



Changing the world  
of work for good

# **Justice for Palestine: executive summary**

**Promoting decent work and respect for  
Palestinian rights**

# Executive summary

## Introduction

Palestine is one of the worst countries in the world to be a worker. This summary sets out TUC policy and the evidence base in support of Palestinian workers' rights. The TUC has long-standing policy in support of justice for Palestine, guided by international law and UN resolutions, as demonstrated by Congress motions passed in 2010, 2012, 2014, 2018, 2019 and 2020. Our more detailed policy positions and evidence base is available in the [full report](#).

In order to secure decent work for Palestinians, the TUC believes we need:

- respect for Palestinian rights, including the right to collective self-determination and the right to return
- an end to the illegal military occupation of Palestinian territories and annexation of East Jerusalem, an end to the blockade of Gaza, and for the permanent halt to any further annexation
- support for genuine efforts towards a just, comprehensive, and lasting peace that is consistent with international law and based on a two-state solution.

The illegal military occupation of Palestine, expansion of Israeli settlements, the blockade of Gaza and the ongoing threat<sup>1</sup> of official annexation contravene multiple international laws. They also undermine Palestinians' right to collective self-determination and efforts to find a peaceful two-state solution, and have led to numerous human rights abuses over many decades. A 2019 UN report declared that the human rights situation for Palestinians "deteriorates day-by-day".<sup>2</sup> Human rights violations in the occupied Palestinian territory (OPT) include land confiscation, home demolitions, excessive use of force and torture, lack of freedom of movement, and the imposition of a two-tier system of political, legal, social, cultural and economic rights based on ethnicity and nationality.<sup>3</sup>

The International Trade Union Confederation's (ITUC) Global Rights Index (2020) places Palestine in its worst ranking with "no guarantee of fundamental labour rights" due to a breakdown in the rule of law.<sup>4</sup> And in recognising that the occupation is a barrier to

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<sup>1</sup> Netanyahu: West Bank annexation 'remains on the table' after Israel-UAE deal (August 2020) Jewish News <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-west-bank-annexation-remains-on-the-table-after-israel-uae-deal/>

<sup>2</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 (15 March 2019) [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A\\_HRC\\_40\\_73.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A_HRC_40_73.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Israeli annexation of parts of the Palestinian West Bank would break international law – UN experts call on the international community to ensure accountability (2020) United Nations Office Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25960&LangID=E>

<sup>4</sup> 2020 ITUC Global Rights Index, International Trade Union Confederation [https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ituc\\_globalrightsindex\\_2020\\_en.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ituc_globalrightsindex_2020_en.pdf)

achieving decent work, the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Decent Work Programme 2018-2021 aims to support the State of Palestine's National Policy Agenda through three pillars: i) the path to independence, ii) ending the occupation and iii) sustainable development.<sup>5</sup>

We recognise the importance of working with affiliates, the ITUC and like-minded civil society organisations in the UK, Palestine and Israel to progress justice for Palestine.

## Impact of the occupation on workers and their livelihoods

### Economic impact

Between 2000 and 2017 the fiscal cost of the illegal military occupation to the Palestinian people was US\$48 billion (£36 bn). If this US\$48bn had been injected through expansionary fiscal policies, UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates that this would have generated 2 million job opportunities (110,000 new jobs per year) during the same period.<sup>6</sup>

Unemployment for Palestinians is high, reflecting the discrimination and precarity faced by Palestinian workers. In the second quarter of 2020 (April-June), unemployment in Gaza stood at 49 per cent in general, and 66 per cent for women.<sup>7</sup> In the West Bank, unemployment for the same period was 15 per cent, and 26 per cent for women.<sup>8</sup> According to the ILO, "nowhere in the world does the labour market situation of women appear so dire".<sup>9</sup>

Wages in Gaza are 36 per cent lower than those of employees in the West Bank, and over 70 per cent lower than average Palestinian wages in Israel and the settlements. Poverty is pervasive in Gaza where 68 per cent of households are moderately or severely food insecure.<sup>10</sup>

### Working in the settlements and Israel

Poor working conditions and employment prospects in the OPT leaves workers with little choice other than to seek work in the illegal settlements and Israel. In 2019, an estimated 110,000 Palestinians from the occupied territories were employed in Israel and a further

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<sup>5</sup> The Palestinian Decent Work Programme 2018–2022, International Labour Organisation (2018)

[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_mas/---program/documents/genericdocument/wcms\\_629011.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_mas/---program/documents/genericdocument/wcms_629011.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development <https://unctad.org/news/48-billion-estimated-revenue-loss-palestine-2000-2017-due-occupation>

