

TUC delegation report 2003

Israel and Palestine

1 Arising from a joint visit to Great Britain a few years ago by the Histadrut and the GFTU - General Federation of Trade Unions (the Israeli and Palestine national trade union centre affiliates to the ICFTU respectively), the TUC was invited to send a delegation to Israel and Palestine in 2003. The purpose of the delegation was to produce a report on the trade union situation in the region, the challenges unions face and the prospects for union activity, within the context (but not exclusively) of the peace process, seeking to identify ways in which the British trade union movement can assist trade unions in the region. The delegation consisted of the President - Roger Lyons, the General Secretary, Keith Sonnet, Jane McKay, Owen Tudor and Simon Steyne, and spent two days in Palestine (East Jerusalem, Nablus, Ramallah) and two days in Israel (Tel Aviv, West Jerusalem and Haifa) between 21 and 26 November.

2 The delegation met representatives of trade unions in Palestine and Israel (including the leaders of Histadrut – MK Amir Peretz – and the GFTU – Shaher Sa’ed, along with leaders from health, transport and public services unions); the Governments of both states (the President of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat and the Minister of Labour; and officials from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs); the British High Consul in Jerusalem and Deputy Ambassador in Tel Aviv as well as officials of the ILO in Palestine; Labor leader MK Shimon Peres, the prominent and charismatic Israeli businessman Dov Lautman, one of the architects of the current peace petition, Dr Sari Nusaiba, workers and managers at a port in Haifa, a school in Nablus and hospitals in Haifa and Ramallah. There were many discussions with local trade union representatives in both Palestine and Israel.

3 The TUC received considerable assistance from the ILO (including the loan of two UN vehicles and drivers when in Palestine), from the GFTU and from Histadrut, and meetings were held before the visit with the Israeli Ambassador and the representative of the Palestinian Authority in London. Despite these official contacts, the TUC delegation was initially refused entry into Nablus by the Israeli Defence Force – a minor example of the sort of

problems which affect the Palestinian population (including senior Government and GFTU officials) far more seriously, every day.

Economic situation in Israel and Palestine

4 Both economies are in profound trouble – essentially because of the political turmoil since the outbreak of the intifada, although the Palestinian economy is worst affected, with unemployment rates of over 60% (much higher in certain places, for example Gaza) and poverty levels affecting well over half the population. The labour market is effectively dependent on the Palestinian Authority, and the rest of the population depend on state benefits and charities.

5 All but illegal employment of Palestinians in Israel has ceased (although the PGFTU estimate that up to 10,000 Palestinians continue to work illegally in Israel), and employment within Palestine is severely restricted by the checkpoints and road blocks which as a matter of course prevent or inordinately lengthen journeys to work not just between the major towns (which are often less than an hour away from each other by car, and are therefore within normal commuting distances) but also between villages around the major towns and the towns themselves.

6 In Israel, the Government's expenditure on the situation is diverting substantial resources from the public sector, which together with the right wing economic policies of the government have precipitated a crisis in public sector employment. The government is also pursuing a number of anti-union policies in terms of industrial relations law and practice, and employers are increasingly turning to migrant labour to cut wages and deal with the removal of Palestinian workers from the economy, or outsourcing to less expensive labour markets in exactly the same way as is happening in Britain. In addition, trade around the Middle East is severely reduced by the current conflict, reducing the overall level of economic activity and especially hitting the tourist trade which has been an important part of the Israeli economy and a fundamental part of the Palestinian economy. Relations between Histadrut and the Sharon government (and especially Finance Minister Netanyahu) are at a very low ebb, and Histadrut recently called a general strike, which is currently mired in the courts.

7 Unions in both Palestine and Israel are seriously under-resourced (the GFTU has effectively never been well resourced, but the Histadrut has a tradition of being well-resourced due to involvement in the health and social security system – roles it has lost in the last decade with a subsequent loss of income and influence). The Histadrut faces severe problems in dealing with an economic crisis, an anti-union government and the politics of the conflict and has lost members and income, but the GFTU, although it has good relations with the Palestinian Authority, faces even greater problems because of the restrictions on movement which affect its operation as well as its impacts on the employment of workers. The GFTU is predominantly engaged in poverty and unemployment relief now, rather than traditional industrial relations, and a major issue is representing the workers who were employed in Israel and have now often had their employment terminated.

