

A SILENT WAR



**A report from a trade
union delegation to
Palestine, July 2015**

Front cover image: A battered Palestinian flag flying defiantly in Hebron. Picture by Marz Colombini

Between July 21st and 28th 2015, a delegation of trade unionists travelled to Palestine with the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. They were (L-R): Tim Lezard (NUJ executive), Andi Fox (TSSA executive), Colin Smith (ASLEF), Manuel Cortes (TSSA general secretary), [Nabeel At-Kurd], Steve Sibley (PSC), Mick Whelan (ASLEF general secretary), Marz Colombini (ASLEF executive), Mick Carney (TSSA president), Paul Scholey (Morrish Solicitors), Hugh Lanning (PSC chair) and Peter Pinkney (RMT president).



The Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) campaigns for peace and justice for Palestinians, in support of international law and human rights and against all racism. Help us to build a new mass anti apartheid movement for Palestine



July 21st Arrive Tel Aviv airport and drive to Jerusalem, through checkpoints.



Visit Old City, witness Israeli soldiers hassling Muslims trying to worship in mosque.

Tear gas – an everyday experience for Palestinian children

“We are suffering every single minute”

Pop! The tear gas canister fizzes through the air and lands next to the children playing outside the office.



As we dash to the window, we see one child, aged about ten, run towards the steaming canister, pick it up and hurl it defiantly back towards the soldier who fired it. The soldier, who is 200m away, casually turns around and disappears back behind the safety of the 25ft-high separation barrier or ‘wall’ as it is known.

As he does so, the gas reaches our open window, forcing us backwards into the meeting room, eyes running, throats rasping.

“Tear gas – it happens every day,” shrugs Salah Ajarma, who runs the Lajee Centre in Bethlehem, teaching the residents of the Aida Refugee Camp about human rights, dance, reading and music.

“I am 42 years old and I have lived in the camp all my life. You ask how we feel? We feel we are in a big gaol. We are suffering every single minute.”

More than 5,000 people live in the camp – one of three camps in Bethlehem – after having been made homeless by the Israeli state. Conditions are crowded, with one person for every two square metres.

When they first arrive, refugees live in tents for as long as six years. Toilets are outside, there is no kitchen. Women have taken to sleeping fully



clothed because soldiers come into their homes at night.

Life in the camp is no life at all. Workers wake at 3am to reserve their place in the checkpoint queue so they get through the wall by 7am. They come home in the evening, tired, and sleep instantly. They see their children only at weekends.

As we leave Aida behind, it is impossible not to ask ourselves what society we have created where it’s acceptable to launch tear gas at children, where children are no longer scared of tear gas and where adults do not react to children being teargassed.

It is also impossible not to reflect how, unlike millions of Palestinians, we can walk away. But having witnessed their suffering at first hand, we have chosen not to. We stand in solidarity with them.

Tim Lezard, Editor of USi (www.usilive.org)

Main picture: children in Aida are tear gassed by Israeli soldiers. This is a still from a film shot by reporter Mohammed al-Azza in February https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTSgKTPN5_M

Below: the children playing before they were tear gassed during our trip.



July 22nd Visit UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – 4.4m people live in West Bank & Gaza, 44% of whom are refugees.



1.8m people live in Gaza – that’s 4,500 people per km². 1,500 Palestinians killed in Gaza last year, 18,600 homes destroyed.

On the right track with the Palestine Solidarity Campaign

“You need multipliers.” Such was the advice received by PSC some years ago from Mustafa Barghouti – general secretary of the Palestine National Initiative. People who can spread the word about Palestine in their own world and networks.

When we meet him again on this delegation, his advice remains the same – but now what is required is a shift in the balance of power. Palestinians alone can not stop the tide of settlements, roads and railways stealing their land from beneath their feet.

So every delegation we support counts. This time it is a group of senior officers from the three rail unions – ASLEF, RMT and TSSA. Powerful industrially and influential politically in the wider labour and trade union movement.

They saw the light railway under construction to link yet more settlements. They met with truck drivers in Nazareth, unions in Jericho trying to organise workers in settlements to claim their rights, heard about “illegal” workers climbing and going under the Wall

to seek work in Israel. Young postal workers trying to organise in Hebron. Bedouin deprived of their land so they now had to buy settlement produced camel’s milk.

