes in essential services. The Labor Department, which became active in early 1942 and was similar to other Labor Departments across the empire, was central in this interventionist policy. This was demonstrated in the department's consistent efforts to cultivate quiescent trade

unions in the Arab sector and to create mechanisms of arbitration and conciliation. Moreover, the department allowed the Histadrut and Arab trade unions to play a major role in the war machine, mainly through wage committees, joint-production committees, and participation in joint consultative committees with industrialists. Britain's approach to unions in the empire was, however, largely affected by the potential danger organized labor posed to economic activity and political stability. Encouraging labor as an actor in employment relations therefore went hand in hand with limiting its political potential. This was made evident in the government's discouraging political parties—communists, in particular—from becoming involved in union affairs and in its limiting of the influence of the Histadrut on government employees.¹⁴

Consequently, the government's logic was that the employment of civil servants should not create too many costs for the government. Preference in improving working conditions was given mainly to high officials, while the low-grade employees were expected to be efficient and restrained in their demands. The SDA leadership, structured equally of Muslims, Christians, and Jews and headed by the Haifa Christian customs officer Labib Fuleihan and the Jewish clerk Yosef Perkal, was expected to be nothing but a government department—a reliable and subdued association whose affiliation with organized labor was minimal. In fact, the government never recognized the principle of collective bargaining in the administration, thus leaving the fixing of pay and working conditions to government committees and to the approval of the Colonial Office and the Treasury in London. The SDA was therefore limited in power and was expected to refrain from affiliating with any unions outside—in particular, if the outside union espoused the right to strike. From this, it followed that the membership of Jewish civil servants in the Histadrut or PAWS was forbidden, and their ability to join in larger collective action was effectively restrained. Organized disputes, even superficial attempts at involvement by Arab and Jewish political parties or politically oriented labor organizations, were therefore hardly conceivable in the civil service. Consequently, while both Arab and Jewish employees were conscious of the evolving national conflict, they deeply felt the absence of organized labor and of national-oriented labor politicians. The decreasing number of Jews among government employees, following the decline in real wages and the inability to obtain in government work the salary and wages levels that were offered in the Jewish sector, meant fewer rank-and-file workers with organizational traditions. The relations between the SDA and the Histadrut, and the lack of influence on the government sector of either the Histadrut or Arab union activists, reflected this weakness.¹⁵

During the war, the civil servants' sense of a workplace community consolidated with the growing involvement of the government in the economy and their own increasing importance in the war effort. However, it never translated into action because of the incapacity of the Histadrut and PAWS to orchestrate disputes from outside. Furthermore, Arab fears that pressure on the government to ameliorate the conditions of the civil servants was a Zionist conspiracy hampered cooperation between the two organizations. Until 1944, the SDA's ties with the Histadrut were secret, and the Arab-dominated SDA tactically tried to keep them from strengthening. This was so not only because the authorities restricted political activity, but also because a strengthening of ties could harm the standing of the employees as valued mediators with the government. Arab–Jewish co-existence in the administration was thus closely associated with this non-politicized state

of affairs. And it was largely this lack of politicization that shaped the SDA's restraint, its operation as merely a formal representative of its rank-and-file, and its preference to work with the government, not against it. Furthermore, the economic changes in the early 1940s accentuated the demarcating lines between the SDA's organizational culture and the militancy of Jewish industrial workers and Arab workers in the British-run railways and military camps. The cooperation between the government and the Histadrut (exemplified by the latter's reluctant accommodation to the ban on strikes and participation in the wage committees), served to keep government offices out of the orbit of collective action. The association between the SDA's moderation and the impenetrability of the administration by organized labor such as the Histadrut and PAWS became ever more evident.¹⁶

The moderation of the SDA became crucial when the pressure of its rank-and-file was frustrated by the government's intransigence. Some disputes in 1943 took a theatrical shape, such as the "beard strike" in May in which employees appeared at work unshaven, challenging the culture of cleanliness espoused by British officials. Other actions took the form of short hunger strikes, such as that in June in which the employees demanded higher cost-of-living allowances by stressing the contrast between hunger and work efficiency. In 1944, the SDA reiterated this demand and openly criticized the lack of government control of the black market and its discriminatory calculation of the cost-of-living index. The government's policy of calculating the allowances according to workers' incomes, and not according to their purchasing power, was now understood as a clear preference for the better-paid industrial workers who, unlike the civil servants, enjoyed new pay agreements drawn by the Histadrut and the Jewish industrialists. Thus, when the government supported a new allowance agreement struck at the Tel Aviv municipality and, at the same time, resisted SDA demands to apply the agreement to the administration, a "Silence Stoppage" was called. In this moderate act, clerks remained seated silently at their desks for sixteen minutes, signaling controlled disobedience and limited protest.¹⁷

However, only when the war drew to a close was anti-government militancy invigorated, as reflected in a twenty-four-hour strike in May 1945. Formulated by the SDA, the twenty-one demands the strikers presented centered on inclusion of more employees in the pension schemes, regrading of salary scales, and increasing of the cost-of-living allowances. Though the vocabulary was still restrained, new symbols emerged that coupled loyalty to service and dedication to office-work efficiency with outcries of distrust and humiliation. In contrast to earlier episodes, joint action now spread beyond the offices and reflected a strengthening of ties with the Histadrut. The high commissioner tried to prevent the strike by promising to press the Colonial Office to agree to the demands. The Jewish Agency, while supporting these "economic" demands, attempted to dissuade the Jewish members of the SDA from acting, claiming that the strike fell on the same day of a wide Arab anti-colonial strike in Syria and Lebanon, with which Arabs in Palestine identified. The failure of such pressure to prevent the strike demonstrated the SDA's gradually turning into a viable Arab-Jewish trade union independent of major political influences.¹⁸

