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Adamant and multifaceted: diamond workers' strikes in World War II Palestine

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Strikes often present a curious tension. They are basically local events, framed in local contexts and impacted by local actors, who themselves are placed along local traditions of employment relations and collective action. At the same time, strikes are also part of larger continua of regional and global competition and changes in prices of products that influence the strategies of local employers and labor costs, which in turn impinge on workers' decision to launch strikes, and on employers' resistance to workers' demands. Such tension is relevant in particular to the relatively understudied association between collective action and commodity chains¹, between strikes and the distinctive labor process that commodity chains create, and even more so when the latter are disrupted and changed by wars. Belligerent tensions and wars cause havoc in commodity chains: production sites are dislocated and relocated and the established balance between regions distraught by wars and those that the latter benefit is transformed, often resulting in the surge of strikes. Strike activity in the global diamond industry is an apt case in point, as is well reflected in the case of the transplantation of diamond production from Europe in British-ruled Palestine.²

¹ Van der Linden, Marcel. *Workers of the World: Essays toward a Global Labor History*. Leiden: Brill, 2008, pp.173-207.

² For the diamond industry in Mandate Palestine see De Vries, David. *Diamonds and War: State, Capital and Labor in British-Ruled Palestine*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2010. The case here focuses on the 1940s and reflects a small part of the myriad collective action in the global network of modern diamond making. For the commodity chain, see Grodzinski, Paul. *Diamond Technology: Production Methods for Diamond and Gem Stones*. London: N.A.G. Press, 1953; Even-Zohar, Chaim. *From Mine to*

World War II and the Holocaust left indelible marks on Mandate Palestine, but none seemed more paradoxical than the tremendous surge of strike action. On the one hand, the war propelled an economic boom and therefore created a conducive atmosphere for enhanced strike action. At the same time, the turmoil the strikes caused in relations between workers and employers seemed totally indifferent to the climactic contexts in which they happened - the severance of Palestine from Europe, the decimation of Jews, the mobilization of the Middle East for the fight against Germany, and, last but not least, the progressive political tension between Arabs and Jews in Palestine itself. It was as if the strikes, always attuned to and impacted by social and political contexts, took off on their own course and sustained a life of their own.

Wartime strike action was, however, far from insular. For the British government of Palestine and the Colonial Office and London, the strikes not only ignored their colonial legal authority, but signaled that British intervention in Palestine's economy – justified and encouraged by the needs of war – should not be extended to civil society and industrial relations. For the Palestine Arabs the wartime strikes – concentrating mainly in the Jewish community – marked a surge in trade union activity³, but also a platform to enhance the impact of the war on their opposition to colonial rule. And among the Jews there were many who regarded the parallel life of the strikes as a demonstration of the war-induced strengthening of capitalism, and the inability of the Histadrut – the institutional arm of organized labor in the Jewish polity - to contain its effects. However, as demonstrated by the diamond industry – the most strike-prone sector in wartime Palestine – strikes also interlaced workplace issues with international factors. Evidently, they coupled the impact of war on the diamond production chain with imperial interests.⁴

The context in which diamond cutting emerged in Palestine in the late 1930s and early 1940s was economic and political and as usual along the diamond commodity chain it mixed international and local forces. The rise of Fascism in Europe destabilized Jewish life in the Low Countries, and when the war broke out and began to paralyze the diamond trade, merchants and polishers in Antwerp and Amsterdam looked for temporary shelter. This

Mistress: Corporate Strategies and Government Policies in the International Diamond Industry. London: Mining Communications Ltd., 2007.

³ Trade union activity in the Jewish community was mostly organized by the Histadrut, the roof union organization in Mandate Palestine and Israel.

