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TUC solidarity: Palestine & Israel  
**General Council delegation report**  
January-February 2016

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## **TUC 2016 delegation to Palestine and Israel**

A TUC delegation to Palestine and Israel took place in 2016. When Congress originally called on the General Council to send such a delegation, it had been hoped that it could visit Gaza to identify what the TUC could do to help lift the blockade. The positions of the Israeli and UK governments made it impossible to arrange such a delegation, so plans were put in place to visit Palestine and Israel instead.

The delegation took place from 31 January and 3 February 2016, consisting of Paul Nowak (Deputy General Secretary TUC), Sally Hunt (General Council Spokesperson on International Relations), Christine Blower, Hugh Lanning (Chair of the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign) and Sean Bamford (Policy Officer TUC).

The delegation met with the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) in Nablus, the Palestinian Authority Deputy Minister of Labour, the Governor of Nablus, UNOCHA, the British Deputy Consul-General in Jerusalem, the PPSWU in Hebron, the Mayor of Bethlehem (and a visit to a refugee camp), Defence for Children International – Palestine, representatives of APHEDA and Ma'an, Histadrut and Kav LaOved (names and acronyms are explained in text below).

On the morning of 1 February the delegation was due to meet the Palestinian Prime Minister, Mr Rami Hamdallah, in Ramallah where the Palestinian Authority is based. Earlier that day at a check point outside Ramallah a Palestinian policeman shot and injured three Israeli soldiers and was himself shot dead. Understandably, Mr Hamdallah had to pull out of the meeting with the TUC delegation. Ramallah was then sealed off by Israeli forces making seeing anyone from the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah impossible.

### **The general situation in Palestine**

There has been no positive movement in the situation in the West Bank, Gaza or East Jerusalem since the last Congress debate. Indeed, in a number of instances the situation is worsening with settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem proliferating at an alarming rate. These settlements present an ever mounting obstacle to a two state solution.

A presentation by the UN's Office for Coordination of Human Affairs (UNOCHA), in East Jerusalem, provided delegates with a mass of authoritative information on the growth of Jewish settlements on Palestinian territory and the situation in Gaza.

Looking at the statistics for goods going into Gaza on a historical basis it is evident that the Israelis continue to apply the severest of restrictions. Added to the problems of Gaza is the fact that the current Egyptian government is antagonistic to the Hamas government in Gaza who had historic links to the Islamic Brotherhood who formed the government of Egypt until the military coup which ultimately brought President Sisi to power. The Egyptian armed forces continue to fight a war against a variety of Islamists groups in the Sinai. In pursuing this conflict and to put more pressure on Hamas, Egypt has destroyed the tunnels that took goods into Gaza from Egypt and has taken steps to ensure they cannot be rebuilt.

A recent UN report has estimated that without urgent action to boost Gaza's water supply it will be effectively uninhabitable by 2020. What water there is, is often contaminated by seawater and worse. Wholesale desalination plants could be an answer but these would be very vulnerable to any military action in Gaza. Indeed, the Israeli military action in 2014 did enormous damage to the existing water supply.

In addition, the UN says that 500,000 people have been displaced in Gaza as a result of the 2014 Israeli Defence Force (IDF) operation alone. More than 20,000 Palestinian homes were destroyed, and 148 schools, 15 hospitals and 45 primary health-care centres were severely damaged.

### **Palestinian workers**

Unemployment rates amongst Palestinian workers average 27%. This appalling figure however masks a marked disparity in the distribution of unemployment. In the West Bank it is running at 17.7%, in Gaza 43.9%. Male unemployment as a whole is 23.9% while female unemployment is 38.5%. These figures are taken from an ILO report published last year, in which the Director General, Guy Ryder, warns that:

"... the combined weight of the continued occupation and settlements does not permit the development of a viable, productive Palestinian economy, which could provide sufficient opportunities in terms of decent work. If current trends continue, the scope for such opportunities will shrink further."

The plight of Palestinian workers has to be understood in the wider economic and political context. Those in the West Bank can seek work in Israel or in the settlements. For those in Gaza not even these options are available.

As of March 2015, 52,297 Palestinians held permits to work in Israel and a further 25,957 in the settlements. An estimated 30,000 more Palestinians are working in the Israeli economy without the required work permit rendering them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abusive practices.