After the war, the employees' twin problems of material hardship and restrained representation were aggravated as the new political climate accentuated the discrepancy between the wish to ease the effect of the war on labor and the government's

long-standing principles. In the summer of 1945, the Labour Party assumed power in Britain, which potentially harbored a liberalization of labor policies at home and in the colonies. As soon as the burden of war eased in Palestine, the administration was able to shift attention to economic construction. Moreover, the political climate was changing with the increase of political tension and the emergence of the first signs of British rethinking of Palestine's political future. In this complex context, the administration sought to achieve tranquillity in industrial relations and consequently to be more responsive to the employees' demands to alleviate the social cost they bore during the war. For officials in the Labor Department, this new climate was perceived as an opportunity to prevent the recurrence of the causes of wartime labor unrest through further sophistication of labor–employer conciliation channels. In the eyes of many workers—and of government employees, in particular—it was thus a time of heightened expectation that their tribulations would finally match their sense of service to the Palestine government.¹⁹

These expectations were frustrated, however. The Labour Party's assumption of power in Britain did not bring about a significant change of policy toward labor in the colonies, as its liberalization of control at home had promised. This was borne out by Prime Minister Clement Atlee's anti-strike policy, regulation of demand, and control of public expenditure. These policies were largely supported by the unions in Britain and led to restraints on wage increases and industrial action. The Palestine Mandatory government followed suit, as reflected in its reluctance to annul the ban on strikes decreed four years earlier. More significantly, the government focused its attention not only on political developments in Palestine and the issue of allowing Jewish refugees to enter the country, but also on the growing deficit, decreasing demand, flooding of the country with imported goods, and economic reabsorption of former servicemen.²⁰

This diversion maintained the government's unresponsiveness to the employees' demands, and assuming that its restrained approach to strike action might succeed in the new political climate, the SDA was willing to accommodate the procrastination. Thus, its October 1945 memorandum on salary scales suggested a compromise to the government. "Nothing other than inefficiency," it moderately explained, "should prevent an officer from proceeding uninterruptedly to a salary point which would provide him with a decent standard of living compatible with the social standing his status in government services exacts from him, and ultimately provide him with a reasonable pension or gratuity on retirement." However, when closely examined, the memorandum reflected a growing disaffection with government neglect, and while the wording of the grievances did not change their essence, they began to express rank-and-file pressure on the SDA.²¹ The testimony of the civil servants in the press disclosed the extent of their isolation. They could enjoy neither the wartime material achievements of industrial workers nor the promises of amelioration given to first-division officers. Furthermore, they were angered by attempts by the Histadrut to weaken the SDA, exemplified by the setting up of a Jewish section of government employees. Isolated from organized labor, feebly represented by their association, and continuously defied by a stringent colonial government, the civil servants' conditions worsened. This discrepancy between heightened expectation and frustration was the chief cause of a growing pressure in early 1946 to force the government to recognize its responsibility for the costs of the war. No wonder one Histadrut functionary claimed that "[t]he workers were motivated by the

hunger, the sense of deprivation and insult, the feeling that they were both deprived and consistently lied to.”²²

By treating the SDA as part of the administration and by weakening the influence of organized labor, the government drew the civil servants together and shaped the moderation of their organization. It was not merely the decline of employees’ real wages and their status anxiety that drove Arabs and Jews to cooperate. A distinct sense of the incapacity of organized forces to withstand the government’s intransigence and of the SDA to represent them also contributed. This consciousness of weakness in redressing economic and status grievances lay behind the extraordinary event that was about to unfold. The common interests of the Arab and Jewish civil servants were based not only on shared economic conditions and common sources of social prestige that the government bureaucracy offered, but also on an enclave-like organizational culture that demarcated them from the nationally oriented and more organized manual workers. It thus reflected a contrast to militant action, and, resembling the deferent civil servants in other parts of the empire, it promised a solid social foundation on which the administration could rely when facing political tension. However, these balanced relations were shaken by the government’s own actions, producing, as they did, a coalition of interests that defied the politicians and the national divisions among the labor organizations. The pressure to express outrage by means of a general strike did not originate with Arab and Jewish labor. And although the claim was persistently made by the government, it was not motivated by politicians who supposedly pledged through instigation of the employees to impact the deliberations of the Anglo-American Committee that began in early April and that aggravated national tensions. While these forces had a background role to play, action stemmed from the rank-and-file and reflected the transformation of relations within the SDA and between the SDA and the government. The outbreak of the strike was an act of desperation caused by the economic effects of the war and in open defiance of the government ban on strikes. But it also protested against a resilient employer that failed to respond to long-standing grievances and loss of dignity. In ignoring the effects of the war on its employees, in differentiating between sectors of workers, and in keeping the SDA a moderate organ, the government brought about the inconceivable in relations between Arab and Jewish civil servants. It shaped a coalescence of interest against the government, the better-off industrial workers, and, as the igniting of the strike will show, the SDA. This coalescence transcended national boundaries and set itself against the social costs of colonial rule. Soon it would threaten the principles of colonial rule and the quest for political tranquility.²³

BECOMING A GENERAL GOVERNMENT STRIKE

Strike action began on 9 April 1946 by some 500 Arab and Jewish employees of the Post and Telegraph Department in Tel Aviv and Jaffa. The strikers, mostly unclassified postal and telephone employees, protested against the governments’ rejection of their demands vis-à-vis the effects of the war on their living standards, working conditions, and post-war economic future. The next day, 1,500 postal and telephone employees in other towns joined them, shutting down most of Palestine’s post and telephone services. Five days later, the strikers were joined by 7,000 Arab and Jewish railway workers in Haifa and other towns. On 16 April the entire low-grade civil service was on strike, lasting

TABLE 2. *Employees in various departments, December 1945*

| | Total | Arabs | Jews |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------|-------|
| Post, Telephone & Telegraph | 2,874 ^a | 1,671 | 1,153 |
| Permanent | 2,192 | 1,249 | 943 |
| Casual | 632 | 422 | 210 |
| Railways & ports | 6,205 ^b | 5,185 | 550 |
| Permanent | 3,388 | 2,478 | 440 |
| Casual | 2,817 | 2,707 | 110 |

Notes: The Post, Telephone, and Telegraph Department employed 21.4 percent of all Jewish government employees and 7.5 percent of all Arab employees.

^aThe total includes 50 others.

^bThe total includes 470 others.

Source: Based on Reuveni, *Mimshal*, 236.

until the morning of 24 April. During these two weeks, which started with a departmental dispute and turned into a general strike of some 23,000 government employees, Palestine's communications and transportation systems was virtually at a standstill (Table 2).