8 In the discussions with the Palestinian authority Minister of Labour, the TUC explored the issues of the current labour code which is a definite improvement on older, Jordanian laws which predate the 1967 war, but which need to be implemented as the economy develops. The GFTU made it clear that they support the code, but want to secure improvements in the implementation phase. They are also discussing with the Palestinian authority a trade union code which is in need of substantial further work if it is to be acceptable to the GFTU. In Israel on the other hand, decades of pro-union labour laws are being challenged by the Sharon government, and while the TUC delegation was taking place, Netanyahu proposed some further restrictions on the right to strike which bear a startling similarity to UK labour law. Both the Histadrut and the Labor Party expressed an interest in the TUC's experience of labour law reform.

9 The GFTU is also largely prevented from playing its part in the international trade union movement – while in Palestine, the TUC delegation met with Anan Al Attira, a member of the PSI Executive Committee who has several times been prevented from attending PSI meetings (her case was raised by Paul Noon at the November Executive Committee meeting).

10 Relations between the Histadrut and the GFTU have been better and more involved (especially in the years before the intifada), but contacts have been maintained, and meetings held, since the current conflict began. Practical co-operation is limited however (although there are different perceptions, for example over the extent of assistance being offered by the Histadrut's lawyers to Palestinian workers whose jobs in Israel have been lost) – Histadrut can sometimes assist with the movement of GFTU officials, for example. However, it is fair to say that Histadrut are more concerned with the practical problems they face than with assisting the GFTU and Palestinian workers to overcome their crisis, and the GFTU is solely concerned for obvious reasons with issues around the overall lack of employment due to restrictions on movement, and take the view that the Histadrut's problems are nowhere near as serious as those facing Palestinian trade unionists. There appears to be goodwill to fellow trade unionists on both sides, although there is some evidence that this is less the case at lower levels of both organisations. One point of continuing concern is the suspension of payments from Histadrut to the GFTU for the subscriptions of Palestinian workers in Israel before the intifada – there is a backlog which remains to be cleared, although it is by no means certain that the Histadrut is in a position to pay the arrears even if they were allowed to by the Israeli government.

11 The solutions to the current economic situation are easy to identify, but very difficult to deliver without addressing the issue of peace, security and freedom of movement. Bluntly, the Palestinian economy needs jobs and income (even transfer payments would assist in developing jobs domestically), and this requires relaxations on the restrictions on movement of Palestinian workers, goods and supplies and stability so that investment decisions can be made and carried through. Ultimately, peace and stability will make foreign (and Israeli) investment possible, and will allow the agricultural and tourism sectors to grow. The Israeli economy needs to be relieved of the direct costs of maintaining the conflict (the "wall" itself, see below, will cost several billion US dollars), and requires the return of Palestinian labour and a restoration and growth of trade and tourism. Because of the situation over the last few decades, the Palestinian working age population is comparatively highly skilled, providing the opportunity for employment in both Palestine and Israel if political circumstances permitted

(historically, there has been a large and educated Palestinian diaspora, some of whom returned to Palestine before the intifada – tragically, very much the same as the Jewish diaspora in earlier times).

12 The economy of the region does not only result from the current conflict, it is now contributing to it. Unemployment and poverty in Palestine (and the restrictions of movement which are a key element of that) have created the conditions for young Palestinians to be attracted to violent solutions, and have reduced the capacity of moderates such as those who control the GFTU to deliver, weakening their political power. In Israel, similarly, the economic crisis has contributed to a shift in the balance of power between right wing politicians and the Histadrut which makes Israeli trade unionists less capable of influencing both the political and economic policies of both the government and, to a lesser extent, the Labor Party, contributing to the damaging splits in the left of the political spectrum.

13 Suggestions made by the TUC delegation to a range of figures in Israel about deploying improvements in the economy to improve the political situation met with a general response along the lines of: such moves would be positive, but would not address the security situation, and would not win support from the Israeli public, and would therefore not happen. Palestinian voices were united (although stronger on the trade union side) in supporting such moves unreservedly – but without consideration of the need to secure popular Israeli support for them, such support is likely to remain purely theoretical.

The peace process

14 Especially in Israel, the delegation was repeatedly reminded of Israeli concerns about security – suicide bombings have allegedly reduced since restrictions on movement and especially the wall have been introduced, and they are therefore popular among the Israeli population (although not necessarily well understood – the impact of checkpoints and road blocks is not appreciated, and the political impact of the wall is misunderstood and contentious – some people consider it a security measure, others part of a border solution). The historical concerns of Jewish people about the history of anti-semitism, the holocaust and so on were repeatedly stressed. People, politicians and trade unionists were more open about calling the conflict a

war (albeit low intensity) than the TUC expected, although there were varying views (roughly from left to right) on how far the Israeli Defence Force is engaged in a policing operation, and how far in collective punishment – but the Palestinians were clear that it was the latter.