The delegation had meetings with the PGFTU Histadrut and Kav LaOved, at which the position of Palestinian workers was discussed. Histadrut is the largest trade union centre in Israel and the only one currently affiliated to the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Kav LaOved describes itself as a Worker's Hotline, an independent, non-governmental organization committed to the defence of workers' rights and the enforcement of Israeli labour law designed to protect every worker in Israel, irrespective of nationality, religion, gender, and legal status. Whilst under Israeli law workers have the same rights irrespective of their nationality, however as elsewhere non-nationals (not just Palestinians) are more vulnerable to unscrupulous employers and exploitation.

PGFTU raised the issue of Palestinian workers queuing daily at check-points to go to work in Israel – they are usually required to return to the West Bank after work. The PGFTU said that it was not unusual for people to start queuing at 2am or indeed 1am in the morning in what can only be described as squalid conditions. The delegation saw one of these crossings or check-points which was no more than a long covered ramp with absolutely no facilities. For some this becomes too much and they do not return home each night breaking the terms of their work permit, which can result in its withdrawal.

PGFTU and Histadrut have had talks on what can be done to improve the lot of Palestinian workers crossing into Israel as well as providing help in obtaining work and the required work permits. Because the process of finding work, getting security clearance and a permit can be difficult and time consuming, many workers resort to the use of unregulated brokers. Even if the resultant permits are valid the worker is still faced with paying the broker's fees which can amount to 20-40% of their wages.

For its part, the Israeli state acknowledges that its labour market needs an increase in Palestinian labour – particularly but not exclusively in the construction industry. In addition, providing more work for Palestinians is regarded as a way of reducing tensions in the West Bank. More obvious ways, such as removing the settlements are not politically acceptable to the current Israeli government.

Increased numbers of Palestinians travelling into Israel to work will clearly make the issue of the crossing points even worse unless positive action is taken.

Those Palestinians working in the settlements face some of the same problems as those working in Israel. There are similar problems around obtaining a work permit. In addition, there is the issue of what law applies. Whilst Israeli civil law applies to the settlers, the Palestinians are subject to Jordanian law as it stood at

the start of the occupation in 1967 except where amended by military order. That being said in 2007, Israel's Supreme Court ruled that, in the case of labour law, this two-track legal system is discriminatory and that Israeli labour law should apply equally to Palestinians when working in the settlements. The Israeli government has not implemented this ruling, and claims it cannot investigate and enforce compliance.

This lack of government oversight and dependency on Israeli work permits has led, according to Kav LaOved, to widespread abuse of Palestinian workers. Kav LaOved estimate at least half of settlement companies pay Palestinian workers less than the Israel minimum wage. PGFTU drew attention to the fact that it's not only in relation to pay where Palestinian workers are being abused. Health and safety law was also being flouted putting them at risk.

PGFTU also referred to the fact that in some companies Palestinians were given different uniforms to Israeli workers presumably so they can be easily identified.

### **Settlements**

The Oslo II Accord created three temporary distinct administrative divisions in the Palestinian territories, Areas A, B and C, until a final status accord would be established. The areas are not contiguous, but rather fragmented depending on the different population areas as well as what the Israeli Defence Force insists on.

Only Area A is theoretically fully controlled by the Palestinian Authorities although Israeli Defence Force incursions occur when they want to snatch someone. This area only amounts to 18% of the Occupied Territories. Area B is under Palestinian civil control and joint Israeli-Palestinian security control and accounts for 21% of the Occupied Territories. This includes Palestinian towns and villages where there are no settlers.

Finally Area C is under full Israeli civil and security control; some 61% of the Occupied Territories. This area includes all Israeli settlements (cities, towns, and villages), nearby land, most roadways that connect the settlements as well as strategic areas described as "security zones." In fact Palestinians, identified by the colour of their number plates, are banned from using these roads. Connecting roads between Palestinian villages are often blocked off.

In 1972 there were 1,000 settlers in Area C. In 2015 Israeli government figures put the number of settlers in the West Bank as 389,250 with another 375,000 Israelis living in East Jerusalem.

Whilst Palestinians find it virtually impossible to gain planning permission to build in Area C, this is not the case for Israeli settlers. Indeed, Palestinian dwellings are cleared where they are considered to be a security risk. In other instances Palestinians are forbidden to repair their own premises which will mean that eventually some will be effectively forced out. The Israeli authorities

speak of relocating Palestinian/Bedouin settlements because they did not have the necessary permits to build, when in reality this is purely because they are in the way of expanding settlements.

The delegation travelled from East Jerusalem down into Hebron in the south of the Occupied Territories and northwards to Nablus. Settlements were everywhere to be seen, often on a hill protected by fences and other security measures such as watch towers and a military presence.