The postal employees' decision to force their department and the government to alleviate their grievances emerged during the first week of April. Possibly, spontaneous action began among the postal and telegraph workers because the number of Jews among them was relatively higher than in other government departments, and, in general, the propensity to strike during the Mandate period was stronger among Jews than among Arabs. More plausibly, the postal and telegraph employees became more militant because many of them were fixed-salary and permanent employees and therefore were deeply affected by inflation and loss of purchasing power. Spontaneous action also may have been a reaction to attempts by various parties to dissuade the postal employees from taking strike action. After all, their representatives in the moderate SDA preferred negotiations with the government, and the postal employees were angered by an ultimatum the SDA presented to the government that was not accompanied by a threat of immediate action. Their disappointment deepened as PAWS feared that a joint strike might affect the pending conclusions of the Anglo-American Committee in demonstrating a political cross-national cooperation in the midst of the general Arab anti-Zionist economic boycott.²⁴

In desperation, the Jewish employees suggested a turn toward experienced labor organizations that were closely associated with the Histadrut: the Railway Post and Telegraph Workers' Organization and the Tel Aviv Histadrut Labor Council. The latter, convinced by the postal workers that it was a politically an opportune moment, agreed to sympathize on the condition that the strike be a limited affair and not too provocative. The outbreak of the strike thus stunned the government because of the contrast it presented to the employees' usual moderation and because of its violation of the existing ban on strikes. In reaction, the government promised the postal workers that it would convey their demands to the Colonial Office and hurriedly sent the police to where the strikers congregated. In defiance, and despite the lack of significant organizational backing, the strike spread to Jewish and Arab postal employees in the larger Jaffa and Tel Aviv

areas, and the local Labor Council lost even the minimal influence it had on events. Spontaneous action spread to other towns, and despite the SDA's calls for moderation, local committees of Arab and Jewish postal workers organized assemblies in front of government offices. All government telegraph and radio networks were gradually shut down, even though the army was ordered to replace the employees. This was accompanied by gestures of sympathy for the postal strikers by workers in mixed Arab–Jewish municipalities, who threatened to start a strike of their own. It was like “the outburst of a volcano. . . . [I]t was more than they could bear,” reported one of the journals of the Jewish labor movement at the beginning of the strike. The leader of the Haifa Labor Council added “there was an elementary uprising of forces that nobody controlled.”²⁵

The unexpected eruption of the strike and its immediate effects on the country's communications system forced the government to start negotiating with the strikers. For the government, the decision to do so was not easy, for it perceived its old promises to investigate conditions of the employees and to make recommendations to the Colonial Office on their behalf as sufficiently convincing. Forced to stop procrastinating, the government placed some of its best administrators in positions to negotiate, including R. M. Graves, head of the Labor Department; H. E. Chudleigh, his deputy; G. D. Kennedy, the postmaster-general; and G. T. Farley, the acting principal secretary. Farley kept in close contact with John Shaw, the chief secretary, and with Alan Cunningham, the high commissioner. No doubt, this unusual grouping of high officials testified to the emergency status of the situation. However, it also exerted enormous pressure on the strikers, who were unaccustomed to such high-level attention to their affairs.

The strikers' fourteen-member delegation demonstrated how unplanned the strike was. On the one hand, the delegation consisted of postal employees who had been elected democratically in mass meetings and evidently lacked any experience in negotiating pay and working conditions with an intransigent employer such as the government and the Post, Telephone, and Telegraph Department. On the other hand, the delegation included old-time activists such as Labib Fuleihan, head of the SDA (which was yet to join the strike); Yehezkel Abramov, head of the joint Railway, Post and Telegraph Workers' Union; and Sami Taha, the prominent Arab trade-union leader who represented PAWS. All three asked that the strike be short and desired a quick settlement with the management of the Post, Telephone, and Telegraph Department. Fuleihan, who was unaccustomed to organizing strikes, feared government reaction. Abramov, the veteran leader of the Jews who worked for the railways, resented a struggle over which the Histadrut lacked control. Taha of PAWS, though known for his willingness to cooperate with Jewish workers, suspected that Arab–Jewish cooperation might be manipulated by the Zionist Histadrut at the expense of the Arab employees.²⁶

These voices could not withstand the pressure from below, however, and the ensuing negotiations were affected by the ominous prospect that the postal strike would spread to the entire civil service. Joint Arab–Jewish vigils were held in front of postal offices in many towns, and public support of the strikers became widespread. Some government employees tried to cross the picket lines but were overshadowed by joint processions in the main towns in which the call “Long Live Jewish–Arab Unity” received public approval. The hurried negotiations surprised the strikers and testified to the government's realization of the potential cost of the strike. The government promised the strikers that

their demands would be considered thoroughly, not only by department managers, but also by the High Commissioner himself and the Joint Consultative Committee, and that these recommendations would be hurriedly sent to London for approval. This answer, which practically accepted a third of the strikers' demands, reflected what the administration defined as its "limits of concession." Impressed by the government's goodwill and by the decision to send two high officials to London, the SDA succeeded in convincing the strikers' delegation to stop the strike.²⁷

The proposed agreement disappointed the rank-and-file. First, although not all of the demands were agreed to, the strikers had to consent to return to work. Second, it was accepted that the postal employees' minimum daily wage would be raised, but the application of the increase had to wait for the results of an inquiry into the reasonable living wage in Palestine. Third, the promise to raise the minimum monthly salary and reform the grading of the employees was preconditioned on Colonial Office approval. Finally, although the government accepted the need to improve the promotion system in the Post and Telegraph Department, it did not include more employees in the government pension scheme. To many strikers, the situation therefore recalled the disputes they had experienced during the war, when an intransigent government and their own organization, which largely shared the government's views on conflict resolution, concertedly attempted to contain a radicalized sector of workers.²⁸

