

Palestine, Israel and the trade union movement

A trade union supporting war crimes

Israel's 'Operation Cast Lead' from December 2008 to January 2009 in which Israeli forces killed 1,434 Palestinians, including over 400 children, and destroyed the infrastructure of the Gaza Strip, was condemned worldwide. The UN-commissioned Goldstone Report detailed Israel's war crimes and called for those responsible to be brought to justice. It also called for an end to Israel's blockade, which has entered its fourth year, creating a humanitarian disaster. Essential foodstuffs, medicines and building materials are still being prevented from reaching those in need.

During and after the assaults on Gaza, Israel's principal trade union organisation, the **Histadrut**, endorsed its government's actions absolutely, echoing their line that sole responsibility for all deaths lies at the door of Hamas. (This, despite the fact that even the Israeli government's own spokesperson Mark Regev conceded that it was the Israeli forces who ended the ceasefire on 4 November 2008, by

their assassination of six Hamas members.)

Homeless in Gaza. Photo: MaanImages.

In Britain, the views of the Histadrut were, as usual, given absolute support by the **Trade Union**



Friends of Israel, who claimed in their January 2009 Update that 'Israel made clear that the operation was defensive.'

After the March 2009 elections in Israel, Ofer Eini, General Secretary of the Histadrut, encouraged the Labor Party to join the government of Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu, whose criticism of the attacks on Gaza was that they had not gone far enough. Netanyahu has gone on to form a government with Avigdor Lieberman, described by sections of the Israeli press as "Israel's Mussolini".

The roots of Palestinian trade unionism

Long before the foundation of Israel, there were independent workers' organisations in Palestine. The roots of the Palestinian trade union movement can be traced back to 1920, when a small mutual aid society was established by railway workers to provide assistance for sick workers and benefits for the families of the deceased. By 1923 this became a formally registered benevolent society. From these early roots the **Palestinian Arab Workers' Society** (PAWS) was established in Haifa in 1925.

PAWS was part of a broader range of organisations that aimed at defending the rights of workers, in the face of both British colonial rule and the threats by Zionist leaders to 'transfer' the indigenous population beyond the borders of Palestine.

In January 1930 PAWS organised the first countrywide **Congress of Arab Workers** in Haifa, attended by 61 delegates representing some 3,000 workers.

From 1936–39 the Palestinian trade union organisations played an important role in resisting British rule, organising a general strike in 1936 which lasted six months and later, a general non-payment of taxes. Dockworkers in Jaffa joined the general strike and remained on strike throughout the whole time.

Key activists were arrested by the British who, at the same time, were bombing Palestinian villages to suppress the uprising. Eventually the resistance was crushed by the British army, and many of the leaders hanged.

In later years other bodies like the **Federation of Arab Trade Unions and Labor Societies** (FATULS) and the **Arab Workers' Congress** (AWC) emerged, with differing perspectives on questions of strategy and tactics.

In April 1946 a general strike involved some 23,000 employees of the then government of Palestine. From time to time there was joint action between Arab and Jewish workers but in the end the stumbling-block to unity remained the nationalist aspirations which always dominated the Histadrut's approach.

The Palestinian Arab trade unions were recognised as legitimate representatives of Arab workers in Palestine at the founding conference of the **World Federation of Trade Unions** (WFTU) in 1945. However the Palestinian labour movement was effectively destroyed during the Nakba (Catastrophe) of 1947–48, when the newly established state of Israel expelled more than 750,000 Palestinians and occupied 78% of what had been historic Palestine. **By the mid-1950s all Arab organisations, including trade union bodies, of pre-1948 Palestine had ceased to exist.**

The Histadrut and Zionism's 'conquest of labour'

The Histadrut, *General Federation for Hebrew Workers in the Land of Israel*, was established in 1920. As the name declared, the institution was for 'Hebrew' (i.e. Jewish) workers only and secondly, it sought to represent the workers of a yet-to-exist "Israel". Its name defined it as a Jewish national organisation, part of the political body of Zionism, not an organisation of workers in "Palestine", which was the region's name. **The name itself expressed a major contradiction between the organisation's exclusively ethnic-national identity and its declared trade union ideals.** This ideological contradiction is illustrated in the Histadrut's 'Hebrew Labour' campaign, which aimed at promoting Jewish immigration and ousting all "foreign" — i.e. the indigenous, predominantly Palestinian Arab — workers from Jewish workplaces.