⁴ Nathan, Robert, Gass, Oskar, Creamer, Daniel. *Palestine: Problem and Promise*, Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1946, pp. 506-514.

destabilization was perceived among local Jewish entrepreneurs in Palestine as an opportunity to help their Belgian and Dutch brethren, and at the same time to introduce to the Jewish economy in Palestine an industry in which Jews in the Netherlands, Belgium and South Africa have had a long-standing presence.⁵

This initiative, merging a capitalist venture with Zionist-oriented industrialization, matched nicely with the needs of two powerful forces. One was the De Beers cartel. In the late 1930s its reserves of rough diamonds mined in the British Protectorate of Sierra Leone and the Belgian Congo (present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo) were dwindling, and it needed an alternative to the paralyzed diamond trade in Europe. The second force was the British who needed diamonds for the war effort, looking for ways to prevent diamonds from reaching the Germans, and seeking more American dollars so needed for their war economy in Europe and the Middle East. For both forces Palestine seemed an obvious choice. It was far from the European fronts, the Jews in Palestine were perceived by the British as part of an ethnic group historically associated with the occupation of diamond making and trading, and Palestine being under British Mandate rule promised control over the country's exports.

When the Germans occupied the Low Countries in May 1940, Palestine was therefore destined to become an alternative diamond production center – mainly to Antwerp, but also to the German diamond production centers of Hanau and Idar-Oberstein that in the late 1930s competed (with strong Nazi government backing) with Antwerp. During the ensuing war, Jewish refugees established cutting workshops in London, Cuba, Brazil, New York and Puerto Rico where Belgian and Dutch craft traditions, and where even organizational models of diamond manufacturers and traders were reproduced.⁶ However, among these “industrial Diasporas” Palestine was the fastest growing diamond center, and the only place where the decision to establish the industry was coupled with a formal and explicit policy that it should be limited in its expansion, and that it should not compete with Antwerp and Amsterdam after the Germans ended their

⁵ For the diamond industry in Belgium see Laureys, Eric. *Meesters van het diamant. De Belgische diamantsector tijdens het Nazibewind*, Tiel: Lannoo, 2005.

⁶ The number of diamond workers in Palestine rose from 60 in 1939 to 5,000 in 1946. In Belgium, the number declined from 25,000 to 15,000 and in the Netherlands from 8,000 to 1,000 respectively. See Friedman, Avraham. "On the Crisis in the Industry," *Niv Poel Hayahalomim* [Bulletin of Histadrut Diamond Workers' Union], no 1. 1947 [H]; *Proceedings of the First Congress after the Liberation of the Universal Alliance of Diamond Workers*, Antwerp 2-6 September 1946. The George Meany Memorial Archives, Silver Spring, Maryland, RG 18 – 005/12.

occupation. This could be enforced only in a British-controlled territory, clearly reflecting British thinking on the future postwar relations with Belgium and with the Belgian Congo. Moreover, British intervention in the transplantation of the industry from Belgium to Palestine was reflected also in the Colonial Office and the Ministry of Economic Warfare on the British side and a group of local entrepreneurs in Palestine itself agreeing that the industry would be exclusively Jewish. This was quite an unprecedented understanding in the British Empire. State and capital agreed here formally not only on maintaining an ethnic occupational tradition, but also on ethnic segregation and Arab exclusion that could well affect labor market tensions between Arabs and Jews. The Jewish diamond cutters in Palestine were to become therefore Britain's and De Beers' "special natives", tasked with a particular role, and relying on them was based on the perception of their historical occupational niche and on the application of the notion of trust in trade to production itself. In this way a coalescence of interest was created between Britain and Zionism, in which Palestine was serving the needs of the war by replacing paralyzed Belgium, and Britain was serving the economic foundations of the Jewish community in Palestine on the other.⁷

This cooperation was further reflected in the mutual understanding that all the imports of rough diamonds and the export of polished stones would be centralized and controlled. Furthermore, it was understood that the rough-diamond distribution mechanism of De Beers in London would be the sole supplier to Palestine, that all production of the polished product would be exported, mostly to the USA and India, and that all involved in the industry in Palestine would have to be certified and authorized to operate. Thus, in diversifying organizational traditions in the diamond industry of the Low Countries these instructions shaped the high degree of centralization of the manufacturers and employers organization – The Palestine Diamond Manufacturers' Association (PDMA).⁸ It determined Palestine's dependency on London, and seriously limited the freedom of individual action of the manufacturers who in turn were driven to save on labor costs.

No less formative was the decision that all work was to be centralized in the framework of a factory. Home work and familial induction systems – among the hall marks of the industry in pre-war

⁷ Government of Palestine. *Report of a Committee Appointed by Government to Examine the Question of Post-war Regulation of the Palestine Diamond Industry*, Jerusalem: Government Printing Press, 1946.