The disaffection of the postal employees began to spread to other government departments—in particular, to the railway workers, who added their own specific grievances: unimproved conditions of railway service, low pay compared with that in private companies, insufficient cost-of-living allowances, and arbitrary dismissals. By stressing the government's refusal to recognize its responsibility to deal with the economic effects of the war and the ineffectiveness of the railway's union organization to bring pressure on the government, the railway workers demonstrated a similar spirit to that of the postal employees. Using the opportunity of the strike, and seeing the government's willingness to concede, the railway workers thus joined in on 15 April, first at their center at Haifa, and then spreading to railway workers in other towns. Consequently, the front the government was facing widened. The terms of negotiation became more complicated, and the economic cost of the strike increased. The movement of trains stopped, both inside the country and among Palestine, Egypt, and Lebanon. The government's attempts to replace trains with light locomotives run by British soldiers failed to have an effect. The spreading of cross-national strike action proved to the government the total ineffectiveness of the ban on strikes in essential services. The Histadrut's backing of the Arab and Jewish strikers strengthened, exemplified by the financial and political support given to the railway workers by the Haifa Labor Council. Support also came from the Arab communist press and from the leftist Arab Workers' Congress (which broke off from PAWS), which praised the "anti-colonial struggle" and the example that the civil servants set of Arab–Jewish cooperation. In the eyes of government officials and SDA leaders, the increasing involvement of forces outside the government workplace threatened to change the nature of the strike.²⁹

Largely as a consequence of the postal workers' rejection of the government's proposals and the joining in of the railway workers, an assembly of 1,000 members of the Haifa SDA branch decided to join the strike without the prior approval of the SDA. The demands formulated by the assembly drew the general contours of struggle: the

fulfillment of long-standing demands, equalization of pay with clerks in the private sector, increased allowances, war bonuses, and the regrading of salary scales. Joining the strike, it was argued, was a show of support for the postal workers and a logical step to take following the railway workers' joining of the strike. But it aimed mainly to force the SDA's leadership to put its power into practice. The impact was indeed immediate. A meeting of the SDA's General Council was called (held at the Arab Orthodox Club in Haifa) and was attended by representatives of all of the SDA District Committees. The council formally decided that all civil servants should join the strike, and that a committee under Fuleihan's leadership (composed of two Arab Muslims, two Arab Christians, and two Jews) should take control of its management.³⁰

On 16 April, the Second Division Association joined the strike. It did not plan the strike or initiate it, and it joined not because it ceased to be restrained, but despite it. "Realizing the present situation in its picture," declared the SDA in one of its circulars, "and lest confusion result which may give other elements the chance to take control of the situation, . . . it had no alternative but to take charge and lead the strike emphatically demanded by every civil servant in the country." No doubt the SDA leaders felt that widening the strike was unavoidable. The strike by the postal workers showed signs of success, and the SDA hoped that, by joining in, the demands it had been pressing since 1943 might be fulfilled. The fact that government officials had not yet set out for London to secure the approval of the Colonial Office of the strikers' demands made the SDA leaders realize that the government's firm stance against budgeting the social cost of the war was far from over. Furthermore, a certain "organizational patriotism" evolved: from the start, the SDA sympathized with the postal employees, and the postal employees' rejection of government's procrastination meant that staying outside the picture might split the ranks of civil servants. Then political forces, such as the nationally oriented Histadrut and PAWS, might take over. The SDA decided, therefore, that distancing itself from the government could be avoided only by combining representation of its rank-and-file with a drawing for that rank-and-file the limits of possible action. This Janus-faced character of the SDA—one face responsive to pressure from below, and the other apprehensive of militancy and adhering to its status as servant of the state—was exposed by the effects of its joining the strike.³¹

The joining of the strike by the Second Division Association was momentous (Table 3). It turned the dispute into a general strike of the entire lower-grade civil service

TABLE 3. *The structure of the April 1946 strike*

| Strikers | Total | Arabs | Jews | Dates |
|--|--------|--------|-------|-------------|
| Post, Telephone & Telegraph Department | 2,000 | 1,200 | 800 | 9–23 April |
| Railways | 7,000 | 6,600 | 400 | 15–23 April |
| Civil service ^a | 10,000 | 7,500 | 2,500 | 16–23 April |
| Public works | 2,500 | 1,900 | 600 | 16–23 April |
| Port workers | 1,500 | ? | ? | 16–23 April |
| All strikers | 23,000 | 18,700 | 4,300 | 16–23 April |

^aSecond Division, excluding the Post, Telephone, and Telegraph Department.

Sources: Secretariat of Histadrut Executive, 24 April 1946, LAL; SDA communiqué, 17 April 1946, LA IV250-72-1-1671.

and thus widened Arab–Jewish cooperation in collective action. Practically it meant almost a total paralysis of the country’s communications system, its export and import activity, and its government civilian operations. As it grew into a serious disruption of political and economic routines, the strike, in the eyes of the authorities, turned into a threatening destabilization of the “industrial peace” that was so badly needed during this period of turmoil. Although the strike began as a departmental affair, the entire civil service was now united in demanding accommodation with the achievements of other sectors, in challenging its neglect, and in questioning the basic principles of the government’s labor policy.³²

THE POWER OF THE STRIKE

In signaling the change from moderation to militancy, the SDA took responsibility for 23,000 strikers. When compared with the eruption of the strike wave (Table 3), the SDA’s joining in increased the relative share of Arab strikers and the association’s influence on them, further weakening the involvement of Jewish and Arab organized labor. The SDA’s strike message of 16 April reflected this coalescence. It was forwarded not only to the strikers, but also to labor politicians in PAWS and the Histadrut, warning them not to use the strike politically, and to the administration, which was made to understand that it was its own intransigence that had radicalized the SDA. The strike aims were redefined. First, the SDA demanded the revision of the civil servants’ salary scales, compensation for the financial hardships brought about by the war, and increases in cost-of-living allowances. Second, it demanded the limitation of the powers of the heads of the government departments (who were accused of humiliating employees and making arbitrary dismissals). Third, it demanded the appointment of an inquiry committee (with an SDA member) to investigate the conditions of railway service. The strike message also called on the strikers to keep an orderly and non-violent strike, thus leaving the option of quick agreement in case the administration became more responsive. Moreover, in stressing that high officers of the First Division were not part of the strike, the declaration noted the specific social bases of the strike. Finally, the declaration turned to the strikers, stressing that from now on the SDA was in charge.³³

