



PALESTINIAN WOMEN DEVELOP THEIR STRUGGLE

Background

Throughout her recent history (20th century), Palestinian women have actively participated in the struggle against colonialism and exploitation. During the period 1917-1948 they participated in the movement against British imperialism and Zionist colonization. As early as 1920, they participated in the first revolt against British rule and formed a part of a delegation to the British Commissioner to demand the annulment of the Balfour declaration, and to protest against the torture of prisoners. In 1929 Palestinian women held their first conference in Jerusalem and called for the continuation of armed struggle. This call was expressed through physical participation in the struggle. They took part in active fighting, smuggling weapons, nursing the wounded, and hiding the fighters. Some of them even martyred at this early stage. Women also took part in civil rights activities through demonstrations and petitions, protested against heavy sentences given by the British to Palestinian militants as they did when the leaders of the 1929 strikes were sentenced to death by hanging.

As the resistance against imperialism and Zionism reached its climax in 1936, and as violence increased women played a more prominent role especially through the April-October strike of that year. They boycotted Zionist and foreign products, organized huge demonstrations against British policy

and continued to actively participate in the various fields of the struggle. As the conflict intensified in 1947, women started having specific tasks such as digging shelters, building fortifications, buying and transporting arms, feeding the fighters and nursing the wounded. During this period, a secret women's organization stemmed up thus, increasing women's participation in military activities. Up to this stage of the struggle, women's activities were only spontaneous and came as a direct result to the enemy's policies. The question of women's participation in the resistance activities was not tackled by the Palestinian national movement and within the political parties there were no programs aiming at involving women on the ideological level.

During the period 1948-1967 and after the establishment of the state of Israel and the disposition and dispersion of the Palestinian people and the birth of the «refugee» problem, Palestinian women struggled to preserve their Palestinian identity and resisted all attempts to liquidate the Palestinian cause. The emergence of new political parties influenced the society and women had the chance to take part in every political activity aiming at liberating Palestine. They were in the forefront of every fight, demonstrating against imperialist plans aiming at consolidating the occupation, division and backwardness of the Arab World. But in spite

of all this, the extent of women's participation in the national and social struggles remained limited due, amongst other reasons, to the lack of a program that deals with the concept of their liberation.

The economic hardships to which the Palestinians were subjected to, helped women to join the labour force. In spite of all the old traditions, social values and, customs, Palestinian women started going out to work in increasing numbers. Need was the strongest drive, and they had to accept heavy manual jobs for absurd wages. But still, women were not liberated from the prevailing social conditions although they acquired some of the advantages inherent to economic independence and new possibilities were opened for them through participating in political work.

In 1950, an Arab Palestinian Women's Union (APWU) was established in Lebanon as a continuation to the union which was first established in Palestine in 1929. Its aims were «philanthropic, constructive and social». The union had several activities which were mainly charitable, informative, and taking part in Arab and international conferences. In 1955 it joined the International Women's Union after Israel's membership was dropped. The involvement of the union in pure women's issues was limited and it never reached the level of politicization. This was mainly due to the nature and background of the

leadership elements.

In 1965, the General Union of Palestinian Women was founded and held its first congress in Jerusalem. Soon it became the sole legal representative of Palestinian women. The main difference between the APWU and GUPW was that the first was only a philanthropic society while the other was a popular organization. Every Palestinian woman who believes in revolutionary armed struggle as the only mean for liberating Palestine was eligible for membership. The Union was organized in a manner which gave the General Secretariat the task of coordinating the union's various activities in the camps which were carried out by its different branches. The most important aim of the Union was to organize women's capabilities and put them in the service of the revolution. It also aimed at putting into practice the programs that would help push forward women's struggle for liberation on social and economic bases. Throughout its history, the GUPW reflected the agony of the Palestinians and their suffering since 1948. In 1966, the GUPW was banned in Jordan. Its offices were closed and properties confiscated.

As a result, the General Secretariat's headquarters moved to Cairo. It reopened again in Amman in 1969 only to be closed again in 1970 as a result of the September 1970 clashes. The Palestinian revolution has always stressed that the way to liberation was through a people's war of long duration and for this aim a wide mass base for the Union was needed. The development and training of cadres and the need for an organized strict union were emphasized. The GUPW took a new step, initiating several new activities such as civil defence and training camps. Previously, and in spite of the very difficult conditions, the Union's branches had conducted productive activities in the social and political fields, by campaigning against illiteracy, opening schools for children, conducting first aid and health programs, and teaching and marketing handicrafts. It also conducted programs aiming at raising the political awareness amongst women, and programs to preserve the Palestinian culture. The main efforts were directed towards the camps and the occupied territories.

THE SECOND CONGRESS OF GUPW

What had been left of the General Secretariat managed to form a preparatory committee in order

to prepare for a new General Congress. By now, new branches of the union have been established in those countries where Palestinians were present in large numbers mainly in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and Kuwait. The political situation in the Occupied territories and Jordan made it, practically, impossible to establish official branches of the Union there. Thus, after nine years since its First Congress, the GUPW was able to hold its Second Congress on August 5th-10th, 1974 in Lebanon. Representatives of the different branches in the Arab countries as well as representatives of Palestinian women in the occupied territories and Jordan. The latter were allocated 25 seats by the General Secretariat — the largest representation in the congress. Seventy-four delegates attended the congress, plus a number of observers from the Union's branches, from Arab and Palestinian organizations and representatives of women's unions in the socialist countries and liberation movements at Arab and world levels. Representatives of Palestine solidarity committees in Europe also attended. A special program was organized for the foreign delegates in order to

provisional program which would be able to accommodate itself with the factors of the political solution. The main point in their program was the acceptance of a «Palestinian state» in the West Bank and Gaza, in the case of the «receding of the occupation» as a result of the expected peace talks.