⁸ The Palestine Diamond Manufacturers' Association was established in 1940 and during the 1940s and 1950s was the leading organ of the diamond manufacturers in Mandate Palestine and Israel. See De Vries, 2010, *Op.cit.*, ch. 2.

Belgium – were barred, and the free movement of expert cutters and inductors between the workshops was equally restricted. These aspects of regimentation of the nascent industry and its mobilization for the war effort made the manufacturers' organization an extremely powerful cartel-like operation. It was selective in accepting new manufacturers, it controlled the wages paid, and it practically turned into an entrepreneurial community espousing a culture *mélange* of profit, nationalism and the fight against Fascism. Supervised from above by the British Government and strengthened by a common sense of capitalist purpose, the diamond industry could therefore well exploit the persistent American demand for polished stones and the absence of competition from the occupied Low Countries. However, the same factors also harbored the tensions that provoked – at least in Palestine's historical context – quite an unprecedented vibrant strike action.⁹

The swift take-off of the Palestine diamond industry during the war was related also to another key determinant of workplace regimentation that would influence strike activity. In contrast to tradition, Palestine asked De Beers to specialize in one type of stone - the small stone (or Sand). This also used to be Antwerp's specialty and it also catered to the need of the De Beers cartel to dispose of large reserves of such stones created by the paralysis of the Low Countries. The specialization in the small stone turned Palestine into one of the world's leading suppliers. Furthermore, in Amsterdam and Antwerp it took at least three years to apprentice a cutter, and apprenticeship usually covered all types of stones and all cutting and polishing skills. In Palestine the labor process was fragmented into a chain or conveyor system, in which the apprentice learned just one phase of the polishing process. "Taylorization" of production enabled the shortening of the learning process to six months and the quickening of the entry of the cutter to production and earning. This merging of capitalist efficiency with considerations of time and international competitiveness well fitted the thinking of Zionist economists who propounded the association between Theodor Herzl and Frederick Taylor, between a national home for the Jews and efficiency, a sort of "Zionization" of the labor process. It also attracted the attention of the diamond people in London, some of them Jewish Belgian exiles, who feared that Palestine's consequent specialization in small stones would not only surpass Belgium's pre-war supremacy, but practically hamper its post war recuperation. These fears added to the

⁹ De Vries, *Op.cit*, 2010, pp. 45-64 and 109-141.

tensions in which the strikes in the local diamond industry were contextualized.¹⁰

As employment relations in the diamond industry lent themselves to control and regulation, voluminous strike action seemed unlikely. From the establishment of the industry the PDMA selected the labor force and the workers were wholly dependent on the knowledge and experience of the expert work managers. While the manufacturers could little affect the exogenous sources of supply of raw diamonds, they could still discipline the workers and delimit the actions of their union representatives and the emissaries of the Histadrut in particular. Moreover, the manufacturers could build on the attraction of the industry for Palestine's youth who imagined the short training and the orientation of the industry on export as promising sources of income. The latter allowed the manufacturers to mold workers' loyalty to the workshops and limit the cost of labor that made diamond cutting worth it in the first place.¹¹

In reality, employment relations in the diamond industry turned extremely tumultuous, and as the intensity of strikes in the Jewish community and Mandate Palestine as a whole significantly increased during the war, they attracted the intense attention of the press and public opinion. After all, though the 4,500-5,000 diamond workers in the mid-1940s (in 33 workshops mostly in Netanya and Tel Aviv) were approximately 10% of the wage earners in Palestine, the number of workdays lost due to strikes in the diamond industry was two thirds of the entire workdays lost in strikes in Palestine. Moreover, despite the power of the diamond manufacturers, the strikes often destabilized the balance of power in the industry, cemented the legitimacy of strikes, and added to the image of unruliness the British authorities in Palestine increasingly came to hold of their creation.

Table 1. Strikes and Strikers in Mandate Palestine's Jewish Community and Diamond Industry, 1940–1944

¹⁰ De Vries, *Op.cit.*, 2010, pp. 94-101; Laureys, Eric. "De joodse diamantdiaspora en de versnippering van de Antwerpse diamanthandel en -nijverheid tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog," *Jaarboek van het Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie*, NIOD, 2003.