The declaration thus reflected a change in the SDA’s self-image—from an association to a trade union, from being co-opted by and cooperative with the government to an adversary. The government’s wartime policy of cultivating “sound trade unions” closed a circle with the turning of the frail SDA into a full-fledged representative organ. Furthermore, while some observers might have read in the widening of cross-national cooperation the symptoms of political change, the strike was primarily a non-politicized event. It focused on a widely shared sense of economic injustice, and Arab and Jewish politicians were still significantly absent from direct involvement in the strike’s management. Despite attempts by various political forces inside and outside Palestine to disrupt the cooperation, its success surprised many observers. The sources on the strike disclose almost no evidence on national undertones in the strike’s management and in the short-lived strike culture that arose from the mass meetings of the employees. In rejecting the involvement of the politicians, the strikers expressed the danger to their collective action from potential politicization, thus cementing both their internal cohesion and wide popular support.³⁴

Once the SDA took control and the tension between the militant employees and their moderate organization dissipated, the confrontation began to produce a sort of strike culture. This culture was based first and foremost on recurrent mass assemblies in various towns where government departmental centers were located and SDA locals were active. These congregations, unprecedented for their cross-national character, served as a means of communication. But they turned into a powerful democratic lever of pressure on the SDA not to give in, guardians of social justice and defenders against attempts by politicians to break the coalescence the strike expressed. They aimed to debate and affirm the decision-making process of the leadership and to keep in contact with the urban public but also to create a sense of solidarity. Parallel to the picketing and vigils in front of offices, organized journeys of strikers from one town to another, and processions at the towns' centers, they created momentary bonds beyond the government workplace. These bonds were crucial in opposing the government's attempts to replace the employees with the police and the military, to split the strikers and foment suspicion. Through these events, the strikers conveyed to the government the extent of its neglect of the civil servants and the cost that the strike was threatening to cause.³⁵

Part and parcel of this strike culture was the communications system that evolved among the strikers around the country. Conducted by the SDA and not tied to existing Arab and Jewish political and union bureaucracies, the network worked beyond the local and departmental levels. It reproduced the power of the strikers as a unified actor by spreading correct information and transmitting the sense that the event was democratically managed. Characteristically written in English, the daily SDA communiqués expressed the non-national character of the strike and stressed the government as its main address. The communiqués fed the strikers with information on decision-making, number of participants, sympathizers, and, crucially, strike breakers (ridiculed as “chicken-hearts”). They thus served as a crucial means of contact and mobilization among the dispersed strikers, who were otherwise connected only by the government as their employer. An alternative and combative system of information seemed to replace the trustworthy relations between the civil servants and the government that previously had been maintained through routine directives and reports.³⁶

Mobilization and mutual support were an essential part of this expression of moral outrage. This was reflected, for example, in poems by the Arab civil servant Hanna G. Daher that were published in the SDA's bulletins. In one poem, the silencing of the country and the firmness of the strikers were associated with restrained militancy:

So still is the night
 No engine's in sight
 No rending shrills
 No deafening sound Is heard;
 At dead of night
 No passengers
 From railway wagons
 Would alight;
 No friend to meet
 No friend to bid good-bye
 With heaving sigh.
 All Civil Service

Men and women alike
Proclaimed a peaceful strike.
One soul and heart
Never to depart
Till all demands
On which their heart are set
Are duly met.
Obey ye the Call
And make a firm stand.

The poem contrasted the sounds of daily work and of urban bustle with the strike's paralyzing effects; it further connected the non-violent atmosphere of the strike with the just "noise" of the strikers' demands.³⁷ In avoiding any mention of the national identities of the strikers, the striker-poet expressed a central feature of the event: the lack of surprise among the strikers about the extent of cooperation and momentary blurring of national divisions. The poetic gestures joined with other cultural expressions in the bulletins that referred to religion and national identities as unopposed to the unity of the strikers and to the shared sense of justice. Thus, the strike culture focused not only on defining internal and external enemies but also on the non-political nature of the action, its democratic atmosphere, and the sense of legitimate wrath against long-standing neglect. In this atmosphere, Arab–Jewish cooperation seemed unproblematic, needing no political socialization or guidance.

The widespread public support for the strikers contributed to the employees' emerging from obscurity, and it undoubtedly fed on the non-political atmosphere that the strikers and their causes expressed in a period when almost every aspect of civil life in Palestine underwent a politicization of a sort. However, the political witnesses to this extraordinary event coupled their sympathy with the strike and its contextualization in their general logic of labor politics in the country. Thus, the Jewish labor movement, while wholeheartedly supporting the strikers (as expressed in strike coverage by the Histadrut daily *Davar*), was persistent in its suspicion that any strike action that involved cooperation between Arab and Jews might be used by Palestinian opponents of Zionism. On the left of organized Jewish labor, such suspicions were vehemently rejected, and the sudden emergence of class solidarity was praised as bearing the potential for a political impact. Such was the case with the Zionist-oriented Hashomer Hatsair but even more so with the Jewish-led Ihud (Unity) Association, which provided in its publication *Baaiot* (Problems) a sympathetic analysis of the social solidarity between Palestine's peoples and its essential role in establishing in Palestine a binational state. On the other side of the Zionist political spectrum, the newspapers of the Jewish right disliked the widespread sympathy for the strike in the Yishuv and were unremitting in their opposition to cooperation with Arab government employees, who were assumed to be guided by anti-Zionist Palestinian politics. However, this attitude, partly stemming from the right's general objection to labor strikes, did not prevent from the right-wing newspaper *Haboker* from sympathizing with the anti-British stance of the strikers.³⁸