In Hebron the delegation observed a unique settlement right at the centre of a city of 215,000 Palestinians. For every settler the Israelis have committed 4 members of the security forces. While in Hebron the delegation met and was accompanied by a representative of the Palestinian Postal Services Workers Union (PPSWU).

Within Area C Israelis are subject to Israeli civil law whereas, whatever the legal necessities about Jordanian Law, Palestinians are subject to Israeli military law. Even where the letter of the law seems even handed the practice is somewhat different. As pointed out by the representative of Defense for Children International, whereas Israeli children are invariably bailed the same is not true for Palestinian children who are normally kept in detention.

### **Refugee camps**

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) defines Palestinian refugees as:

"Persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict."

This definition extends to the descendants of refugee males which explains why the number of Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA has grown to more than 5 million people. There are Palestinian refugee camps not only in the West Bank and the Gaza strip but also Syria, Lebanon and Jordan.

Following a meeting with the Mayor of Bethlehem the delegation visited Aida Refugee Camp which is adjacent to Bethlehem and up against the Israeli wall. The delegation pulled into the camp and headed to Lajee Community Centre. Immediately outside of the centre there was a group of children some of whom were using sling-shots to propel stones at the Israeli wall some 250 yards away. There were no Israeli forces present.

Within Lajee Community Centre the delegation was given a presentation on the work the centre did with the camps' children including taking them on cultural visits to the UK. During this meeting the delegation's local driver came in suffering from teargas. The delegation went to the roof of the Centre. A small number of Israeli soldiers had appeared and was firing teargas and rubber



bullets at the children some of whom clearly had not even reached their teens. This was then followed up with some of the soldiers doing a sweep of the street with their rifles at the ready.

Following the meeting at the Lajee Community Centre, the delegation made a brief tour of the camp. As a refugee camp the UN is responsible for providing utilities. Against one part of the wall there was a rubbish dump with rubbish just piled up on the floor. Periodically the UN would arrange for this rubbish to be collected but apparently this was pretty infrequently because of lack of resources.

The camp had been established in 1950 shortly after the 1948 war. Tents had long ago given way to buildings. Within the refugee camp it was possible to build which has had at least two consequences. Firstly it has driven up prices of buildings because the land covered by the camp is prescribed. Secondly houses are often built closely together blocking out each other's light and adequate ventilation creating an unhealthy environment.

### **The nursery project in Gaza**

In East Jerusalem the delegation was able to meet representatives of APHEDA, the Australian trade union movement's aid agency, and MA'AN - the organisations responsible for running the Nursery Project in the Gaza Strip that TUC Aid has helped to fund. MA'AN Development Center is an independent, not for profit, Palestinian development and training institution.

In 2013, MA'AN Development Center with £15,000 from TUC Aid established a nursery with the objective of supporting sustainable livelihoods for small-scale farmers in the Gaza Strip. Beit Lahia was selected as a location for the nursery. Beit Lahia is considered as one of the most vulnerable localities in the Gaza Strip where the poverty rate is 31.16%, unemployment is 32.3%, and the food insecurity rate is 55%. Agriculture is considered as a main livelihood option in Beit Lahia where the majority of farmers are small-scale.

Since the nursery was established, 180 farmers have accessed the nursery services. These services included providing poor farmers with access to high quality seedlings and to promote sustainable farming practices.

In July 2014, the Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip started and continued for over 52 days. Amongst the death and destruction caused, the MA'AN nursery was a minor but nevertheless very unwelcome casualty. Some 50,000 trees, saplings, and seedlings withered and died due to lack of irrigation during the weeks of military hostilities. The losses include 1581 olive saplings, 869 poppy saplings, 44,300 tomatoes seedlings, and 12 citrus trees.

TUC Aid has, with the help of affiliates been trying to raise a further £15,000 so that the damage caused to the nursery in 2014 can be undone. So far £10,000 has been raised and the work is underway.

### **Histadrut meeting**

Although the delegation spent most of its time in East Jerusalem and the West Bank a meeting did take place in Tel Aviv with Histadrut.

Delegation members' met Histadrut's International Officer, the International Coordinator from the postal services union and a representative of a non-affiliated teachers union.

Histadrut made it clear that whilst some British trade union policies on Palestine and Israel were problematic for them, they welcomed dialogue.

As previously stated they shared PGFTU's concern about the conditions Palestinian workers suffered when crossing into Israel to work. They also welcomed an increase in the number of Palestinians being permitted to work in Israel.

They also emphasised they sought to represent all workers in Israel irrespective of their nationality or religion.

### **Follow-up**

A number of matters arising from the delegation were identified by the TUC Executive Committee and are being taken up by the TUC.