¹¹ Six organizations were present in the diamond factories. The largest was the Histadrut. The second was Histadrut Ha-Ovdim Ha-Leumit (National Workers Association), representing the Revisionist Movement. The third represented the religious Hapoel Hamizrachi. The fourth, Ha-Oved Ha-Leumi, represented the liberals while the fifth, Poaeli Agudat Israel represented the religious orthodox. The sixth represented the Communist Party and occasionally acted together with various splinter groups. During the war about half the diamond workforce was unaffiliated.

	Jewish Community		Diamond Industry		% Diamond Strikers in Jewish Community Strikers
	Strikes	Strikers	Strikes	Strikers	
1940	89	3,317	-	-	-
1941	71	4,185	2	1,400	33.45
1942	88	9,258	13	2,613	28.22
1943	123	15,220	43	5,017	32.96
1944	82	7,805	15	4,166	53.37

Sources: Etkin, Yeshayahu. "Sixty Years of Striking in Israel, 1921–1980," *MA thesis*, Tel Aviv University, 1982 (H); *Sikumim*, Statistical compilations by the Histadrut's department of statistics, 1946 (H).

Any explanation of the relatively high strike propensity of the Palestine diamond workers during the war must start by framing the relations that had evolved between the manufacturers and the workers as a social pact. On one side of the pact there was an intensely expanding stratum of workers. They were mostly young and eager to work in a venture that seemed much more attractive than other available jobs. They quickly became highly skilled workers, and in comparison to many others in Palestine's industrial workforce, their skill was rooted in tradition, knowhow, precision, and manual dexterity. On the other side of the pact were the diamond manufacturers, the providers of the economic opportunity and of the novel economic attraction that emerged during the war. The employment structure the manufacturers created, the "Taylorized" conveyor system of the cutting process and the mix of piecework and collective bargaining was conducive to high levels of efficiency and productivity. Long hours of work and high pressures on the immobilized body of the workers and on their penetrating eyes were coupled with an atmosphere of regimentation and recurring worries over dropping stones off the cutting tables or harming their inner qualities. These were balanced by relatively high wages protected by an all-industry collective agreement, a strong sense of workplace solidarity, and pride in skill and in the worldwide reputation of the quality of their work. The diamond workers therefore felt their commonality much more through the labor process and work experience than by organizational framework, union affiliation, and presence of union activists. This was often reflected in their deference to the manufacturers

and to allegiance to the workplaces, the basic ingredients of any such social pact.¹²

The diamond workers became strike prone much more because the social pact with the owners of the diamond factories was regularly under stress and often violated - and less because of traditions of militancy.¹³ After all, the legacy of strike action among diamond cutters and polishers in Amsterdam, Antwerp and New York was hardly of one of adversity and militancy. The radicalism of the cutters and polishers in the Low Countries expressed itself less through strike action and more in robust organization, in the attainment of improved pay and working conditions, through piecemeal organizational (and educational) action, and composed demonstration of power. What the widely known leaders of the diamond workers' unions in Belgium, the Netherlands, England and New York had in common was labor's reformism and gradualism.¹⁴ Much of their organizational energy in their respective countries was spent on attaining rapprochement with the diamond manufacturers and employers and less on fighting them. This was what defined them as a sort of "labor aristocracy", a term usually connoting highly skilled jobs, craft workers and restrained militancy. The respect of the employers for the leaders of the diamond workers and to their organizations (e.g. the diamond workers union in the Netherlands and Belgium or the Protective Union of Diamond Workers in the US) testified not only to the sense of occupational commonality, but also to the need to maintain industrial peace and wide areas of consent.¹⁵

It is difficult to substantiate why these non-radical legacies found less expression in Palestine, where so many of the traditions of the industry kept on feeding the daily life in the diamond workshops of Tel Aviv and Netanya. Perhaps it was due to the fact that those arrived in Palestine were diamond experts and not workers or union activists, and therefore the

¹² Editorial, "Palestine Industry in Light of the Diamond Workers' Strike", *Palestine Illustrated*, 16 December 1943; Horowitz, S., J.L. Fletcher, D. Anderson, *Report of the Diamond Control Sub-Committee, Confidential Report*, 21 June 1944, Central Zionist Archive, S40/269/1.