Jewish and Arab communists were the most vocal supporters of the strike, and their papers—*Kol Haam* in Hebrew and *al-Ittihad* in Arabic—tirelessly praised the anti-colonial aspect of the strike and the expressions of solidarity among manual and white-collar workers. Calling for the prolongation of the struggle until all demands were

met, they jointly hoped that more workers would join in and that further expressions would be voiced against what they perceived as British attempts to incite Arabs and Jews against each other. The strike even brought about a rare joint declaration by the Palestine Communist Party and its breakaway organization the National Labor League, led by Fuad Nasser (head of the Nazareth branch of the Arab Workers Party). The left wing of PAWS, which was traditionally suspicious of cooperation with Jewish workers, expressed sympathy. Its right wing, led by the moderate trade-union leader Taha was even more enthusiastic and stressed both the potential for Arab–Jewish cooperation and the solidarity between manual and white-collar workers. International support from the International Union of Railway employees, British Labour Party activists, and the Near East and Middle East representatives of the International Trade Union Organization in Beirut contributed to this anti-colonial enthusiasm. Anti-colonialism also characterized the sympathy expressed in the newspaper *al-Difaa* and the close coverage of the strike in *Falastin*. Though *Falastin* initially suspected that the leaders of Zionist labor had manipulatively orchestrated the strike and persistently avoided mentioning Arab–Jewish cooperation, it elevated the strikers to the status of anti-colonial heroes and portrayed the strike as a strongly anti-colonial and anti-Zionist lesson. Furthermore, the SDA bulletins continuously published the supportive commentaries of *Falastin* and *al-Ittihad* and thus totally ignored contemporary calls by the Higher Arab Committee and the Arab League for Arabs not to cooperate with Jews. The criticism of cooperation with Zionists, which was also joined by anti-strike declarations by King Abdullah of Transjordan, was comparatively less influential.³⁹

The press played a major role in creating the atmosphere of Arabs and Jews collaborating to transform the colonial outlook of the government and became a vehicle of mobilization. It widely publicized donations to the strike fund and the timetable and course of the strikers' processions in the towns. In its close coverage of negotiations, the press linked the government's reluctance to rethink its approach to its employees with its attempts to split their ranks. In giving the traditionally silent civil servants a voice, the press played an important role in humanizing the conflict, in presenting the colonial government as the cause of the employees' plight, and in propagating the need for action. To this was added sympathy for the strike that also expressed economic interest, such as that of the fifty merchants and firm owners in Ramla who warned the High Commissioner of the cost of prolonging the strike. More significantly, various groups, ranging from the Histadrut to Arab unions, from railway workers in Transjordan to the Association of Arab village teachers, accompanied their vocal support with donations to the strike fund. In the political context of the time, this wide range of sympathy was unusual, testifying to the ability of the public to dissociate the strike from narrow political interests and to the general popular disaffection with the government shared by both the Arab and Jewish communities.⁴⁰

In fact, the public support accentuated the distance of the politicians from the strikers. Not only were leaders of organized labor, both Jewish and Arab, kept outside the event by the strike's leaders, but the emphasis of the strike on the contradictions in British colonial policy defied the political contextualization that the Histadrut and the Arab labor politicians were used to making. This distancing of the strike from politics made the event extraordinary as it was. However, it may also have contributed to the way the strike ended, for the British feared that prolonging the strike might bring about political

involvement, and the SDA's successful distancing of politics from the strike served to allay these fears. More influential on the government, though, was the threat that more workers would start strikes of their own. Municipal workers, the workers of the oil refineries, and the clerks in the government's military departments expressed their intentions either to embark on sympathy strikes or to use the opportunity for their own gains. These threats, which emerged parallel to the publication of the findings of the Anglo-American Committee, signaled that the strike was turning into a political event but also made clear that there was only a minority whom the government could consider replacement workers. In a sense the threats were part and parcel of the diffusive and wavelike nature of the strike itself.⁴¹

COMPROMISE

The radicalization of the civil servants and the widespread public sympathy with them surprised the government. Cunningham and Shaw were convinced that the SDA was satisfied with the treatment of grievances at the Joint Consultative Committee, (established in January 1946), in which both the First and Second Division Associations were present. The SDA's decision to join the strike was perceived as harming the negotiations and as a threat to the government's assumption that "sound unionism" promised conciliation, not militancy. In view of the government's willingness to consider the strikers' demands, it perceived the strike as fundamentally unjust and the SDA as holding the country to ransom. It thus called on the employees to return to work and demanded that the SDA preserve its image of moderation by resuming negotiations. However, the ominous spreading of the strike made government officials realize that they had to concede more and increase the pressure on the Colonial Office to concur.⁴²

For many officials, their confidence in their capacity to rule Palestine seemed shaken, mainly because the strike joined with Palestine's political destabilization. "There is no doubt that present situation has most serious potentialities," Cunningham telegraphed the Colonial Office and the Treasury. "It is clear that the worsening in the economic situation of Civil Servants during the war years in relation to all other sections of the country has made them easy prey to agitators, and that a very strong bid must be made to regain their confidence. Otherwise they must inevitably fall even further under the sway of Jewish political interests who, under Labor cloak, are seeking to paralyze public services, to step up wage levels to the utmost, to bolster up a case for mass labor immigration and generally to hamper the administration of this country in a manner calculated to raise doubts as to the ability of the Mandatory Government to carry on." The SDA's joining the strike was therefore more than mere radicalization; it turned matters into an emergency, an economic liability for the government, and a way for the Yishuv and Jewish labor movement to gain politically. Until then, the government had perceived the dispute as an internal affair that could be handled with procrastination, without turning its back on budgetary considerations. Now the dispute was connected to political events and to the government's fears that the Zionist camp wanted, by making the civil service militant, to disrupt its rule and bring the Anglo-American Committee to side with Jewish interests.⁴³

These fears, in as much as they diverted attention from the real issues at stake, triggered the government to move in several directions. It hurriedly sent Kennedy, the postmaster-general, and Farley, acting principal assistant secretary, to London to negotiate the

approval of the Colonial Office. Second, an attempt was made to split the strikers by denouncing the politics behind the strike. Instigating Arab and Jewish strikers against each other on political grounds was considered a very effective way to quell the strikers. Third, emergency measures were taken to ensure the supply of services and replace strikers with soldiers to maintain skeleton port and rail facilities, to bring in essential supplies, and to relieve congestion in the postal services.⁴⁴

The increasing confidence of the strikers and the paralysis of the country made these measures ineffective, and the government had to make more concessions. It adopted the recommendations of the Joint Consultative Committee to facilitate “the ventilation of staff grievances” and “seek as expeditiously as the circumstances permit a settlement which will be fair and just to both the Service and the public.” In practice, this meant accepting ten of the twenty-one demands and urgent consideration of another six, and pressure on the Colonial Office to approve the rest. This demonstrated the extent to which the government felt threatened.⁴⁵