<sup>7</sup> Labour Force Survey (April- June, 2020) Round (Q2/2020) State of Palestine, Palestinian Bureau of Statistics [http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/pcbs/PressRelease/Press\\_En\\_9-9-2020-LF-en.pdf](http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/pcbs/PressRelease/Press_En_9-9-2020-LF-en.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Report of the Director-General, The situation of workers of the occupied Arab territories (2019) International Labour Organisation [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_705016.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_705016.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

29,000 worked in settlements.<sup>11</sup> Work in the settlements is often informal and unregulated, and Palestinian workers report multiple employment abuses including being paid below the minimum wage, unregulated hiring, and incidences of child labour, especially in agriculture. Virtually no labour inspections take place, meaning violations are rarely penalised and rights are seldom enforced.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, Palestinian workers have been required to have a permit to work in Israel or the settlements. This has exposed them to exploitation through unscrupulous labour brokers and through binding them to an employer. Finally, the Israeli government has announced<sup>13</sup> it will improve the permit system, so that Palestinian construction workers in Israel will receive their permits directly. This is a step forward and should establish a direct employment relationship between workers and employers, rather than through labour brokers, but enforcement will be vital. More information about this policy change is needed, and we want to see a system where every worker is treated fairly and has decent work. Currently, around 28,600 Palestinians do not have a permit and face even greater exploitation.<sup>14</sup>

## **Wage deductions and Freedom of Association**

Palestinian workers are subject to a series of taxes enforced by the Israeli government but receive no protection or rights in return. The Paris Protocol stipulates that these taxes should be transferred to the Palestinian Authority (PA) monthly, however, Israel regularly withholds large sums of these taxes. Between 2006-2013 Israel retained a total of €164m (£146m) of 'equalisation taxes'.<sup>15</sup>

The Israeli government's Pay Department is meant to guarantee Palestinian workers entitlements to benefits, but frequently fails in its duty. Inaccuracies have resulted in many Palestinians being paid below the minimum wage, and payslips have not recorded accurate information about benefits such as sick pay.<sup>16</sup>

Palestinian workers in Israel cannot join a union of their choosing, unlike their Israeli colleagues, and Palestinian unions are prevented from acting legally in settlements because they are under Israeli control, leaving Palestinian workers with few avenues to pursue their employment rights.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Labour Force Survey Results (2019) State of Palestine, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/\\_pcbs/PressRelease/Press\\_En\\_13-2-2020-LF2019-en.pdf](http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/_pcbs/PressRelease/Press_En_13-2-2020-LF2019-en.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Report of the ILO Director General (2019) op cit

<sup>13</sup> To protect rights, Palestinian workers to get Israel permits untied to employers (14 November 2020) The Times of Israel <https://www.timesofisrael.com/to-protect-rights-palestinian-workers-to-get-israel-permits-untied-to-employers/>

<sup>14</sup> Cited in European complicity with Israel's occupation (2019) op cit

<sup>15</sup> Cited in European complicity with Israel's occupation (2019) op cit

<sup>16</sup> The Occupation of Labor, Employment of Palestinian workers in Israel (2018) Ka LaOved <https://www.kavlaoved.org.il/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/12/final-reduced-report.pdf/>

<sup>17</sup> A decade of organising Palestinian workers in the West Bank settlements (2019) op cit

## Covid-19

During the Covid-19 lockdown period 52 per cent of workers did not receive their salary or wages, and 25 per cent received only partial wages.<sup>18</sup>

According to the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU), 75,000 workers have been arbitrarily dismissed. By April 2020, over 453,000 Palestinian workers had lost their jobs and over 115,000 families were pushed into poverty.<sup>19</sup>

## Health and safety

Many Palestinians work in unhealthy and unsafe conditions. The construction industry is particularly dangerous for Palestinian workers. Numbers of fatalities and injuries on Israeli construction sites are higher than many other developed countries. In 2019, 47 construction workers died on site, 31 of whom were Palestinians.<sup>20</sup>

## Israeli control of natural resources in Occupied Palestinian Territories

The potential contribution of natural resources to the Palestinian economy is large, but Israeli control of Palestinian natural resources finances the settlement enterprise and keeps the settlements economically viable for the Israeli state. At the same time, this hinders Palestinian economic development and access to decent jobs, forcing Palestinians to work as cheap labour for Israeli settler industries in precarious and exploitable conditions, as mentioned previously. This can be seen in the case of quarrying, use of Dead Sea resources and farming, for example.

## Trade, business, and human rights

The UK carries out significant trade with Israel, but to date has not used this relationship to try to ensure adherence to human and workers' rights.