¹³ On the concept of violation of social pact see Bonnell, Victoria E. *Roots of Rebellion: Workers' Politics and Organizations in St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1900-1914*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983, pp.1-18.

¹⁴ Among the leaders were Henri Polak and Piet van Muyden of the Algemene Nederlandse Diamantbewerker Bond; V. Daems and Frans Schoeters of the Algemene Diamantbewerkerbond van België, William Jacobs of the British diamond workers' union and Meyer Andries at the Diamond Workers' Protective Union of America.

¹⁵ Polak, Henri. *A Short History of the Diamond Cutting Industry*. London: The Diamond Workers Section Committee of the Society of Goldsmiths, 1950; Jacobs, William. "History of the Organized British Diamond Workers," *Ibid.*, pp. 37-43.

continuity of labor traditions of collective action was disrupted. It could have been also affected by the PDMA's insistence on not allowing the Histadrut – the Jewish General Federation of Labor, evidently a national oriented non-radical organization – to become the hegemonic representative of the workers and overshadow all other minority unions. Whatever the reasons, the diamond manufacturers in Palestine, some of them eager to reproduce the Belgian model of employment relations, repeatedly bemoaned the failure of the Low Countries' legacy of restraint to take root.¹⁶

In the manufacturers' perception, the social pact practiced in their factories was under constant threat because of their high financial exposure. On the one hand, they were dependent on the regular supply of rough stones arriving from Africa and distributed in London. The high irregularity of supply was a corollary of the war conditions but also of the distributive policies of De Beers, themselves influenced by the diamond commodity chain, the fluctuations in demand for raw materials, and by British policy towards the Belgian pressure to contain the expansion of the new cutting centers outside Europe. The irregularity of stone supply could be expressed in the varying size of stones sent for cutting in Palestine, but mainly in the constant thirst of the factories for more materials. On the other hand, the reserves the manufacturers kept were under a constant threat because of overproduction, low replenishment, or uneven distribution by the PDMA in Palestine itself of the rough diamonds to the individual factories. Each manufacturer in Netanya and Tel Aviv was therefore inclined to hoard reserves to preempt irregularity.¹⁷

Furthermore, for his guarantee the manufacturer had to cut his labor costs. He could do that by decreasing the distribution of stones to the workers and the number of apprentices in his factory, or simply by tampering with workers' pay. All these the manufacturer could employ to a certain limit. He had to be careful not to harm the workforce he took so much care to cultivate and on whose trust and loyalty he depended. He had also to take into consideration the collective agreement the PDMA signed on his behalf, which obliged the manufacturers to guarantee workers' pay when supply of stones decreased or when the factory had to temporarily

¹⁶ Jerusalem Labor Council. "The Diamond Workers and their Union", *The Histadrut in Jerusalem 1942–1944*. Jerusalem: Histadrut, 1944, pp. 92–94 (H). On diamond workers' unionization see Van Tijn, Theo. "A Contribution to the Scientific Study of the History of Trade Unions," *International Review of Social History*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1976, pp. 214–215; Bloemgarten, Salvador. *Henri Polak sociaal democraat 1868–1943*, Den Haag: 1996, chapters 7 and 10.

¹⁷ Paltin, Naftali. "Relations between the Manager and the Workers," *Hayahalom*, [Bulletin of the diamond industry in Palestine], vol. 2, no. 9, 1945, p. 9 (H).

close. The manufacturers often preferred not to harm their workers and instead digressed from the PDMA's pay policies and collective agreements with the unions. In more extreme cases, the manufacturers chose to lock out the factory and drastically decrease activity and renewing it again when profit levels allowed. All in all, therefore, the manufacturer was incessantly calculating the extent of his exposure to his sales' levels in the US, to the arrival of rough diamonds from Africa to Europe, to London's stones' distribution policy, and finally to the PDMA's collective pay directives. His autonomy and freedom of action, so cherished by all the liberal-oriented diamond manufacturers, were therefore limited, and on encountering these limits he would opt to cut labor costs, otherwise it would not be profitable for him to continue. This was a permanent source of pressure on relations with the workers and it was often enhanced by the manufacturers and the PDMA who exaggerated the extent of these dangers to the press.¹⁸