Affected by this change in the government’s position, the SDA led the strikers’ delegation to accept the proposals and bring the strike to an end. However, the rank-and-file, regarding the promises as meaningless without London’s approval, rejected the compromise. This was followed by the decision of a mass meeting of railway workers to repudiate their leaders via a no-confidence vote after those leaders decided to follow the SDA. “The country is undergoing a severe crisis of trustworthiness,” wrote one observer in *Davar*. “The postal workers remember well what happened to their demands last time [they protested], and what were the results of the committee that investigated their conditions and proposed whatever it proposed. . . . The workers have no confidence any more in promises.” Sensing their power, their solid cooperation, and the widespread support, the strikers defied the leaders and chose to wait for the reaction of the Colonial Office.⁴⁶ Consequently, the SDA felt legitimized to press the government to accept more demands and to resist the intention to deduct from the strikers’ salaries pay for the days lost in the strike. Pressure from below and threats of being disfranchised by its own constituency led the SDA to replace its traditional moderation with firmness. The rejection meant prolonging the strike, further economic deterioration, and industrial unrest—contrasting with the political tranquillity the government asked for. The government in turn was forced to concede more and cancel the deduction of the strike pay. In as much as the spreading of the strike to all offices was a corollary of the government’s principles of stringent economic policy and indifference to the weakly represented employees, so was its submission a consequence of the threat posed by the strikers to these principles. Moreover, the rejection, hurriedly conveyed to the Colonial Office, was conducive to the latter’s approval of the provisional proposals.

The compromise drawn between the government and the SDA on 22 April reflected this pressure but also demonstrated a mutual interest. The government wanted to prevent further deterioration that might endanger the principles of its rule, and the SDA feared that prolonging the strike might cause it to lose the control it had over its management. For both, the sources of the threats were similar: political forces such as PAWS, the Histadrut, and communists in the National Liberation League. Until now, they had lacked significant impact but now wanted, each for its own reasons, to influence the strikers and gain from this cross-national affair. This mutual interest necessitated a return to the pre-1945 restraint that characterized relations between the government and the SDA.

The compromise matured gradually. First, the government drew up a provisional agreement in which most of the strikers' demands were met and asked the Colonial Office for approval. Accompanying the agreement was the government's promise not to deduct pay for the days lost in the strike and not to punish the strikers for violating the strike ban. The second stage saw the SDA's leadership secretly debating the proposals, avoiding publicity of its willingness to conclude the agreement from the strikers and the politicians, and forcing the agreement on the SDA's council. The council's meeting reflected Fuleihan's authority and capacity to prevent politicization. When the news of the decision to stop the strike reached militants outside (mainly Arab communists in Jerusalem), they violently tried to reverse the decision in the council. They challenged the secrecy of the talks, the fact that the railway workers had not been consulted, and the SDA's commitment to using the conciliation machinery. However, in reverting to the SDA's pre-strike restraint, the council approved the ending of the strike, fearing that politicization might endanger its achievements and that the government might use the strike's prolongation to split its ranks. The final stage was the approval of the agreement by the Colonial Office and Treasury, despite their grave misgivings about the obligations the government had to the strikers.⁴⁷ The compromise, which brought the resumption of work on 24 April, included a comprehensive regrading scheme. The three junior grades, who earned an annual salary of 60–360 Palestinian liras, were raised to 96–450. The cost-of-living allowances were increased, particularly for married employees with children. The civil servants were given a war bonus—namely, three months' salary and allowances that helped them pay off debts and rehabilitate themselves economically. Finally, in return for their immediate return to work and commitment to turn in the future to conciliation, the employees were given the salaries they had lost during the strike. Practically, the agreement cost the government 2–3 million pounds—"catastrophic effects," in the eyes of many government officials—which meant that soon after, new taxation was considered to balance the unexpected expenses.⁴⁸

EPILOGUE

The civil servants' return to their offices was followed by lengthy negotiations to realize the agreement between the government and the SDA under the scrutinizing eyes of the Colonial Office and the Treasury in London. The strike, the cooperation it brought about, and the government's submission began to sink into historical oblivion, its memory occasionally evoked by those who kept hoping that Arab–Jewish anti-colonialism would feed on the strike's legacy, or by a historiography that stressed nothing but its anomaly. The SDA reverted to its pre-war moderation; national divisions increasingly overshadowed co-existence in the civil service; and the joint action practiced during the strike was never reiterated.

However, as suggested by this reading, the strike's reflection of the contradictions in British rule turned the labor dispute in the administration into a moment of reckoning. In conceding to the strikers, the government signaled that, to defend the fundamental principles of its governance, it had to prevent the return of the causes that had shaped anti-government militancy in the first place. To maintain low-cost rule of the country and industrial peace through "sound trade unionism" and preference for organized labor, it could no longer ignore the pressures from below that these principles created.

Resembling the effects of the strike wave in British and French Africa during the same period, this recognition meant a reluctant application in Palestine of a labor policy based on European standards that was more attuned to the needs of the urban working and lower-middle classes. This was exemplified by the government's recognition of its responsibility for the social cost of the war and for its influence on the under-representation of its employees. This language of government obligation was closely associated with contemporary ideas that increasingly were characterizing British authorities in 1946 regarding the need to introduce in Palestine a system of social insurance and trade-union legislation. Moreover, the government's management of the strike and its resolution proved to the Colonial Office in London the extent of the increasing cost that maintaining Palestine entailed. That this tremor paralleled the political deterioration in the country, and the weakening of British independence in determining its future, may have had an influence on Britain's later withdrawal from the Mandate.

