

Radical Political *Irbutz** in Israel

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The concept of urban collectives has floated around Zionist circles for a long time, and history records a few failures. Discussion has resurfaced recently, with the development of an independent radical Zionist movement, whose members are dedicated to their own self-realization through communal life in Israel and to serious socioeconomic changes in the Israeli structure. Also, the Sha'al group in Israel has received wide publicity since its establishment three years ago as a "kibbutz" of professionals who chose an urban setting. In all due respect to the Sha'al group, which has seriously pioneered a life style that looks as though it may succeed, we should differentiate between them and what we shall call the "political *irbutz*." This concept has been proposed as not only a life style, though certainly the stability of such communes as permanent homes is crucial. The "political *irbutz*" is seen primarily as a means to effect political, economic, and social change in Israeli society.

* "*Irbutz*" is a contraction of the Hebrew words for city and kibbutz, connoting an urban collective settlement.

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The Kibbutz

Let us begin with a look at the history of the kibbutzim. Recent research has shown that the communal institutions of the early kibbutzim were not, as had been widely assumed, arrived at haphazardly. They were, to a large extent, calculated attempts at solving what was seen by the founding Socialist-Zionists as the crucial problem that needed to be solved in order to create any sound Jewish national existence—a base for the national economy. This meant that there had to be an organized Jewish working class, a widespread Jewish presence on the land itself, and, if the economy was to be a socialist one, ownership of these newly-created means of production by the Jewish workers themselves. The subsequent creation of the collectivist movements of different shades, and of the large Histadrut union, were the fruition of these intentions. But also on the cultural level, the work ethic that permeated the kibbutz society, its valuing of group spirit, and its nationalism, became the models for the whole society. These group-oriented values created the national conditions of production that are still the foundation of the state, and its values and goals.

The kibbutz was certainly a revolutionary vanguard movement of its time, aimed at solving the problems necessary to achieve Jewish national existence with a socialist bent. It achieved a great deal, but fell far short of bringing complete socialism to Israel, and seems unable to effectively continue the struggle today, at least on its own. In fact, socialism as a value and a goal seems lately to be less and less important and even less popular to all of Israeli society. Why?

First, there was created out of the early kibbutzim and labor movement an incredibly powerful Socialist-Zionist elite, still holding a great deal of power. For many of them, political and social reality is the same as it was fifty years ago, and a natural resentment has built up among aspiring younger leaders,

and an "anti-ideological" spirit among the young public. Private ownership has increased, but the largest private owner by far remains this gigantic labor union complex, and the fact is that it has become, to large portions of the population, oppressive.

The Urban Problem

Take, for instance, a scenario from one of the proper development towns, created around 1960 for the masses of immigrant Jews from backward Asian and African countries. The population is, say, 95 percent Moroccan and Tunisian, totaling maybe 5,000 people. The poor educational and cultural facilities and overcrowded housing are given factors, as is the cultural gap between these citizens and many Europeans of the large cities and kibbutzim. In addition, the town's residents are trapped in poverty: Professional services are usually provided by outsiders who often do not live in the town. Except for the minority who own or work in small businesses or trades, the vast majority of the labor force are relatively unskilled workers in one of two large basic industries in the town. And here's the catch: These industries are almost always owned by the Histadrut, the union supposedly representing the workers it hires. There is an obvious contradiction. Furthermore, the Histadrut bureaucracy is controlled totally by outsiders, and relatively little has been tried in these unskilled factories in the way of worker participation in management. Needless to say, there are few strikes in these industries. Another obvious result: There is a good deal of resentment—when elections come around the only anti-Histadrut opposition is the chauvinist right-wing and religious parties; and they receive large support in these towns in the absence of any effective left opposition. This only hurts the chances of these towns receiving new investments from bureaucratic Histadrut decision-makers.

Kibbutz-Town Interaction

And the kibbutzim? Often a development town like the typical one described above is literally surrounded by kibbutzim. And usually the social contact is zilch. If anything, the kibbutzim hire some workers from the town, not the best example of socialism at work. The standard of living on the kibbutz is way above that of the town. And the kibbutz movement is the backbone of the labor bureaucracy that ostensibly prevents the development of these "development towns." In terms of the modern social and economic problems of Israel, the kibbutz is removed from the struggle for socialism, no longer in the vanguard, in fact, and is a social and economic elite. The younger kibbutz members, if they stay on the kibbutz, are less concerned about the general struggle for socialism, taking even the life style more or less for granted. The kibbutz succeeded in its revolutionary purpose of creating an organized Jewish working class, and, in fact, the present state and its institutions, but is not geared to solving the problems of today, found in the development towns and in sections of the large cities. The kibbutz is still valuable as an example of communal life style, and even as an economic institution; and there is a potential for the kibbutzim assuming once more an active role in the large struggle. But something will have to stimulate this from the outside.