In this way, the world of booming diamond production in Palestine unraveled itself not only as an attractive source of income, occupational attainment, and mobility for the young Jewish diamond workers. It was also unstable, fluctuating, and laden with threats to shatter the system of trust and interest they shared with the manufacturers, the experts that taught them their skills, and the workplace that provided them with a sense of social order and economic future. The backing that could have been provided to them from outside by a single solid union organization was frail. Furthermore, the PDMA's successful splintering of labor organization in the factories discouraged the traditional restraining barriers usually placed by the labor movement on the social unrest of the urban workers.¹⁹

The age of the diamond workers was indeed a crucial factor in explaining their propensity to strike. Upon entry to apprenticeship at a young age, the workers expected to start earning after three months. Despite the regimentation and arduous conditions of the work, they enjoyed the benefits that piecework accrued to them. Willingness to work for hours on end, the lack of familial commitment (other than to parents whom they could quickly provide for), and flexibility in their adaptation to changes in supplies and in sizes of stones all made them also susceptible to spontaneous action. They could be children of members of one of the four or five unions, but were hardly satisfied with the collective agreement in the industry or paid little respect to the unions' restraining attempts. For the

¹⁸ Rothblum, David. "Wish Them Godspeed!," *Dapei Hamenahel*, [Bulletin of the managers in the diamond industry in Palestine], no. 1, 1944, pp. 6-7 (H).

¹⁹ *Hasapir* [Bulletin of a diamond factory in Jerusalem], 1943 (H); *Hatzohar* [Bulletin of diamond workers in Jerusalem], 1943 (H).

union organizers in the labor movement they seemed an unruly lot, wholly dedicated to work and uneasily recruited to union work, distant from values of loyalty to a labor movement and much more prone to organizational independence than to traditional union frameworks.²⁰

The Labor Department of the Palestine government was aware of these characteristics.²¹ In the department's logic the propensity of the diamond workers to strike was related to the large number of unions in Palestine, and to the effect of the expansion of the industry on the entry of large numbers of unaffiliated workers. These explanations may have had a ring of truth to them, but they ignored the relation between the entry of the unorganized and the PDMA's worker-selection policy. Furthermore, they overlooked the relation between the great number of unorganized and the fact that in times of low unemployment, workers affiliated with the labor movement could have preferred not to enter the diamond industry because they disliked its characteristics (exposure to fluctuations in supply, long working hours, the instability of the employers, etc.) despite the relatively higher pay rewards.

Clearly the multiplicity of strikes was related to the breakdown of negotiations on collective agreements, to the workers' realizations of the increasing prosperity of the industry, and to their desire to have a share in it. The young diamond workers interpreted the recurrent intermissions of supplies and consequent changes in work schedules as a taken-for-granted feature of their work experience that turned work stoppages into routine. Manufacturers who wished to hoard rough stones in reserve instead of distributing them for cutting were quickly blamed for breaching their commitments to the apprentices and workers. Fluctuations in supply, and intermittent attempts to cut labor costs and to empty collective agreements of their original contents portrayed the manufacturers as unwilling to share their high profits from the industry. The workers' pride in acquiring a craft, in their technological adaptability and in the culture of the skill they cultivated, deeply affected this portrayal.²²

The impact of the propensity of the diamond workers to strike and of the weakness of the unions to restrain strike action was hardly confined to

²⁰ Gurevich, David. *Workers' Wages in the Jewish Diamond-Polishing Industry in Palestine in 1944*, Jerusalem: Department of Statistics of the Jewish Agency, 1945 (H).

²¹ The department was established in 1940 and by 1942 formulated an anti-strike ordinance. However it lacked teeth as shown by wartime strike action among industrial workers and diamond workers in particular.

²² Government of Palestine, Op. cit.

employment relations.²³ First, the strikes added to the anxiety of the manufacturers during the war largely caused by the instable supply of raw material from London. The latter contrasted to the image that the PDMA wished to market (in particular to the British authorities and the Diamond Syndicate) of a viable industry and at the service of the war effort and the empire. This was true with regard to the general strikes in the diamond industry, and it was further made explicit in the wake of the general strike in diamonds in 1944 that lasted for ten weeks and turned into one of the largest and intransigent strikes in the history of Mandate Palestine.

