

consideration to only a fraction of the teachers' grievances. Then, on November 2nd, the teachers suspended the strike after reviewing the results of their meeting with the Interior Minister. They evaluated the strike as very positive in terms of the unity exhibited between public and private school teachers. Concerning their demands, they had received pledges for wage increases, payment of transportation costs, medical benefits and amendment of the regulations concerning dismissal. However, the teachers' statement called for vigilance as these were only promises. December 12th was set as the date for possible resumption of the strike, if concrete results were not forthcoming.

GENERAL STRIKE

Literally all of Lebanon ground to a halt on November 5th, in the long-heralded general strike. Though food shops began limited openings over the next few days, major economic institutions, including the country's international airport and harbor, remained closed for five days. The fifth day of the strike, 100,000 Lebanese converged for a three-hour demonstration in Beirut - the biggest anti-inflation manifestation ever. At the same time, there were large demonstrations in Sidon, Tripoli, Tyre and the Bekaa. Shouting «No to hunger, No to the war», people from East and West Beirut met at the city's divided center. West Beirut residents clambered over civil war embankments to join demonstrators on the other side.

The same evening, the General Labor Confederation suspended the strike on the grounds that the government had pledged to set up a committee to study ways of strengthening the Lebanese pound (which had most recently plunged to 700 to the dollar). While the suspension elicited some surprise since the strike had been intended to last longer, this reflected the realities of such struggle in the current Lebanese situation where there is no single power or body competent to fulfill the masses' demands. As a result of the General Labor Confederation's meetings with various officials, some things were agreed upon: a sliding wage index; monitoring of school fees by the Education Ministry so that these cannot be manipulated by school owners; implementation of the law for importing medicine and establishing a fund to insure reasonable prices for medicine; allocating £1.5 billion to the Housing Bank for loans to citizens; and the expansion of the joint transportation network. Obviously, while useful, these measures do not constitute a solution to the crisis. Efforts to stabilize the Lebanese pound can take a long time to implement even if agreed upon. Even this is doubtful, for real solutions would infringe on long-established traditions of laissez-faire and bank secrecy.

The progressive labor leader, Elias Haber, dealt with some of these problems while evaluating the general strike in an interview with *Al Nida* newspaper, November 15th: «The

desired results... were not achieved. We say that economic, social and political reform is needed, but to safeguard working class unity, we decided to suspend the strike. Controlling the currency is very important in the current situation, and it takes a long time to agree on means for control. As a union, we had to suspend and wait... like a warrior pausing to gather strength to continue the battle.» Haber pointed to the mass movement as the reserve force for further struggle if solutions to the social problems are obstructed. He added, «The unachieved currency control is closely linked to national dialogue and reconciliation without which no serious measures can be enacted.»

Haber explained that some forces within the trade union movement were aware that to really make an impact, the political ceiling of the struggle should be raised. This would lead to continuing the general strike until ousting the president and current government, and forming a transitional government, with the participation of the trade unions, to monitor the process of reform. However, other forces were afraid of the risks involved in continuing the strike; some were afraid of unleashing the masses' full capacities, or were subject to pressure from the political forces dominating certain areas. This prevented the «continuation of the strike which could have changed things in a way that would have positively impacted on Lebanon's stability, unity and reform.» In view of the lack of consensus, the strike was suspended, until the upcoming 3rd National Union Conference which will outline the future actions of the labor movement.

Whether it is resumed or not, the importance of the general strike is the fact of its being the largest mass manifestation in Lebanon's post-independence history. As such, it accurately reflected the depth of the socio-economic crisis, bringing together, for the first time, people on both sides of the political and confessional divide. It stands as a milestone to be carefully evaluated by the progressive forces in planning any future popular action.

August demonstration at the Central Bank: «We want to eat, we want to live.»



dateline: November 20th.