All the discussions in the different committees of the Congress were reflections of these two political lines. On the second day, the members of the different committees were elected. These were: Political, Internal Rules, Social and Cultural, Financial, Information, and Foreign Relations Committees. They came out with several recommendations which were discussed by the Congress. The Internal Rules were adopted.

The main recommendations were to orient the Union's activities towards the refugee camps, to prepare new cadres from among them; to politicize the activities of the Union; to raise the political, social and cultural status of the Palestinian women and to provide her with military training. There were also recommendations that aimed to make the Union financially self dependent through the estab-

popular armed struggle and the establishment of the democratic society as part of the unified Arab democratic society.» It also stressed «the belief of the Union that these aims cannot be achieved except through a long-term popular war, in which all the Palestinian and Arab masses would participate...» «And through this understanding, the Union considers the Palestinian question as the central issue for the Arab nation, and the Palestinian revolution as part of the world liberation movement whose enemies are world imperialism headed by the United States, Zionism and Arab reaction.» The report also mentioned the October war and stressed its positive results such as «proving the capabilities of the Arab fighter, his consistency and his ability to use modern war machinery,» and «shaking and destroying the legendary myth of the 'undefeatable' enemy with the Arab will and determination to fight.» It also said that «the crossing of the Canal was accompanied by a new American attack on the Arab area, the results of which were cease-fire, disengagement of troops and containment of the masses' achievements obtained through their na-

that the GUPW, as an essential base of the Palestinian revolution, «struggles to abort all liquidationist settlements and stresses the line of the revolution which rejects peace, recognition and negotiations with the enemy.» It said that the Egyptian-Jordanian communique represented a deviation from the resolutions of the Algeria summit, that it called for the division of the Palestinian people, the ending of its personality and the oppression of its national identity which were the guarantee for its revolution and its armed struggle, and that it accepted the liquidationist «United Arab Kingdom» plan.

The report stressed that the continuation of the revolution meant «struggling for a revolutionary base on any land that could be liberated from the enemy, in order to forward and to continue the revolution.» It emphasized that the achievement of the fighting revolutionary people's authority can only come as a result of armed struggle. It rejected that «the price of the authority be the participation in negotiations with the enemy, conceding the existence of the Zionist occupation on any part of Palestine, the acceptance of the hiring

THROUGH PROGRESSIVE REVOLUTIONARY RESOLUTIONS

orientate them with the different activities of the Union in the refugee camps and the centers of the revolution in Lebanon.

The Congress opened at the UNESCO hall with a word by the General Secretary of the GUPW, followed by a speech by Abu Maher, the representative of the Mass Organization Department of the PLO. The political and activities reports of the General Secretariat were read, followed by fraternal greetings of the guest delegates who expressed their solidarity with the Palestinian revolution and the struggle of Palestinian women. The closed meetings of the congress began in Souk-El-Gharb on the 7th of August, by discussing the reports of the General Secretariat. The political report took most of the discussions since two different political lines appeared from the start of the congress. The first one, to which most of the delegates adhered to, believed in and stressed on the continuation of armed struggle and rejected any political solution, on the basis that it could not be but a liquidationist one. Delegates who identified with this political line stressed the need to keep the Union a true base for the masses, expressing the wishes of the people it represented. The few delegates who identified with the second political line referred to the need to take into consideration the new changing factors that came about as a result of the October war, and the need of the revolution to adopt a

lishment of special projects; that relations with women in other Arab countries should be strengthened; that kindergartens should be established, anti-illiteracy campaigns conducted and technical schools established, thus giving the woman the chance to work and become active.

The most important document that was issued by the Congress was the political report. It underlined the position of the General Union of Palestine Women (GUPW) towards the important events in the Arab countries; being the revolutionary stand, it was victorious by an overwhelming majority. It stressed the commitment of the Union to the aims of the Palestinian revolution in «the liberation of all the Palestinian national soil through

tional struggle.» «U.S. imperialism, Zionism and the puppet Arab reactionary forces were successful in exploiting the Arab victory for their own interests and enabled the Zionist enemy to rearm itself to wage a new war... thus starting to impose compromises essentially aimed at liquidating our cause and our will for armed struggle.»

The report continued by strongly condemning the joint Egyptian-Jordanian communique. It said that it «came to emphasize the capitulationist road official Arab policy has adopted.» «Imperialism will not stop for even a moment from conspiring against our Palestinian people, its cause and its armed revolution.» It also emphasized that the communique represented only one of the signs in this conspiracy and

Jordanian regime's presence on any part of the homeland, the submission to any official Arab or international authority, the division of the Palestinian people or the containment of the Palestinian revolutionary struggle.»

The communique ended by mentioning the necessary steps needed to face the critical present situation. These are: to depend essentially on the subjective capabilities of the resistance; the unity of the revolution to support the Jordanian-Palestinian front, the military struggle against the hiring regime in Jordan; the escalation of the armed, political and mass struggle in the occupied territories; to increase the cooperation with all sectors of the Arab liberation movement, and to widely develop the relations with the Socialist and non-aligned countries and with the national liberation movements of the world.

In the end, we can say that through her Congress the Palestinian woman expressed a high level of awareness regarding her responsibilities in the revolution. Also, she waged a firm struggle to preserve the independence of her Union in spite of various pressures. The comradesly relationships that prevailed during the Congress overshadowed the narrow mindedness that usually limits the efficiency of many Union's members.