Table 2. General Strikes in Mandate Palestine's Diamond Industry, 1941-1946

	Workers Affected	Working Days Lost	Average Intensity (Days lost per Striker)
1942	2,600	82,000	32
1943	2,000	24,000	12
1944	3,250	182,000	56
1946	4,320	56,000	13

Source: Histadrut. *The Diamond Worker in Palestine*, Tel Aviv: Histadrut, 1946.

Second, the recurrent strikes exposed the weakness of the Palestine government and the PDMA to fully control the industry, and thus added to the threats posed by the movement of experts between the factories and by the persistence of home work. Third, the strikes forced the manufacturers to take into account the chronic industrial unrest in their business-expansion strategies. This was clearly seen in their willingness to attenuate the objection to the presence of the labor organizations and – quite without precedent in Mandate Palestine - to a branch-wide collective agreement.²⁴

The strikes had a deeper effect on labor organization, in particular on the presence of the Histadrut. To the PDMA's attempts to prevent a meaningful presence of workers' representation in the labor process, the strikes added a from-below challenge to the organizations themselves. Naturally this resulted in a growing effort to widen union influence over workers and in a concerted action by the Histadrut to unite the organizations under its umbrella and to discipline the workers through the cultivation of loyal workshop workers' committees. Nevertheless, the strikes emphasized

²³ For the strikes see De Vries 2010, Op. cit., chapter 5.

²⁴ Minutes of the PDMA's executive and labor committee, 8 December and 14 December 1943, Netanya city archive, G/67/389; *Hamashkif* [Daily of the Revisionist movement], 9 December 1943 [H]; PDMA's proposals, 20 December 1943, Labor Movement Archive, Lavon Institute (Tel Aviv), LA/IV-250-49-175-b; "2-Month Diamond Strike May End Today", *Palestine Post*, 17 May 1944.

the partial effectiveness of these attempts, in particular among the diamond workers who were affiliated with Communist party or the right-wing Revisionists. It thus made the Histadrut recognize the limits of its hegemony in the industrial sector in the Jewish community, and of its capacity to reach consensus with private capital which so deeply depended on external resources and colonial politics.²⁵

The sense of a limited power produced among the union ideologues negative images that coupled the diamond workers with all the wrongs of capitalism and unorganized labor. Focusing on the "pathology" of workers' attraction to personal profit and defiance of mainstream organization, the images reproduced the traditional arsenal of social hatred that since the 1920s Zionist-Socialism cultivated against capital on the one hand and unaffiliated workers on the other. The imagery never excluded a national-oriented reasoning of Labor's need to cooperate with Jewish industrialists and capitalists; neither did it weaken the quest of the organized labor movement to widen its bases by tempting those objecting to organization. Uncontrolled militancy in the diamond industry signified for the Histadrut union activists that its ambivalent language towards both capital and the unorganized remained ineffective. The militancy testified to the wider, menacing problem that the Histadrut was too weak to overcome workers whose working conditions and power in the workplace was improved by the wartime boom, and who consequently defied Labor's authority and collective interests. The tactics used by the leadership of the Histadrut and Mapai (labor's dominant political party) to contain these better-off workers could not work in the diamond industry because of the piecework character of the labor process and because the PDMA and the manufacturers took care to keep workers' representation at bay. The Histadrut had nothing left but to recognize the failure of its organizational efforts, to divert its best forces to other industries, and to hope that relations with the industry and its workers after the war would correspond to the presence of organized labor common before the war.²⁶

²⁵ Avniel, Binyamin. "The Role of the Manager in Labor Relations," *Hayahalom*, no. 7, 1944, pp. 3-4 (H); PDMA, Minutes, 13 September 1945, Netanya City Archive, G/99/744; Report by the PDMA's labor department, May 1946, NCA, G/99/744(H); Rosen, Op. Cit.; Etkin, Op. Cit., pp. 215-268 (H).

²⁶ Y. L. "Diamonds," *Hapoel Hatsair* [Periodical of Hapoel Hatsair Zionist-Socialist Party], 25 June 1942 (H); Kalisher, Arieh. "The Diamond Workers in their Strike," *Misgav* [Bulletin of the Histadrut-affiliated diamond workers in Palestine], no. 7, 1944, pp. 9-10 (H); De Vries, David, "British Rule and Arab-Jewish Coalescence of Interest: The 1946 Civil Servants Strike in Palestine," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2004, pp. 613-638.

