

# Hunger Strikes

The hunger strikes waged by Palestinian prisoners in Zionist jails from late February until April 5th, exhibited a high degree of coordination. This existed not only among the political prisoners who initiated and sustained the strike in Askelon, but from prison to prison, and between the prisoners, their relatives and supporters outside.

On February 22nd, 500 Palestinian prisoners in Askelon (along Palestine's southern coast) initiated a partial hunger strike, accepting only tea and bread. Thus they prepared for an extended confrontation with the prison authorities, leaving open the possibility of a total hunger strike, if their demands were not taken seriously. Their demands were those of all political prisoners in Zionist jails: improvement of living conditions and medical service, and a stop to arbitrary searches which the guards use to harass and attack the prisoners. Among the strikers at Askelon, 148 have been seriously ill for years. In view of the Zionist prison policy, they knew that they would not get their demands totally or at once, but that without struggle, conditions could only get worse.

In the first part of March, Palestinian political prisoners in Hebron, Jnaid (Nablus), Nafha (the Naqab), Damoun (Haifa), and Gaza Central Prison staged

strikes in solidarity with the Askelon militants. In some cases, the solidarity strikes also had a background in particular events at that prison. For example, in Damoun, prisoners declared a strike immediately after they had been stripped and beaten by guards supposedly searching for political material. In addition to protesting this assault, the prisoners demanded that young Palestinian detainees be housed with the other political prisoners and not in the criminal section, where they are subjected to added harassment and attempts at corruption by Jewish criminal prisoners. They also protested the detention of 23 «security» prisoners in small cells. The warden ceded to their demands verbally after four days of the strike, but his promises were not fulfilled, so the strike resumed, joining the others.

## Mothers lead solidarity

Women have long been prominent in organizing solidarity with political prisoners. This time, relatives of the strikers played an especially sustained role. A sit-in began in the International Red Cross office in Jerusalem, almost simultaneously with the Askelon strike. Then mothers began to sit-in at the Red Cross office in Gaza where many of the prisoners' families live. By late March, the

Jerusalem IRC office closed, claiming it impossible to work with the sit-in going on, but the mothers continued by camping outside. On March 25th, 300 relatives and supporters gathered in Jerusalem to protest the prison authorities' refusal to meet the strikers' demands. Speakers at the rally included mothers of prisoners, unionists, student council representatives and the head of the Higher Islamic Council.

On April 1st, progressive Israeli women demonstrated at the Prison Service Authority office in Jerusalem and were joined by the mothers of the sit-in. On April 4th, East Jerusalem closed down in solidarity with the political prisoners. A large solidarity meeting was held in Ibrahimiyeh College and violently disrupted by the Zionist forces who fired machineguns and tear gas. Many students were seriously injured, 132 arrested and enormous damage done to educational facilities.

## A victory

The prisoners' persistence and the widespread solidarity evidently had their effect on the newly appointed Prison Service director who needed to defuse tension in the prisons. After 41 days, the Askelon prisoners ended their strike when the authorities promised to meet a whole series of their demands. If this is implemented, it signals a victory, setting an example for the possibility of improving the conditions of other political prisoners by struggle.

## Operation Galilee

*Liberated in «Operation Galilee» which reduced the number of political prisoners in Zionist jails by almost one-third*

