



PALESTINIAN PEACENIK

Mubarak Awad brings peace to the Occupied Territories

throw the British occupation of India retain their force today, says Palestinian peace activist Mubarak Awad. In a society that Awad sees as increasingly “worshipping the gun,” active pacifism is a political ideal that often falls on deaf ears. To promote it, Awad and other peace activists have had to appeal to principled courage: “We say, ‘Okay, see if you have the guts to walk without a gun past someone with a gun.’”

Awad’s nonviolent strategy was tested last January, when he led some 100 Palestinians and Israelis onto land seized from Arabs by residents of Ma’al Amos, a small Jewish settlement midway between Bethlehem and Hebron. The settlers had bulldozed the tent dwellings of several Bedouin families and three hills of olive trees, barley and wheat that had been cultivated by three local Palestinian families for generations. Tension was already at a high pitch because only days before, Hussein al-Rashaide, a charismatic local activist and a member of one of the families whose land was expropriated, was accidentally killed by a land mine set by the Israeli army.

Awad had taken pains to ensure that the protest would be nonviolent: Protesters were forbidden to carry rocks or guns. But when some of the protesters set fire to an empty camp trailer on the site—an act Awad later denounced—Israeli settlers opened fired on the crowd, sending the marchers scrambling for cover. When soldiers arrived, they bused the demonstration’s Israeli participants away and detained Palestinians at the site. They jailed two

It’s not easy to promote nonviolence to people who have spent nearly three generations in one of the world’s most protracted and violence-ridden ethnic conflicts. But the nonviolent tactics that followers of Mahatma Gandhi used to over-

ETC.

By Joel Bleifuss

The NAFTA shaft

In the November 14, 1994 *In These Times*, correspondent Peter White reported on the disturbing disposition of the first case tried under NAFTA’s labor side agreement. In that case, the National Administrative Office (NAO)—the American agency created to enforce NAFTA’s labor provisions—decided that it lacked the authority to rule against two American multinationals charged with mistreating their Mexican workers.

Now, a recent case has shown that even when the NAO does take action, it possesses few powers to back up its edicts.

Last year, workers at Sony’s five maquiladoras in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, protested a company decision requiring them to work Sundays. The official, state-connected trade union, CTM, which represents the 1,700 workers at the five plants, sided with the company. Attempts by Sony workers to vote in new union leadership were thwarted by electoral fraud. Subsequent demonstrations against that fraud were broken up by riot police who clubbed protesting workers.

The workers, with the assistance of the American Friends Service Committee and other groups, filed a complaint with the NAO. (Interestingly, the Mexican workers did not receive the support of the AFL-CIO, which has close ties to the corrupt CTM.) The case was heard last February, and on

April 11 the NAO ruled in the workers' favor. But that ruling hasn't accomplished much. The NAO, which took the strongest action possible, was only able to require that U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich "consult" his counterpart in Mexico—Labor Secretary Santiago Oñate—and ask him to respond formally to the complaints that Mexico has failed to enforce its labor laws.

Pharis Harvey, the director of the International Labor Rights Fund, one of the groups supporting the Sony workers, says the decision "highlights the overall inadequacy of the labor side agreement itself and the need for renegotiation of a stronger agreement."

Onward and downward

Wages in the United States fell by 2.7 percent between March 1994 and March 1995 according to the U.S. Labor Department. This decline in inflation-adjusted wages coincided with a 14 percent rise in corporate profits. "It signals a dangerous shift in the distribution of income from ordinary working Americans to the very wealthy who own most of America's financial assets," said U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich. As a press release from the Labor Department noted, between January 1 and June 7, the volume of trade on the stock market increased by 16 percent, or \$673 billion. This is enough to give a \$5,100 bonus to every American worker.

Palestinians for setting fire to the first trailer and another trailer that had burst into flames on a hillside far from the demonstrators. In the end, Awad's nonviolent tactics seem to have paid off: In what is a rare occurrence in the Occupied Territories, the army removed the Jewish settlers from the hills.

In 1985, Awad and a handful of other West Bank activists founded the Palestinian Center for the Study of Nonviolence (PCSN) and devised 120 options for a nonviolent uprising against the Israeli occupation. PCSN activists traveled to villages and refugee camps throughout the Occupied Territories, distributing Awad's pamphlets, speeches and Arabic translations of pacifist classics. But it was not always so easy for him to get a hearing, Awad says, "because I was completely against the armed struggle [against Israeli occupation]." He persisted nonetheless, and by late 1987 many of his tactics—such as withholding taxes, boycotting Israeli products, obstructing bulldozers and planting olive trees on land seized for Israeli settlements—had gained widespread acceptance in the Palestinian intifada.

Despite his strict refusal to condone violence, the Israeli government branded Awad a terrorist. In 1988, he was transported in shackles to an airplane headed for America, earning him a reputation as the "Palestinian Gandhi" in the international press. He was exiled at the insistence of the Israeli government, which claimed he had forfeited his residency rights after spending 13 years in the United States. He studied social work and psychology here, married an American Quaker, Nancy Nye, gained U.S. citizenship and started a family.

Israel now lets Awad visit for three months at a time, and he takes eight or nine brief trips home each year to call on friends, relatives and PCSN offices. The center's staff still works with other Palestinian and Israeli groups to organize demonstrations, peace camps for Arab and Jewish teenagers, rapprochement between adults, workshops on women's rights and planning for independence.

In October, the PCSN launched the Palestinian Center for Democracy and Elections with funding from the Washington, D.C.-based National Endowment for Democracy. The center hosts seminars in which local faction representatives meet to debate the peace process and to learn about human rights and election procedures. Awad insists that democratic dialogue must include people of all philosophies—even Hamas members who espouse continued violence. "It's our idea to push the factions to have democratic elections and to make them [into] parties," Awad says.

A small photograph of Yasser Arafat's and Yitzhak Rabin's famous 1993 handshake adorns a wall of the center's office, symbolizing the hope that the PLO's renunciation of violence has restored. But Awad concedes that the PCSN's work is as tough under the Oslo Accords as it was a decade ago. "The Palestinian people are very angry," he says. "People see that after the peace process things are getting worse." He recites a familiar litany of complaints: confiscated land, extrajudicial imprisonment, curfews, shootings, beatings. "We are opposing the things the Israelis are doing to us, because they are non-democratic, and we are opposing some of the things the Palestinian Authority is doing," he says. In particular, Awad complains that Palestinian police in Gaza round up critics together with suspected terrorists to be tried in military courts.

Awad says he learned nonviolence as a child when his mother taught him to pray for the man who killed his father in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. And today he remains passionately committed to nonviolent resistance. "Every human life is important," Awad says, "And we don't have the right to destroy it."

—Nadia Oehlsen