

# Matzpen – A Short History

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*The Socialist Organization in Israel* – better known by the name of its paper, *Matzpen* – was founded in 1962 by a group that formed around four members who had been expelled from the Israeli Communist Party (ICP), having challenged the ICP's lack of internal democracy and its unquestioning allegiance to the Soviet Union. The organization is committed to a socialist revolution based on councils elected by the workers, is opposed to Zionism and calls for recognition of the Palestinian people's national rights. In its early years, the main activity of the group's members was aimed at creating an independent workers' trade union outside the ambit of the *Histadrut*.

From the beginning, the group's prominent members were Oded Pilavsky, Akiva Orr, Moshé Machover and Haim Hanegbi. In 1964 *Matzpen* was joined by a group that included some Arab members that had split from the Haifa branch of the ICP, among whom were Jabra Nicola and Daoud Turki. These, in turn, brought along with them some other Arab and Jewish activists from Haifa and the Galilee. This group joined *Matzpen* on the basis of the following jointly agreed principles: rejection of Zionism, unequivocal stand for revolutionary socialism, rejection of the cult of the Soviet Union and its ideological and political implications, absolute rejection of Stalinism and the cult of personality, support for genuine international solidarity, support for the integration of Israel in a socialist Arab union, on the basis of self-determination.

On 8 June 1967, three days after Israel started its war against Egypt, a joint Arab–Israeli statement, signed by representatives of the Democratic Palestinian Front and *Matzpen*, was published in the London *Times*. The statement, which had been written before the outbreak of the war, specified the conditions for a desirable resolution of the conflict: the de-Zionization of Israel; return to Israel's territory of those Palestinian refugees who wish to do so; Israeli acceptance of a Palestinian state if the Palestinians wish to set one up, and readiness to make territorial concessions in its favour. The new, non-Zionist Israel would aspire for integration of Israelis and Palestinians in a supra-national socialist federal state that would be part of a political and economic unification of the entire Middle East.

Immediately after the war, *Matzpen* called for Israeli withdrawal from the newly occupied territories and against an attempt to impose a political settlement. This statement was published in the first issue of *Matzpen* published after the war, in July 1967. Shortly afterwards the group coined the slogan *Down with the Occupation!* The next issue of *Matzpen* came out in September 1967. Its front page showed a picture of

the deserted streets of Al-‘Arish, where a general strike had been declared against the occupation; and carried the headline: “An old story: ferment and defiance against foreign occupation”. As early as January 1969, the front page of *Matzpen* (issue No. 47) declared: “The occupation is loathsome”.

In the post-1967 period, *Matzpen* was subjected to vicious attacks in the media, and to some repression by the state, especially against its Arab members. At the same time it experienced some growth, although its membership never exceeded a few dozen (The circle of its close supporters probably reached a few hundred). The main obstacle to its growth in the Israeli-Jewish sector was the overwhelming influence of Zionist chauvinism. Among Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel, opposition to official Israeli policy and ideology had considerable popular support; but it was mostly channelled through the well-entrenched CP and through the Palestinian nationalist movement *Al-Ard* and, later, *Abna’ al-Balad*.

From its early days, *Matzpen* spanned a broad spectrum of revolutionary Marxian ideas; it was felt that insistence on sectarian conformity to a narrowly defined doctrine was counterproductive and an unaffordable luxury in conditions of externally imposed isolation. But after the 1967 war, as the group began to grow, internal tensions increased.

In 1970 two groups split away from *Matzpen*: the Workers’ Alliance (Vanguard), a Trotskyite group; and the Revolutionary Communist Alliance (Struggle), a group with Maoist leanings.

In 1972 there was another split. This time the group that split away set up the Revolutionary Communist League which – although it included none of *Matzpen*’s founding members – claimed for a while to be the true continuation of *Matzpen* and published a paper calling itself “Marxist *Matzpen*”, but soon identified itself as the Israeli section of the Trotskyite Fourth International.

This split was particularly damaging: it was caused by disputes over issues that were of little direct relevance to the actual struggle in Israel and resulted in two groups of roughly equal size that were barely viable.

In 1977 the group – originally called “The Israeli Socialist Organization – *Matzpen*” – renamed itself “The Socialist Organization in Israel – *Matzpen*”. This seemingly minor change was made in order to assert more clearly the group’s internationalism.

In 1982, members of *Matzpen* were active in forming the Progressive List for Peace (PLP), which ran for elections to the Knesset (Israeli Parliament), and was the first non-Zionist electoral list to break the monopoly of the ICP over parliamentary representation of oppositional opinion among the Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel. The Progressive List comprised two components: one Israeli-Jewish (*Alternative*), the other Palestinian-Arab. Following the elections, some *Matzpen* members demanded unification of these two exclusive national components into a single movement. This

was rejected by the leaders of both components. The same Matzpen members then raised an alternative demand: allow the creation, under the umbrella of PLP, of a socialist grouping that would be open to all members who wish to join it, irrespective of nationality. This demand was also rejected. Consequently most Matzpen members left the PLP, and those who remained within the PLP left Matzpen. This episode weakened Matzpen further; a year later, after issue No. 90, the paper Matzpen ceased publication.

Since then, members of Matzpen continue to meet regularly every fortnight, but they no longer operate as a group; each is active individually within various groupings and coalitions.