



HATEM MOUSSA/AP/PA PHOTOS

# 'It's about peace, security and justice for us all'

On a trade union delegation to Palestine in June, three FBU officials met firefighters struggling to protect their local communities in the face of extreme danger. They also saw and heard from trade unionists, human rights activists and other progressive organisations of the humanitarian disaster created by the illegal Israeli occupation.

Palestinian firefighters put out a fire at a factory in northern Gaza. The factory was set on fire by Israeli artillery, according to witnesses

## 'Bullet holes in fire engines – and firefighters'

As a trade union official I was aware, at some level, of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. As a political activist I was aware of some of the many issues requiring resolution before peace could be a possibility. As a human being nothing could have prepared me for the visit to the occupied Palestinian territories (OPTs) in June 2008.

It started with a briefing from United Nations Office of the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) on the wall,



Israeli settlements, checkpoints, road closures, land seizures, military exclusion zones and unequal access to water. I instantly understood that the rest of the world is not being told about what is happening in Palestine.

For the next week our delegation saw and experienced the day to day life of Palestinians across the OPTs, whether being confronted by settlers and armed security/Israeli Defence Force (army) whilst walking along a street in Hebron accompanied by a member of 'Breaking the Silence', an organisation of veteran Israeli soldiers, or being teargassed when attending a peaceful protest against the apartheid wall in Bil'in.

The wall separates cities, towns, neighbourhoods and even farmers from their land – all unlawful according to the International Court of Justice.

The wall and checkpoints impact on every aspect of daily life, turning the West Bank into one huge prison with people penned in like cattle, having to form queues in order to do routine chores such as shopping, working or even going for medical treatment.

Our meetings with leaders of the PGFTU (the Palestinian TUC) outlined the frustration but resilience of those under occupation in the labour movement, especially when the economy is all but bankrupt.

International aid cannot replace control over one's own economy – a message repeated

Nablus firefighters  
struggling to do their  
job in the Israeli-  
occupied West Bank

I watched aghast as a fire engine, responding to an emergency call, was stopped and delayed at one of the checkpoints

over and over by those we met.

We saw the refugee camps in Bethlehem and Nablus, where thousands of families are packed together in conditions totally unsuited for human occupation.

As a firefighter I could only imagine the horror of a property fire in these conditions. As a firefighter I also watched aghast as a fire engine, responding to an emergency call, was stopped and delayed at one of the checkpoints.

Firefighters we met in Nablus told me this is not uncommon, nor is it uncommon for one of these vehicles to be detained for up to an hour. Pumps – and firefighters – also received bullet holes when providing emergency deliveries of water to hospitals.

I carry these images with me, and everyone I meet will be told about them otherwise the Palestinians' story and struggle for everyday existence and dignity will remain hidden and forgotten.

**Kevin Brown, Regional Secretary**

### Abu Azam and his 'Palestinian F-16'

"Climb aboard my Palestinian F-16," declares Abu Azam, and we can't possibly refuse. However, Abu Azam is not the 'terrorist' Israel would claim, but an energetic and articulate 65-year-old Palestinian farmer from the West Bank town of Jayyus, and his F-16 is perhaps the oldest working tractor I have ever seen.

Abu Azam drives us to a gate in the Israeli 'separation barrier'. The electrified wire, ditch and road stand out like a fresh scar on the landscape, forming part of the 700km 'apartheid' wall that snakes through Palestinian land in the West Bank. It was built here in 2003 and cuts off two thirds of Jayyus' 3,200 acres of farmland from the village.

The gate is one of only two access points hereabouts to the other side of the barrier and is only opened by Israeli guards for an hour three times a day, though not always and not always when farmers need to be on their land.

Under Israeli law areas not cultivated for three years become state property, so

the barrier helps to lever Palestinians from their land. For the last five years Abu Azam has struggled to go on farming, but Israeli authorities also require Palestinians to apply for 'visitor permits' to farm their own land, and these are refused to all but a few. Out of 32 Jayyus farmers requesting permits in June, only four including Abu Azam were granted them, and only then for three months. So there is no guarantee of even being able to see crops through to harvest. Abu Azam has three sons but none have been granted permits, so he must farm



largely alone.

Israel claims the barrier protects its citizens, in this case an Israeli settlement called Zufin. But Zufin is itself illegal under international law since it was established in 1989 on land everyone in the world except Israel says is Palestinian.

In addition the barrier encloses ten times the current built up area of Zufin, has taken six out of seven of Jayyus's ground wells, and uprooted over 6,000 olive trees, devastating

Following the visit, the Union agreed:

- FBU branches should be encouraged to affiliate to Palestine Solidarity Campaign
- FBU should continue to be involved in future delegations
- FBU should continue engagement with progressive Israelis and organisations campaigning for peace, justice and equality with the Palestinians
- FBU should continue to develop links with Palestinian FRS workers, including twinning fire stations
- FBU should seek funding for training Palestinian FRS staff and raise this issue with politicians, fire authorities and CFOA

the livelihoods of Jayyus' 3,500 inhabitants, 85% of whom used to be farmers.

The fortitude of Palestinians like Abu Azam is inspiring, somehow managing to maintain pride, joy and humour despite the injustices heaped on them. Israeli occupation is relentless however. A new plan to reroute the fence has just been released which would return about a quarter of the land to the Jayyus side, but remove the gates completely, leaving no access at all to the other 1,500 acres of land! It would be annexed, and deemed Israeli state property in three years. In other words, stolen.

The day before our visit the European Union voted unanimously to upgrade its relations with Israel, with the UK a key supporter. Meeting Abu Azam I feel ashamed to be British and party to such hypocrisy and callous disregard. When crimes like these receive support rather than condemnation it undermines peace, security and justice for us all.

**Dave Chappell, Regional health and safety rep**

### From Tel Aviv to the West Bank – a world apart

We arrived at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport terminal – a very modern and comfortable building. Later, on the West Bank, we saw other 'terminals,' or at least that's what the Israel authorities call them. But the Qalandia and Eretz checkpoints are a world apart from Ben Gurion airport. No air conditioning, no designer shops, no bars or cafes. Instead, there are armed soldiers, five-metre high fences, watchtowers, razor wire, turnstiles designed for one person at a time, restricted access for vehicles and an atmosphere of harassment.

I saw mothers with young children struggling with bags of shopping trying to get through the turnstiles. Israel says these checkpoints are necessary for its security – but all I could see was an elaborate system of control, humiliation and outright harassment.

These people are not anti-semitic, terrorists, or fundamentalists, they are mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers – and they are desperate to be allowed to live in peace.

**John McGhee, National Officer**

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