The Histadrut was firmly committed to the Zionist Organisation's policy to achieve the "conquest of labour" (*kibbush avodah*): "Jewish jobs for Jewish workers". The concerns of workers were secondary to the objective of establishing the Zionist state. It was a nationalist body which organised amongst workers, and only secondly a trade union.

Between 1927 and 1936, for example, the Histadrut set up hundreds of pickets near citrus groves and urban construction sites employing Arabs, trying to convince Jewish employers to fire the Arab workers. In 1931 they sabotaged joint Arab and Jewish bus and taxi driver action. In 1936 the British authorities and the Histadrut collaborated to keep the port of Haifa open by providing strike breakers to undermine the Haifa dockworkers strike.

British collusion

Frequently the British authorities played a role in assisting the Histadrut. For example, at the end of 1936 all Arab workers were expelled from the Majdal Yaba quarry and Jewish workers were employed. Some 400 Arab workers lost their jobs and British police made numerous arrests of the Arab workers who were trying to defend their livelihoods.



British troops disperse a demonstration in Jaffa in 1933.

The British authorities frequently turned a blind eye to the actions of the Histadrut, which was involved from the early 1920s onwards in organising the **Hagana**, a paramilitary group which subsequently went on to carry out terrorist acts, especially in driving Palestinians from their homes in 1947–48. The Hagana worked with other groups like the **Irgun** terrorist organisation and ultimately merged with them and others to become the Israeli army.

The first General Secretary of the Histadrut was **David Ben-Gurion**, later to become the first Prime Minister of Israel. He was at the forefront of the Zionist movement, declaring that a ‘general evacuation’ of the native population was key to the establishment of a Jewish state, and that this would be a violent process: **“It is impossible to imagine general evacuation without compulsion, and brutal compulsion”** (1941).



Ben-Gurion: ‘Transfer’ is the key.

For many years, the Histadrut only allowed Jewish members. In 1932 they drew up the charter of a body called the Palestine Labor League (PLL) for Arab workers, thus strengthening the decision to exclude Palestinian Arab workers from membership. In 1943 a special department was set up for Arab workers.

It was not until 1959 that Arab citizens of Israel were allowed to become direct members of the Histadrut. The political character of the Histadrut changed little, however: after dropping the term

“Hebrew” from its official name, it still continued to undermine the industrial struggles led by Arab workers.

The term “separate but equal” was frequently used in South Africa to justify the exclusion of black people from many walks of life, including some trade unions which sought to defend the privileges of their white members. This same approach has been echoed in the thinking and actions of the leaders of the Histadrut.

No ordinary union

It is clear that the Histadrut was never an ordinary trade union — established to defend the interests of workers irrespective of their colour, religion or ethnicity. It was founded as a political agent with a clear agenda to protect the privileges of Jewish workers. For many decades the Histadrut was, after the government itself, the second largest employer in Israel, through its many economic enterprises — in industry, building trades, banking, insurance, transportation, travel agencies, dairy cooperatives, arms manufacture and so on. In addition, the collective and cooperative agricultural settlements — **kibbutzim** and **moshavim** — founded by the Labor-Zionist parties, belonged to the Histadrut, which marketed their products through its various cooperatives.

The Histadrut owned the Bank Hapoalim (the Workers’ Bank) which, like many Israeli institutions, had close relations with Apartheid South Africa. In the mid-1980s companies like Koor Industries, in which the Histadrut had significant holdings, were very active in Apartheid South Africa. Koor had a permanent office in South Africa and controlled most of the trade between Israel and that country and had a keen interest in the arms industry which was supplying South Africa with materials to repress the anti-Apartheid struggle.

“The claim of the Kibbutz and Moshav cooperative agricultural settlements to socialism is misguided, since they are apartheid settler organizations, constitutionally obligated to exclude and discriminate against non-Jews. The attempts by socialist Zionist parties to reconcile Zionism, socialism and brotherhood among peoples have always been predicated upon a calculated lie.”

