



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Labor agencies and the temporality of struggles: A comparative study in the Israeli periphery

Nir Cohen^{a,*}, Meirav Aharon-Gutman^b^a Department of Geography & Environment, Bar Ilan University, Israel^b Faculty of Architecture & Town Planning, Technion, Israel

1. Introduction

In November 2011, workers of Peri HaGalil (PG) – a factory in the town of Hatzor – protested outside the Israeli Knesset against the owners' plan to lay off fifty of them. The demonstration was part of a campaign to pressure Members of Knesset (MKs) to approve the transfer of a 12 million New Israeli Shekels (NIS) grant that would prevent its closure. Inside the hall, the Chairman of the Workers' Board pleaded with MKs to prove their solidarity with workers by voting in favor. Speaking passionately, Mr. Haziza asked, 'What did we ask for? Give [us] the right to work' (Committee on the Economy, 2012: 11). Later that week, having received financial assurances from the government, the owners reversed their plan and workers returned to work. The Minister of Industry, Trade and Labor (MOITAL) explained the decision, 'It was clear to me that closing the plant would be a death blow to the town' (Yefet and Avital, 2012).

A year later, workers of Negev Textile (NT) gathered in front of the Minister of the Economy's residence to protest his refusal to give a grant of 3 million NIS to the owner. Chanting 'we've nowhere to go', protesters called on the Minister to salvage the last stronghold of the textile industry in the town of Sderot. Despite sympathetic media coverage of the protest, and their campaign in general, the grant was eventually declined and the factory was shut down in September 2013. Explaining his decision, Minister Bennet declared 'Had we backed down in this case . . . hundreds of firms with difficulties would have followed with similar demands' (Seidler, 2013a).

Both struggles, which unfolded within months apart in localities at opposite ends of the country had much in common (see Map 1). Waged against the backdrop of an increasingly deregulated industrial labor market, they were led by minimum-wage workers at traditional industrial factories in peripheral development towns. In both, workers – predominantly minorities¹ (either *ethnic internal*

like Mizrahi and 'Russian' Jews or *ethno-national/homeland* like Bedouin Arabs) demanded state support for private enterprises under duress in the name of its commitment to the periphery. In both cases workers deployed a similar strategy based on acts of resistance at various scales (local/national), a multi-sectoral coalition anchored within the respective regional community (Upper Galilee and Western Negev) and mobilization of their marginal socio-spatial identities. Yet, these nearly identical campaigns yielded different outcomes. While state support enabled PG owners to rehabilitate the factory and avoid downsizing, depriving it from NT forced its owner to declare bankruptcy and lay off workers.