The current minister of state for trade policy has stated that throughout the continuity trade deal programme there will be no diminution of UK standards, including human rights.<sup>21</sup> However, the UK-Israel Trade and Partnership Agreement signed in 2019 (in force January 2021) has no binding safeguards for protecting human and labour rights, nor enforcement mechanisms or sanctions if there are violations of rights.

The UK has consistently sold arms to Israel, despite the illegal occupation and its own guidance relating to the overseas business risk and the OPT. The guidance emphasises that

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<sup>18</sup> State of Palestine, World Statistics Day (2020) Palestinian Bureau of Statistics  
[http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/\\_pcbs/PressRelease/Press\\_En\\_20-10-2020-wsd-en.pdf](http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/portals/_pcbs/PressRelease/Press_En_20-10-2020-wsd-en.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Exploited and Essential: Palestinian Labour under Covid-19 (2020) Who Profits?  
<https://www.whoprofits.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Exploited-and-Essential-Palestinian-Labour-under-Covid-19-2.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Database on workplace accidents in construction (2019) Kav LaOved  
<https://www.kavlaoved.org.il/work-accidents-data/>

<sup>21</sup> Greg Hands MP, Minister of State for Trade Policy (8 October 2020) Hansard  
<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-10-08/debates/C20304AC-1BDF-4F7D-9890-930D640E3559/HumanRightsTradeAgreements#contribution-B00C2BF0-9120-4FAE-A94F-07DD31F7A514>

involvement in business activities could have reputational implications as well as possible abuses of individual's rights.<sup>22</sup> Yet between 2014 and 2018, the UK issued Single Individual Export Licenses (SIELs) for arms sales to Israel to a value of £361m, demonstrating a lack of policy coherence.<sup>23</sup>

International law is clear. Israeli settlements are illegal and a war crime, they are discriminatory and give rise to human rights abuses. Business activity within the settlements helps to legitimise the illegal situation and maintain and expand the settlements. The UN Guiding Principles for Businesses and Human Rights clearly state that "business enterprises should respect human rights" and this is expected wherever they operate, including in situations of conflict.<sup>24</sup> Companies are therefore expected to carry out human rights due diligence, not only on their directly controlled operations, but on all their sub-contractors and suppliers.

## **Our work and trade union solidarity**

The TUC works closely with affiliates and the ITUC in support of justice for Palestine. Affiliates collaborate with like-minded civil society organisations and have supported campaigns and projects that build capacity in organising and collective bargaining and help increase workers' knowledge and understanding of their rights. Through policy, advocacy and campaigns, the ITUC seeks to improve working conditions for Palestinians and promote peace, while global union federations also run projects in support of strengthening Palestinian workers' rights.

In 2020, the TUC passed a motion stating full opposition to the Israeli government's stated intention to officially annex parts of the West Bank in violation of international law, with such a move being another significant step in the creation of a system of apartheid, and calls to action. Whilst the TUC cannot make a legal judgement on the issue of apartheid, it is important that we root our language in international law. We recognise the use of the term 'apartheid' brings challenges when it is used as a comparator to South Africa. We believe we must use language carefully and not risk trivialising the critical situation for Palestinians.

TUC policy calls for:

- respect for all Palestinian rights, including the right to collective self-determination and the right to return
- an end to the illegal occupation and a halt to further annexation.

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<sup>22</sup> Guidance, Overseas Business Risk - The Occupied Palestinian Territories (August 2018) Foreign and Commonwealth Office/Department for International Trade

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/overseas-business-risk-palestinian-territories/overseas-business-risk-the-occupied-palestinian-territories>

<sup>23</sup> UK arms sales to Israel, (August 2020) Campaign Against the Arms Trade

<https://caat.org.uk/resources/countries/israel/>

<sup>24</sup> Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (2011) United Nations

[https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr\\_en.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf)

- support for a just, comprehensive and lasting peace that is consistent with international law and based on a two-state solution, which must promote equality and respect for human and labour rights.

We call on the UK government to publicly support the same goals and to recognise the State of Palestine.

UK trade policy and business should ensure Palestinian labour and human rights are protected and respected, and support an end to the occupation. The TUC calls for an ethical policy on all UK trade with Israel which must include:

- suspension of the UK-Israel Trade and Partnership Agreement, which replicates the EU-Israel Association Agreement, until Palestinian rights are respected.
- a ban on trade with the illegal settlements, and requiring mandatory labelling of food produced in illegal settlements in line with the European Court of Justice ruling in 2019.
- an end to the arms trade with Israel and to military collaboration.

We also encourage affiliates, employers and pension funds to disinvest from, and boycott the goods of companies who profit from illegal settlements, the occupation and construction of the wall.