
Attacks on the PGFTU
TUC protests to Middle East leaders and UK
Ministers

TUC condemns attacks on Palestinian trade unions

Palestinian union confederation the PGFTU has suffered attacks from all sides in the last month, the TUC has revealed. The TUC General Secretary has protested to leaders in Israel and Palestine about the attacks, calling on them to allow Palestinian trade unionists to organise in peace. In addition, the TUC is calling on the British Government to do what it can to assist the Palestinian trade union movement.

Attacked from all sides

When Hamas took control of Gaza in June, the headquarters of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) was seized by Hamas gunmen and the staff were told to attend a meeting to discuss how unions should operate under Hamas rule – they refused. Since the start of the year, PGFTU Deputy General Secretary Rasem Al Bayari has suffered a rocket attack on his home (30 January) and the bombing of his office (2 February), all emanating from Hamas. The TUC has protested to former Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniya, insisting that PGFTU property be returned to its control, and that the trade union movement be allowed to go about its business free from harassment and violence.

Last week, on Wednesday 4 July, an Israeli army unit broke into the PGFTU branch office in Ramallah at 2am. They destroyed the main door, the entrance to the headquarters where they broke the internal doors to the offices, as well as filing cabinets and computers, searching for an excuse to justify the raid. The Ramallah office was the venue for the bilateral between the PGFTU and a TUC delegation in January this year. The TUC General Secretary has written directly to Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak, calling for an investigation and explanation, restitution to the PGFTU for the damage done, and an undertaking to avoid attacks on trade unions in the future.

Finally, on Tuesday 10 July, Shaher Sae'd, General Secretary of the PGFTU, was forcibly taken from a Nablus restaurant by masked gunmen, who threatened him and tried to force him to resign from his trade union position and to end his involvement in other Palestinian civil society organisations. Released after around half an hour, Sae'd refused to be intimidated by the gunmen's threats and intends

to carry on fulfilling his trade union functions and maintain his involvement in the other social organisations in which he is active. The TUC understands that the gunmen were members of Fatah, seeking to punish the PGFTU leader for being insufficiently anti-Hamas. TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber has called on Palestinian National Authority President Abbas, who he met in January with the PGFTU leadership, to ensure that trade unionists in Palestine are protected from threats to their lives and the lives of those around them, and to ensure that trade unionism, which is an essential part of the building of a democratic and independent state of Palestine, can be undertaken free of the threat of violence or coercion.

These are not isolated incidents. Public sector workers on strike earlier in the year over non-payment of wages were attacked by the security services of the then Hamas-led government, and a PGFTU MayDay demonstration in Nablus was broken up by the Israeli Defence Force.

Britain's responsibilities

As well as letters to leaders in the Middle East, the TUC has called on the British Government to do more, by pressing the Israeli and Palestinian governments to protect the PGFTU and ordinary trade unionists from attacks and intimidation, and by doing more to support the PGFTU's secular, democratic and peaceful approach to building civil society in Palestine.