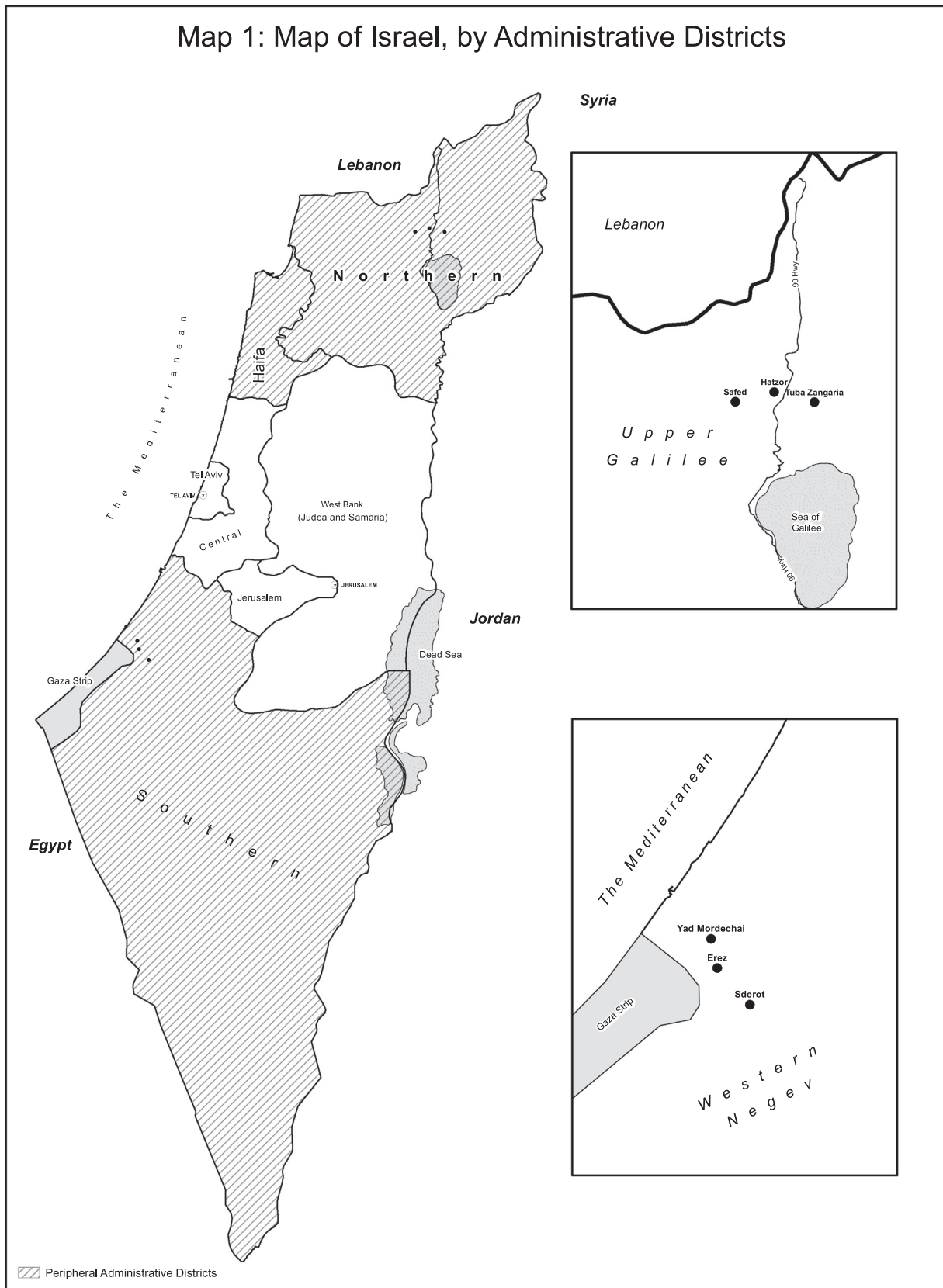
In this article we set out to examine the contrasting outcomes of these labor struggles. Building on scholarship in labor geography, which emphasizes the role of the local context and calls attention to the specific formations of labor agency in workforce resistance (Coe, 2013), we argue that their outcomes may be largely explained by their specific temporalities. By temporalities we *not only* mean the distinct time periods at which they transpired, their position with respect to fluctuations in economic cycles, or their unfolding during the tenure of ministers holding different stances towards public support for private factories. Rather, we refer to 'the timing of agency', namely the dynamic political economic context against which struggles took place. Following Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011), we suggest that accounting for the distinct outcomes of these largely similar campaigns must re-embed the agency of their labor within configurations of state policy, scale and organization of capital (e.g., production networks), communal politics, and labor market intermediaries. While the pivotal roles of key political agent(s) in the process leading up to provision – or denial of – public funds must not be discounted, they ought to be positioned vis-à-vis the historical and contemporary backdrops of these structures.

The article is organized as follows; we first contextualize our study within the literature on agency-based labor geographies. We then attend to the politics of (de)-industrialization in the Israeli periphery, analyzing the shifting trajectories of state support for traditional industries. Later, we analyze the strategy deployed by workers in both factories and contrast struggles in respect to state policy, scale and organization of capital, communal politics and labor market intermediaries. We show how despite a similar strategy to that employed at PG, which consisted of multi-scalar resistance, regional coalition-formation and mobilization of

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: nir.cohen@biu.ac.il (N. Cohen).

¹ The distinction between 'ethnic (internal) minorities' and 'national' or 'homeland minorities' is common in Israeli social scientific literature (see Khazzoom, 2003; Rabinowitz, 2001; Yiftachel, 2000). Whereas the former refers to Jewish minority groups formed through immigration to Israel, the latter describes the Palestinian Arab – including Bedouin – population, which became a minority following the War of 1948 and the establishment of the State of Israel.



Map 1. Map of Israel, by Administrative Districts.

marginal socio-spatial identities, workers of NT were constrained by their inferior position within these four arenas. We conclude by discussing implications of our research to temporalities of labor struggles in Israel.

The paper draws on several qualitative methods. In addition to ethnographically-oriented participant observations in protests organized by PG workers (2010–2012) and interviews with stakeholders in both struggles, we surveyed a wide range of secondary

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5073446>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5073446>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)