15 There are various peace processes in train at the moment, and the TUC delegation was keen to explore attitudes to these, from the US-backed Road Map to the Geneva Accords and the peace petition. Generally, most of the people met by the TUC were positive about any peace process, although there were harder-line attitudes among local GFTU activists on the one hand and Israeli government officials on the other. It is clear that the Israeli government is aiming either to neutralise Palestinian opposition (a 'one-state' solution) or, more charitably, create a Palestinian Authority that they feel they can negotiate with (the 'two state' solution backed by the international community and formally by both Israel and Palestine), and concerns about the reliability of Palestinian representatives were exhibited even by left and union representatives in Israel. Problematically, almost all the peace processes on offer are led by members of the two communities who might be considered as people of good will – the extremes in both communities are barely involved in the process.

16 The TUC delegation, as well as experiencing a scintilla of the effect of roadblocks outside Nablus, visited the "wall" which Israel is building the wall in parts to enclose the Palestinian population or to prevent the easy movement of terrorists – it is an imposing sight, much bigger than the Berlin wall, and it stimulates great emotion among most people in the region, for or against (it was originally proposed by the Labor Party, to follow the pre-1967 borders, but the Likud-led government is building it deep within Palestinian territory, ostensibly so that it will be clearly a counter-terrorist measure rather than a political one which cements the pre-1967 borders). Like the road blocks, the main way in which the Palestinians experience the wall is as a restriction on their free movement, employment, agriculture and trade. But it is popular with Israelis who see it as a purely counter-terrorist device. It was explained by the Israeli Foreign Ministry that the "border" could be moved as a result of any future negotiations.

Possible TUC approaches

17 The TUC delegation was interested mostly in identifying areas where the TUC could make a positive contribution to the situation in which the two trade union movements find themselves, rather than developing policies on how the conflict can be resolved, but as the above paragraphs indicate, it is not possible to resolve the trade union and employment issues without addressing the peace process. However, there is little that the TUC can realistically do in that field, so only a very sketchy outline of a possible TUC position is provided below – and indeed there is some value (both in terms of being able to respond flexibly to events, and in terms of maintaining dialogue with all sides) in not taking hard and fast positions on the politics of the current conflict.

18 The TUC should press the UK Government to be supportive of all the peace processes underway, and to encourage the US administration to take a similar line – this would apply both to those processes which are mostly led from outside the region (eg the Road Map) and those generated internally, because despite what some people told the TUC delegation about the need for the conflict to be resolved internally, it is clear that external stimuli are useful. **In particular, the TUC should support any moves to relax the restrictions on freedom of movement (and therefore employment) for Palestinian workers, as a contribution not just to the economy of the region, but to the peace process itself, because it will reduce tensions.**

19 In addition, the TUC should press for the British government to make an appropriate contribution to the ILO fund for Palestine which is being established to provide employment opportunities and social security payments. The TUC delegation did encounter some views which suggested that the most effective use of funds would be to channel them direct into the funding of the Palestinian Authority which severely under-resourced so the TUC would support measures to minimise bureaucracy in the application of the ILO fund. Palestinian trade unions also asked whether it would be possible to provide training for GFTU representatives in the political and practical issues in running a tripartite social security system. **The TUC should therefore explore (not least with civil service unions and the Department of Work and Pensions)**

whether such training could be provided either in the UK or in Palestine.

20 The TUC should make every effort that we can to promote dialogue and contacts between Palestinian and Israeli trade unionists, and encourage other bodies (UK unions, Global Union Federations and so on) to do the same. There are suggestions that the Histadrut have not been as helpful as they could be and might face isolation internationally – but that fails to recognise the problems they face, and would not be helpful. Instead, **the TUC and others should aim to facilitate contacts that the two trade union movements wish to happen, and ensure that both Histadrut and the GFTU play as full a part as they can in international events.** Union bodies should also be encouraged to develop contacts in both communities – for instance, the TUC has been invited to take part in an ICFTU Women’s Committee delegation in January. The TUC will also continue to take up specific cases where Palestinian trade unionists have had difficulties in travelling to international meetings – in particular **the TUC will raise with the FCO the problems being encountered by the PSI Executive Committee member.**

21 The TUC will also continue to pursue at ILO level measures designed to assist capacity building within the Palestinian trade union movement, such as an ACTRAV project designed to bolster the involvement of the GFTU in the implementation of trade union and employment laws.

22 Finally, the TUC should offer the Histadrut what support and assistance we can in their current problems with the Israeli Government, including technical advice on the labour laws being proposed by Netanyahu.