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Histadrut's deception

FROM THE proceedings of their executive committee meeting last Sunday, it appears that the leaders of the Histadrut have made up their minds to treat the public in Israel, and most specifically the members of the Histadrut, to a campaign of deception.

By a large majority, the committee passed a resolution, submitted by the leadership, expressing opposition to the government's intention to introduce legislation for obligatory arbitration.

There is not the slightest indication in the resolution or in the speeches at the meeting supporting it, as reported in *Davar* – the official organ of the Histadrut – of the crucial fact that the government's proposal is *not* concerned with labour disputes in the private sector. The measure is aimed solely at preventing the repeated convulsions in essential public services. Secretary-General Yeroham Meshel and the other speakers, as reported in *Davar*, pretended unequivocally that the projected legislation affected all the workers in the country.

The resolution states baldly that the “explicit significance of a law for obligatory arbitration is the denial of the right to strike and of the freedom of the professional struggle.”

Mr. Meshel announced that he and his colleagues would go from work-place to work-place to mobilize opposition to the government's measure.

This can mean only that the Histadrut leaders' objective is not at all to ensure a cool examination of the merits of the government's proposal but, by an act of misrepresentation, to heat up an emotional resistant response by all the workers in the country to what they will be told is a threat to *their* right to strike.

There is good tactical reason for this untruthfulness. Mr. Meshel and his colleagues are perfectly well aware that the government's proposal is not designed to prevent the enjoyment of workers' rights, but to put an end to the practice of several *specific* groups of workers, specifically in public services, using their key positions to intimidate, to browbeat, to impose loss and suffering and hurt on the nation at large, or on part of it, until the government (or other public authority) gives in to their demands.

The practice has developed into a national trauma. Children have been deprived of months of schooling, whole areas in cities have been plunged into darkness, radio and television services have been blacked out, the national airline has been brought to the verge of ruin and extinction and – the latest and most gruesome ordeal of all – the nation's sick, except for those in immediate lethal peril, have been largely deprived of the services of their doctors.

It is this kind of “strike,” this manifestation of the “professional struggle” that the government's belated proposal aims to replace by mandatory arbitration. Nothing else; and it is not likely that the general body of workers in Israel could be persuaded to resist this proposal – unless, indeed, it is misrepresented to them.

TO ADD to the heating-up process, Mr. Meshel and his colleagues unblushingly describe the proposal for obligatory arbitration as being “repugnant to the democratic outlook.” A measure to restrain a group of citizens, who happen to have been entrusted with weapons, from behaving like hijackers, from holding a pistol to the head of society; from using the

public, or its weak and vulnerable segments, as hostages – is repugnant to the democratic outlook?

To compel the parties in such a dispute – where the only sufferers are all innocent citizens – to submit their case to a judicial body, authorized and protected by the law of the land, is repugnant to the democratic outlook? Thus is misrepresentation clothed, moreover, in demagogy.

The essential issue is quite simple: Israel is not faced by a problem of social doctrine in labour relations. For many years it has been relatively free of “classical” labour disputes between workers and private employers. Strikes in private enterprises – usually affecting only the specific parties involved – have not posed problems to Israeli society at large.

The disruptions of public services have, however, over the years, become ever more serious, their practitioners ever more daring. Government after government has shirked the task of actively tackling their roots, and they have thus been sustained and encouraged.

A scientific study of strikes in essential public services over the past decade would no doubt reveal a clear escalation in the intensity of pressure and intimidation used by the “strikers.”

The public was outraged when El Al workers at Ben-Gurion Airport harassed Jews of Orthodox mien; but this was but a mild step forward towards the ultimate horror of the doctors’ revolt – which, in the Histadrut leaders’ definition, was no more than the exercise of their “democratic right” in pursuing their “professional struggle.”

TAKEN AT ITS face value, then – as it must be – the import of the Histadrut executive’s attitude, published after the nightmare of the doctors’ strike, is unmistakable: the workers’ right to strike, in whatever way and by whatever means he exercises that right, is *absolute*. It overrides every other right, of every other citizen, of every segment of society.

Once a group of workers has decided to strike, automatically invalidated is the right of the pupil to his schooling, the right of the citizen to his electricity, or his radio or television; even the right of the sick to adequate medical attention; the degree of deprivation being determined by the sacrosanct striker. None of these victims has even a forum to which to appeal, an institution which will weigh *his* rights. He must wait in patience, or in pain, or – if he wishes – screaming for mercy, until the “strike” has been settled.

SOME OF THE protagonists of the Histadrut position argue that obligatory arbitration is unacceptable because it “has not worked in other countries.”

If this assertion were true, it would be merely infantile for that reason to reject arbitration out of hand. After all, there are many elements in Israel’s history and institutions which are unknown – and probably “unworkable” – elsewhere.

There is, at worst, no reason for not making the experiment. It happens, however, that the assertion itself is not true. There is at least one example of a land in which obligatory arbitration has worked.

In Britain (whose attachment to the democratic outlook the Histadrut leaders are free to question), arbitration was applied throughout World War II – not only in the public sector, but throughout the whole economy.

Of course, a state of emergency existed; of course there was a war on; of course a spirit of national solidarity prevailed. Why can a spirit of national solidarity not be expected in Israel?

Moreover, when World War II was over, arbitration continued to rule in Britain for a further seven years – again, throughout the whole economy.

True, this persistence of national solidarity was facilitated by the willing cooperation of the trade unions, which recognized that there were national interests more compelling than their doctrinal right to strike.

That, indeed, emerges as the crux of the issue in Israel. It is patently untrue that the Histadrut leaders oppose obligatory arbitration because “objectively” it will not “work.” From the outset, by the very terms of Sunday’s resolution, they are making it plain that if it does not work it will be because they will have succeeded in frustrating it – even if, in order to do so, they have to go from work-place to work-place misleading the general body of the workers into believing that what is threatened is the workers’ right to strike and their “professional struggle.”

NOT THE LEAST distressing significance of the Histadrut leaders’ attitude is its moral bankruptcy. There may indeed be some among them who are simply mouthing outworn clichés of an earlier generation; but to most of them the moral implications must surely be clear.

It is not as if they are proposing an alternative solution to this painful national ill. They do not propose – nor have they ever proposed – any cure for it.

They are not calling on the workers in public services to demonstrate a sense of solidarity and responsibility with the people they are supposed to be serving.

On the contrary, they are in effect promising them that they, the Histadrut leaders, will do their utmost to ensure the perpetuation of their arbitrary power to intimidate and coerce Israeli society, unfettered by the civilities and restraints of law and arbitration.

THE GOVERNMENT, which has hitherto shown little wisdom or courage on the issue of obligatory arbitration, had better now, in addition to translating its proposal into legislation, take action to explain to the public – and primarily to the workers – the thrust of its proposal and its limits.

If Mr. Meshel can (as he threatened) visit every work-place in the country and there present his distorted version of the government’s measure, it is surely possible for the government to reach every citizen in the country with its truth.