Uri Davis, Israeli academic and author of *Apartheid Israel*

Leaders of the organisation are elected on the basis of proportionate support for political parties within the Histadrut. As a consequence, its positions have reflected the political positions of these parties. In turn the Histadrut has been the source of a number of prominent Israeli political figures such as David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir. Most of Histadrut’s General Secretaries have been prominent in their political parties — for example Haim Ramon became a minister and then Deputy Prime Minister and Amir Peretz became head of the Labor Party and Minister of Defence overseeing the 2006 invasion of Lebanon.

Effects of the “free market”

During the 1990s successive Israeli governments exposed the economy to the global market and began a major process of liberalisation and privatisation. Many of Histadrut’s assets were privatised. The 1995 health insurance law broke the link between the Histadrut and its health insurance company, Klalit, which had been a major reason for workers to join the union. The combined effect of these measures was a halving in the Histadrut’s

membership. The Histadrut remains strongest in the state and public sector, areas in which Jewish labour predominates.

The Histadrut has re-branded itself as the New Histadrut, a conscious effort to break with its past as an employer and service provider and to focus on core trade union work. Nevertheless the Histadrut has not been at the forefront of organising workers in the more vulnerable sectors of the economy. It has not been evident in any campaigns to break down the discrimination against Palestinian Arab citizens in Israel nor has it seriously challenged the appalling racist practices used against immigrant workers from across the world.

Challenging the Histadrut

The failure of the Histadrut to represent the most vulnerable workers has led to a number of other organisations being set up:

Sawt el-Amel ('The Laborer's Voice' — www.laborers-voice.org) is one of the most active organisations within Israel working to fight discrimination in the workplace and to protect the rights of workers of Palestinian origin. Based in Nazareth, they are currently opposing the welfare-to-work Wisconsin Plan, a scheme also opposed by unions in Britain, but backed by the Histadrut. It will have a particularly adverse effect on Palestinian workers and their families. In addition they are working to restore money running into millions of shekels owed to workers from Gaza by Israel-based employers.



Demonstration in Nazareth against the Wisconsin plan. Photo: Sawt el-Amel.

Sawt el-Amel have also taken the initiative in defending the 200 Palestinian workers who were recently sacked by the railway company because they had not had military service training. (The Histadrut only woke up to this issue when they realised that orthodox Jews who did not do military service might also face discrimination.)

Kav LaOved (Worker's Hotline — www.kavlaoved.org.il) is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation committed to protecting the rights of disadvantaged workers employed in Israel and by Israelis in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including Palestinians, migrant workers, subcontracted workers and new immigrants. Kav LaOved has pursued a number of ground-breaking cases through the Israeli courts, including the Supreme Court ruling on the rights of Palestinian workers in the settlement industrial zones. Kav LaOved is currently working with the PGFTU in Jericho to organise agricultural workers.

The Workers' Advice Center (www.wac-maan.org.il) has been campaigning on a range of similar issues and the rights of migrant

workers, but they too report little or no evidence of Histadrut cooperation.

Palestinian workers at the bottom of the heap

Today, the Palestinian labour force in Israel is still faced with problems similar to its situation in pre-1948 Palestine, i.e. concentration in the low-wage sector, unequal pay, lack of infrastructure and other obstacles that contradict the principle of decent work, including the lack of labour law enforcement and inspections.

Over time, the Histadrut reinforced the creation of a separate, low-wage sector for a largely unskilled and unorganised Arab labour force in Israel, which is nowadays joined by migrant workers from Eastern Europe, Africa, and South Asia and new immigrants from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union. This low-wage, manual labour sector occupied by the Arab labour force is now in times of globalisation gradually being transformed into an unemployed labour sector. In its poverty report for 2005, the National Insurance Institute revealed that **52% of Palestinian citizens of Israel live below the poverty line, as opposed to 16% of Jewish Israelis.**

Due to the Histadrut's historical ties to the employers' bodies and the hegemony of the white-collar Labour Councils within the organisation, blue-collar workers of all ethnic backgrounds have little influence in today's New Histadrut. This apparent lack of interest in the country's working class needs is reflected in the Histadrut's refusal to admit migrant workers to its ranks until December 2009 and its unwillingness to address the social injustice of current economic policies, including the imposition of the Wisconsin Plan.

Supporting workers' rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where unemployment averages more than 50%, numerous unions come together under the umbrella of the **Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions** (PGFTU). Under conditions of military occupation, with checkpoints, barriers and the Wall, it is not easy for unions to function properly, but the PGFTU has been at the forefront of drafting labour legislation and campaigning to safeguard the rights of both workers and the unemployed.