A more active struggle towards true socialism will come about with the development of a movement of lower-class workers in the cities and towns; a movement of organized leftist labor against the Histadrut bureaucracy, either from within or without the existing organizations. Progressives of the old left parties and intellectuals may support such a movement, but it will somehow have to generate a momentum of its own. The recent Israeli Black Panther incidents were certainly a hopeful sign, even though only a small faction of the movement talks in terms of class conflict as well as struggle for ethnic equality.

Problems of Urban Collectives

Here enters the idea of the radical *irbutz*, aimed at agitating for such a socialist movement by actually involving itself in the urban setting with its problems. They are obvious immediate problems in creating an urban commune that will succeed merely to exist, let alone build a revolution. The Sha'al group has always been in danger of falling apart communally. Let us analyze why this difficulty exists: The isolation of the kibbutz, with its obvious political disadvantages, does, however, create a ready-made setting for a successful community—owning its own means of production, working and consuming together, and apart from others. Any urban group is many times less isolated, making it very difficult to just stick together. Furthermore, a group like Sha'al, which neither owns its own means of production nor works together, has only the social bonds holding it together. From the outset this has been recognized as the major problem to the group, and for three years the *chaverim/ot* have claimed to be looking for a project which could involve the work of a large proportion of the members. This may be impossible, since most of the members joined specifically for their own personal occupational reasons; many even work outside the town in which they live. It remains to be seen whether such a group, held together only by strong social bonds, will succeed.

Two Possible Solutions

Two possible solutions to this problem of lack of an important binding force in an urban collective had been proposed. Both are aimed directly at affecting politically the surrounding community and the country. (Some Sha'al members are somewhat politically involved in the town, but the group as a whole has chosen not to involve itself).

One idea has been to have a group enter a town or city

and, from the very start, own and work at its own means of production, a factory of sorts. One such proposal now in the planning stages is for a print shop that could serve as the nucleus for information and education for a national radical movement and serve the community at the same time. Of course the group would actively involve itself in the politics of the surrounding community. Problems and advantages of this approach include the following: Owning such separate means of production as a group would somewhat isolate the group from the surrounding workers but would serve very well to keep the group itself together and dedicated to its goals. Establishing such a project would be difficult, however, requiring capital at the very beginning, and if successful, immediate expansion. Help would have to come from somewhere on the outside, and the question is where? Probably *not* the Jewish Agency-Histadrut establishment that usually helps immigrants' enterprises.

A second idea is for a group whose primary motivation is the political one to live in a town, and all find jobs in the town, with many, if not all, as laborers in the factories. This would involve little initial capital and has the advantage of providing close and real proximity with the workers, the most advantageous situation for agitation. There is no common economic enterprise to hold the group together other than consumption, but common political action could play such a role to some extent. If a basic requirement in the establishment of the group is primacy of political motivations over personal and professional ones, then there is something concrete on which to build the community. This plan could also bring in new members very easily, even from the town itself. It has been a question of considerable debate whether such a commune should include professionals or only laborers. Most, however, are willing to include professionals to a certain extent: A majority of the members should be non-professional, and those who are should work within the town itself, and as radicals in their profession, thus serving the town in an im-

portant way. The crucial requirement would be that *all* members consider the political purpose of the community more important than professional and personal aspirations (high priority to a successful and happy community is assumed).

*The Need for Garinim**

Experiments along these lines will have to be planned carefully, pioneering the development of communal institutions adaptable to urban life—strong enough to hold the groups together but flexible enough to allow the necessary interaction with the surrounding community. The biggest drawback, however, is that neither idea has yet been attempted. More and more radical Zionists are arriving in Israel all the time, and more are becoming active in movements outside of Israel. No *garinim* oriented strongly toward these or other possible plans have been formed, though many people are discussing the ideas. Disillusionment often sets in once a radical arrives in Israel and sees that little has been done, that many like him are also floating around.

Serious groundwork would be laid by those in Israel already, and contacts should be made with Israelis ready to participate in such projects. And in America and other countries, more serious efforts need be made to form groups dedicated to these ideals—groups that will arrive together in Israel to set up their communities. These groups have not come into being, often because there were not enough committed people in one place to form a real group. In spite of the disadvantages of lack of personal contact, perhaps we should form mail-order *garinim*; gatherings can be held, summers spent together, and perhaps a year either in America

* Literally, the Hebrew word for "seeds"—groups of people who collectively leave for Israel to settle there.

or Israel before the foundation of the community. We are spread out, and in spite of some growth, are not becoming a mass movement. No one will know if these nice ideas can work until we try, and that means serious commitment and organization of *garinim*.