The impact was, however, wider. As a part of a state-building project, the labor movement wished to cement the economic autonomy of the Jewish community and the preference in the workplaces of Jewish immigrants and workers over Arab workers. Many labor disputes and strikes against Jewish employers in agriculture, construction, and industry revolved around that issue. Moreover, many improvement disputes were no less immersed in Zionist terminology: the employers claiming the workers were disrupting their national-capitalist operation, while labor arguing that the Jewish capital and employers were more capitalist than Zionist. The Zionization of the terminology of capital-labor negotiation and of collective action did not mean that class issues were absent. Rather, they were overshadowed by an agenda that argued for the primacy of the politics and the hegemony of the Zionist-oriented Histadrut in the labor market: in providing the employers with a labor force, in participating in fixing wages, and in regulating the workforce. In the latter part of the Mandate period, contestation in the workplaces became increasingly class-based. The Zionist agenda continued to influence the segmentation of the economy and the organizational segregation of the workforce. However, when the diamond workforce was created in the early stages of World War II and during the ensuing booming of the economy, the balance was already tipping away from the national politics of the labor market toward the social politics of relations between capital and labor.²⁷ The diamond workers became the leading force in this gradual veering from national-segregationist aspects of strike action to economic and social ones. For an industry and a workforce hardly existing before the war and representing just one type of manufacturing, such levels of conflict – an average of 34 percent of the strikers among Palestine's Jews – were remarkable. Even more significant was the fact that the diamond industry was Jewish-only, and that from the start it did not experience the labor market competition between Arabs and Jews that was so influential in social and employment relations in the Jewish community as a whole.²⁸

While the effects of the strikes on the diamond manufacturers and on organized labor were direct, militancy had another, less blatant consequence. The close association in Palestine between the instability of

²⁷ Shalev, Michael. *Labor and the Political Economy in Israel*, Oxford: 1992, pp.137–144 and 166–172.

²⁸ On the national agenda see De Vries, David. "Drawing the Repertoire of Collective Action: Labor Zionism and Strikes in 1920s Palestine," *Middle Eastern Studies* vol. 38, no. 3, 2002, pp. 93–122. On communists' approach see Gozansky, Tamar (Ed.). *'Arise, ye Workers from your Slumber': Life and Collected Works of Eliahu Gozansky*, Haifa: Pardes, 2009 (H). pp. 45-98.

external supply of rough stones and local industrial unrest made local organizers of diamond workers aware of a similar association in the African diamond mines between the regulated mining and the working conditions of the South African, Belgian Congolese and Sierra Leone miners. As the diamond industry never knew a supranational workers' organization (similar to the Amsterdam-based Universal Alliance of Diamond Workers, which referred to cutters and polishers) this awareness never expressed itself in an organized international solidarity. However, the fact that the stones polished in the various centers originated in those African mines provided a sense of "imperial connectivity" that the war strengthened through the increasing importance of noncombatant regions for international politics. The effect of stone supply on the multiplicity of strikes made this connectivity another aspect of an imperial social formation that tied through the diamond commodity chain the experiences of diamond miners in Africa to those of the cutters in Palestine. This was partly reflected in the growing awareness by the owners of the diamond factories and the PDMA itself of information on the tribulations of the diamond industry in other parts of the globe. It was also expressed by the diamond cutters in Palestine who saw that apart from their participation in the Zionist state-building project, they were also part of an empire, of a colonial network, and of an international war effort that crossed national borders. In the last year of the world war, this awareness of the relations between the postwar international arrangements, the plans for economic development, and their potential influence on the international division of labor in the diamond industry deepened.²⁹

²⁹ On the atmosphere of an international strike wave see "Wage Cut for Diamond Cutters," *Palestine Post*, 26 June 1942; Inspector of Labor for the Southern Region to the Secretary of the Jaffa-Tel Aviv Labor Council, 1 May 1943, LA/IV-250-72-1-335; see also Alexander, Peter. *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid: Labor and Politics in South Africa 1939-1948*. Oxford: James Currey, 2000, pp. 27 and 129; for a wider context see Atleson, James B. *Labor and the Wartime State: Labor Relations and Law during World War II*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998.