Palestinian workers travelling from the Occupied Palestinian Territories to work inside Israel have also had big problems. The numbers of permits have been greatly cut, with the declared intention of reducing them to zero, and workers without documentation are frequently arrested and held in detention.

Questions that need answers

There are a number of key issues on which the Histadrut should make their position clear:

- **The occupation and settlement of the West Bank, in clear violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention**
- **The annexation and settlement of East Jerusalem, again illegal under international law, and recognised by no nation state**
- **The demolition of Palestinian homes, both within Israel and in the Occupied Territories**

- The expansion of the illegal settlements
- The building of the apartheid Wall, dividing Palestinian communities and stealing both land and water resources, an action strongly condemned by the International Court of Justice and the UN
- The building of Industrial Zones along the Wall, in order to exploit Palestinian labour, often in industries considered too toxic to be developed within Israel itself
- The inhuman siege of Gaza, which is causing the deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians and immense suffering for 1.5 million Palestinians

Trade unions worldwide condemn Israel's war on Gaza

The Histadrut condoned the carnage caused by Israel's onslaught on Gaza last winter, which has been widely condemned by trade unionists in Britain and across the world, from South Africa to Canada. This was in sharp contrast to the actions taken by trade unionists across the world.

Dockworkers in Durban, **South Africa**, supported by COSATU (the South African TUC) refused to unload an Israeli ship in protest against the attacks on Gaza and the actions of the Israeli government. It subsequently passed a motion supporting boycott, divestment and sanctions on Israel. Railworkers in **Norway** staged a token two-minute strike and informed their passengers of the reasons for their actions.

In **Canada** trades unionists have been making their voices heard alongside unions in **Ireland** and **Belgium**, and in **Britain** increasing numbers of unions have made clear their condemnation of the actions of Israel.

Jacques Michiels, the General Secretary of the Belgium trade union the *FGTB Centrale Générale/ABVV Algemene Centrale* wrote to Ofer Eine, the General Secretary of the Histadrut asking that the Histadrut make a "call for peace without condition before losing credit and dignity [in the international trade union movement]". The letter went on to say that **"If not, we will ask our representatives to remove you from the trade union authorities such as the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). To isolate you seems to us the only way to follow in this context"**.

The **Scottish Trades Union Congress** asked the Histadrut about its "positions in relation to Gaza and the Occupied Territories". It also stated that: **"The STUC will review its relationship with Histadrut in this context."** It also called for a boycott of Israeli goods.

The response of the Palestinian trade union movement was clear and unequivocal. In a statement headed "We are all Gaza" the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions said:

"The current criminal offensive by the Israeli army on Gaza is only an episode in the series of murders and massacres committed by Israel (the occupation state) against the Palestinian people; such incidents are considered war crimes according to the international humanitarian laws and Geneva Conventions" (11/01/09).

What you can do:

The international trade union movement must play its part in ending this inhuman treatment of the Palestinian people by building a mass campaign like the international anti-apartheid movement.

18 national trade unions are currently affiliated to PSC, which is heading the campaign for justice for the Palestinians.

We are calling for:

- The right to self-determination for the Palestinian people
- An end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza
- The immediate dismantling of the Apartheid Wall
- The right of return of Palestinian refugees

PSC organises regular TU delegations to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Get involved!

Join the Palestine Solidarity Campaign

- I enclose £..... to help the PSC in its work
- I want to join the PSC (individual £24/unwaged £12)

Name.....

Address

.....

..... Postcode

Tel

Email

Cheques payable to PSC

Return to: PSC, Box BM PSA, London WC1N 3XX

Or phone 0207 7006192

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Further information

Sawt el-Amel: *Separate and Unequal: The History of Arab Labour in pre-1948 Palestine and Israel*, December 2006. www.laborers-voice.org

Uri Davis: *Apartheid Israel: Possibilities for the Struggle Within*, Zed Books, London, 2003

Zachary Lockman: *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906–1948*, University of California Press, 1996.

Steven A. Glazer: *Picketing for Hebrew Labor: A Window on Histadrut Tactics and Strategy*, *Journal of Palestine Studies*: Summer 2001, Vol. 30.

For more information, to join PSC, and to read the reports of the trade union delegations:

www.palestinecampaign.org