Labor was no less affected. The strike forced the Histadrut to recognize its absence from the government sector, its weak impact on the civil servants, and its incapacity to orchestrate cooperation between Arab and Jewish employees. It was thus made to reconsider not only its involvement in the shaping of the civil service of the new state but also its under-representation of weak laboring sectors and the limits of its hegemony. This was exemplified after the strike by the attempts of the Histadrut to organize the Jewish government employees separately and, in parallel, to seek cooperation with PAWS in the management of strike action that ensued in 1946–47. Neither aim materialized because of the consistent decrease of Jews in the government sector and the looming civil war in Palestine. Also, as the nationally oriented manipulation of joint organization in the 1920s and 1930s proved, politicization of workplace cooperation between Arabs and Jews deepened national segregation, not the other way around. The strike's main features of cross-national cooperation and rank-and-file pressure on the government to concede and on the SDA to radicalize drew a reality that both the government and organized labor consistently ignored—namely, the social cost entailed by the principles of British governance and the practices of national separation. Two years after the strike, the British dismantled the Palestine Mandatory administration. The memory of the strike evaporated. In the wake of the 1948 war, most of the Arabs in the Palestine civil service either became unemployed or were forced to leave the country, and some of their fellow Jewish workers were absorbed into the civil service of the new state. But the problems of social neglect and under-representation that the British authorities were so instrumental in shaping, and that were uncovered in the joint strike, would continue to trouble the politicians, as the strikes of early 1950s Israel would soon prove.

NOTES

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⁴On labor policy, see, for example, Barbara J. Smith, *The Roots of Separatism in Palestine: British Economic Policy 1920–1929* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1993), chap. 7; Bernstein, *Constructing Boundaries*, chap. 1. On labor legislation, see Assaf Likovski, “Bein ‘Mandat’ Le-‘Medina’: Al Chalukat Hahistoria shel Hamishpat Haisraeli Letkufut” (Between “Mandate” and “State”: Rethinking the Periodization of Israeli Legal History), *Mishpatim* 29 (1998): 689–721.

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¹¹SDA memorandum, 27 May 1944, in SDA, *Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 44, 15 June 1944, and CS reply, 3 May 1944, LA IV236-622.

¹²SDA memorandum, 27 May 1944, in SDA, *Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 44, 15 June 1944, LA IV236-622; PRO CO/733/468/27; Haifa Labor Council to Histadrut Unemployment Fund, 1 April 1946, LA IV208-4696; Avi-Rut, “Pekidei Hamemshala Be-Tel Aviv” (The Government Civil Servants in Tel Aviv), *Shurot* 44 (November 1944); interview with Sami Taha, *Falastin*, 27 April 1946.

¹³Richard Massie Graves, “Editorial,” *Department of Labor Bulletin*, vol. 1, October–November 1942, 2–3; H. E. Chudleigh to Abba Khushi, 23 October 1943, LA IV219-46; Histadrut Executive, 23 May 1945, Lavon Institute Library (hereafter, LAL); *Mishmar*, 17 April 1946; *Falastin*, 16 and 17 April 1946; A. F. Kirby, *Palestine Railways, Rates of Pay and Conditions of Service for Wages Staff*, 1 June 1947, Rhodes House, Oxford (hereafter, RH); Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies*, chaps. 4–5.

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²⁷*Palestine Post*, 12 April 1946; *Davar*, 11–12 April 1946; *Al-Ittihad*, 14 April 1946; CS to Anglo-American Committee and CO, 11, 12 April 1946, CS to CO, 16, 21 April 1946, ISA CO 733/457 75156/156/46; Secretariat of the Histadrut Executive, 24 April 1946, LAL; Richard Graves to the Railway, Post, and Telegraph Workers Union, 13 April 1946, LA IV236-43.

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³⁰*Mishmar*, 14 April 1946; *Palestine Post*, 15–17 April 1946; *Al-Ittihad*, 14 April 1946; *Davar*, 15–17 April 1946; CS to CO, 16 April 1946, ISA CO/733/457 75156/156/46; Secretariat of Histadrut Executive, 24 April 1946, LAL.

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³²*Palestine Post*, 17 April 1946; *Davar*, 17–19 April 1946; *Haboker*, 18 April 1946; CS to CO, 18 April 1946, ISA CO/733/457 75156/156/46; SDA strike communiqué 5, 20 April 1946, LA IV250-72-1-1671; Report of the Resettlement of Ex-Service Personnel Committee, 30 April 1946, RH MSS. Medit. S.16, Couzens.

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³⁴Dan, “Sho’n Hadoar”; Taha to HLC, 4 May 1946, LA IV250-27-3-74; Histadrut Arab Department, 15 May 1946, GH (2) 25.90; SDA communiqué 2, 17 April 1946, LA IV250-72-1-1671.

³⁵*Palestine Post*, 17 April 1946; *Mishmar*, 17 April 1946; CS to CO, 18 April 1946, ISA CO 733/457 75156/156/46; *Haboker*, 18 April 1946; *Davar*, 19 April 1946.

³⁶See SDA bulletins and communiqués, LA IV236-3-43, LA/250-72-1-1671; *Mishmar*, 17 April 1946; *Haboker*, 18 April 1946; Mapam leaflets, GH (3) 21.90, GH (2) 25.90; communist leaflets, LA IV425-33; Mordechai Nemirovsky, “Shevitat Ovdei Hamemshala” (The Civil Servants’ Strike), 24 April 1946, LA IV236-3-43; SDA communiqué 2, 17 April 1946, communiqué 4, 19 April 1946, communiqué 5, 20 April 1946, all in LA IV250-72-1-1671.

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³⁹SDA communiqués 4, 19 April 1946, and 5, 20 May 1946, LA IV250-72-1-1671; coverage of the strike in *Falastin*, 11–19 April 1946; *al-Ittihad*, 14, 21 April 1946. See also Jamal al-Husayni’s support of the Arab strikers and the decision of the Arab Higher Committee not to get involved in the strike in *al-Difaa*, 19 April 1946.

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⁴²Government communiqué, *Palestine Post*, 17 April 1946; *Davar*, 17–19 April 1946; CS to CO, 18 April 1946, ISA CO/733/457 75156/156/46; SDA communiqué 5, 20 April 1946, LA IV250-72-1-1671.

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⁴⁵Government communiqué, *Palestine Post*, 17 April 1946; *Davar*, 17 April 1946; Alan Cunningham, “Palestine—The Last Days of the Mandate,” *International Affairs* 24 (1948): 481–90.

⁴⁶Quoted in M. D., “Adain Lo Histayem”; see also CS to CO, 18, 19 April 1946, ISA CO/733/457 75156/156/46; *Davar*, 17 April 1946; *Haboker*, 18 April 1946; *Mishmar*, 18 April 1946; *Falastin*, 18 April 1946; Secretariat of the Histadrut Executive, 24 April 1946, LAL.

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