

of the occupation would spell its economic doom. The small shopkeepers, on the other hand, market mainly local products, and profit much less than the agents of Israeli goods.

In view of the Israeli policy of economic subordination of the 1967 occupied territories, some merchant strata have suffered under the occupation which has restricted local industry and trade. Particularly onerous are high, arbitrary taxes on the merchants' sales. In the early eighties, with the Israeli economic crisis, this became more obvious. Taxes were collected from West Bank merchants in stable Jordanian dinars, to the advantage of the Israeli treasury at a time when the shekel was suffering heavy devaluation. The 1984 report of the 'civil' administration said that the occupied territories were paying for themselves with taxes collected from the local population. The report added that taxes increased by 39% in real terms in 1984. This situation led to a series of protests by merchants in recent years.

The merchants' interests are also harmed by restrictions and high tariffs on imports and exports. Goods cannot be exported or imported without a special permit from the military government. All imports must be via the Israeli Trade and Industry Ministry. Trade between the West Bank and Gaza Strip is prohibited, as is marketing the goods of the occupied territories in 'Israel'.

The commercial strike, which has been one of the most constant factors of the uprising, since it began in December, showed that the Palestinian merchants can no longer bear the national oppression of the occupation. They have become more aware of the fact that economic conditions will continue to deteriorate as long as the occupation persists, especially with the Israeli policy of duri g the burden of its own economic crises on the 1967 occupied territories. In the long run, it is in the interests of this strata, or at least part of it, to join in the struggle for an independent Palestinian state, for this is a prerequisite for a national market. Under the impact of the uprising, Palestinian merchants displayed their readiness to forgo immediate economic gains to join in the popular struggle. Their decision was a blow not only to the Israeli occupiers, but also to the Jordanian regime which has counted on big merchants as the class base for its own plans to absorb the West Bank or administer it jointly with the Israelis.

Though closing shops has often been a part of popular protest over the twenty years of occupation, such strikes have been of a few days duration and largely a symbolic protest. In the current uprising, however, the commercial strike has been pivotal. It concretely demonstrates that the situation is not normal, there is no business as usual, the people won't deal with the occupation.

The occupation forces quite rightly took the commercial strike as a major challenge. In the initial period, great efforts were expended by Israeli troops to force shops to reopen. Meanwhile, pro-Israeli media insinuated that the merchants only stayed closed under threat from «radical forces». The continuation of the uprising changed all this. It became clear that the merchants closed because this was their contribution to the uprising. In some periods, the soldiers stopped trying to enforce reopening because this was simply impossible. Meanwhile, the strike began to effect the Israeli economy by lost sales and taxes. It became intertwined with the popular decision to boycott Israeli goods whenever possible. Israeli Minister of Trade and Industry Ariel Sharon has said that there was a huge decrease in the level of trade due to the Palestinian boycott of Israeli goods. This boycott has at the same time

harmed the interests of those brokers who lived exclusively off peddling Israeli goods, perhaps signalling a reshuffling within the merchant class itself, in favor of smaller merchants whose interests lie with the local Palestinian market.

The commercial strike has also served as a focal point of the institutionalized uprising - the new routine of daily life followed by the Palestinians under occupation in their effort to move towards total civil disobedience. In line with the directives of the United National Leadership, the Palestinians began to decide when the shops would open in order that the people could get necessities. In Gaza, the merchants formed a committee to set the price of goods and prevent anyone from raising prices.

Phyllis Bennis, Middle East correspondent for the progressive US biweekly *Frontline*, described the situation after visiting occupied Palestine the first week of April: «The commercial strike has become a systematic way of life throughout the West Bank, Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem - everywhere. Shops are open from 9 to 12 noon, and then they close. You don't hear shopkeepers speculating about losing money, or consumers wanting to do their shopping in the afternoon. People have made the necessary adjustments... This shows that the calls issued by the United National Leadership of the Uprising are grounded in the needs and aspirations of the masses. The leadership has a level of maturity whereby it doesn't ask people to make an unbearable level of sacrifice forever. When there are general strikes, everything shuts down, but in the main, there are exemptions that were worked out collectively - bakeries, since bread is the basic staple; pharmacies, because of the urgent need for medicine; and taxi drivers are allowed to work. In some villages, stores might be open all day, but these are very small villages where people need to get goods at a different time than the one designated, because they are working in the fields...»

«Then there is the Israeli response - for example, in Ramallah, the army announced that the shops would not be allowed to open in the morning and must open in the afternoon. The merchants said no, they would not open in the afternoon. So the soldiers said, fine, but you will not open in the morning. So the merchants said they would not open at all... So from 9 to 12, the time the shops would be open, the streets are filled with people, talking and passing the word about what's going on, and the stores stay shut. At 12 noon when, under the conditions of the strike, the shops would close, the people go home, the way they do in the rest of the territories.»

The Israeli determination to break the strike has been exhibited time and time again. According to Israeli radio on April 27th, 22 orders governing commercial operations have been issued to this end. In the last week of April, the occupation forces mounted a major offensive in Jerusalem to reopen the shops. Fourteen Palestinian merchants who refused were detained and are now facing trial and extended imprisonment. Still, the commercial strike reigns.

On May 1st this year, the Palestinian working class is waging a battle in defense of Palestinian national rights, alongside all the classes and strata that have interests in ending the occupation and achieving liberation. The uprising has showed the breadth of the class alliance involved in the Palestinian struggle, as merchants and peasants have taken an active role. Also landlords have displayed their national solidarity by refraining from collecting rents. All sectors are involved: Women and students are also on the forefront, along with all the youth, ▶