The Palestine Solidarity Campaign does what it says on the tin, but building solidarity needs organisation, resources and commitment. This is the bread and butter of the trade union movement and why they have been such a vital element of the campaign.

If you want to find out more about our campaigns and how you can get involved – follow us on Twitter (@pscupdates or Facebook (Palestine Solidarity Campaign UK). You don’t have to visit, you can support Palestine in your everyday life. Everyone we met urged support for BDS – the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign. We were told it is the best way we can bring pressure to bear.

In history, Britain helped cause this injustice – let’s be part of the solution. If you want to help and join visit our website (www.palestinecampaign.org).

Hugh Lanning, PSC Chair



The 2015 delegation with Mustafa Barghouti



As the only woman on the delegation I think the thing that struck me most of all was the treatment and suffering of my sisters in Palestine. Obviously I understand the cultural differences but it seemed to be rooted much deeper than that. Hearing that women in Palestine literally have no workers’ rights was both shocking and disturbing. No maternity rights, no sick pay, no family care provisions. So many of the things that we take for granted, even though these are battles fought and won for us recently by our sisters before us. Even when we visited a Palestinian trade union that had projects to employ both Palestinian and Jewish women we were given a wonderful talk by a sister who then went to make the coffee for everyone. It is and remains a man’s world.

But nothing absolutely nothing could have prepared me for the suffering of the Palestinian people and I was deeply touched by their quietness and humility.

Andi Fox, TSSA Executive Member



Visit Civic Coalition for Palestinian Rights where we hear Israel treats East Jerusalem as its own territory.



We visit Nabeel, who has been evicted from the annexe he built alongside the home he’s lived in for 59 years.

From Balfour to Gaza – the background to decades of occupation

The roots of the situation in Palestine-Israel go back to 1917 when, in the Balfour Declaration, the British government promised to provide a “national home” in Palestine for Jews, despite 95% of the Palestinian population being Muslim or Christian.

The British occupied Palestine in 1918 and for the next thirty years supported Jewish colonial immigration from Europe.

In 1948 Britain withdrew, handing over Palestine to the United Nations which assigned 55% of the land to the proposed state of Israel. At this time, Jews constituted only one third of the population and owned just 6% of the land.

During 1948-9, Israel killed 13,000 Palestinians and drove 750,000 off their land. Descendants of these families now live in refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza as well as Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. At this time the West Bank was held by Jordan and the Gaza Strip was under Egyptian military administration.

In 1967, during the Six-Day War, Israeli forces captured the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem – the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).

From this time on, Israeli settlers continually broke international law to occupy further lands owned by Palestinians until, between 1993-5, the US attempted to broker a peace deal. The so-called Oslo Accords failed as Israeli settlements doubled in number during the talks.

Israel’s increasingly brutal military rule and ongoing seizure of Palestine land ignited the second intifada in 2000, when thousands were killed as Palestinian refugee camps were invaded, shelled and bombed.

Two years later, in 2002, the Arab governments agree to recognise Israel within the pre-1967 borders, but this was rejected by Israel, which began building a separation wall.

When Hamas won OPT elections in 2006, Israel responded by abducting 35 MPs, imprisoning Hamas supporters and attacking Gaza, destroying its only power plant, and imposing a complete blockade.

In 2008-9, Israel bombed Gaza for three weeks, killing 1,500 Palestinians, and in 2014 it did so again, this time for seven weeks, killing more than 2,000 Palestinians.

In 1967, during the Six-Day War, Israeli forces captured the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem – the Occupied Palestinian Territories.



Image: Wikimedia Commons



July 23rd Meet with PGFTU and Kav LaOved in Jericho to hear how unions are working to beat discrimination and organise against low wages.



Meet with the mayor of Zbeidat, Hasan Jarimi, to hear of his concerns over Palestinian agricultural workers.

Statistics – not just another brick in the wall

Statistics are, necessarily, dry. But in their aridity they are also revealing and, in this case, damning.

So when Dr Ezekiel Lein from the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Occupied Palestinian Territories tells us, as a matter of record, that 1,500 people in Gaza last year died under Israeli fire, it is hard for us not to translate those cold statistics into human suffering.

When he says 551 children were killed during the three-week Operation Protective Edge, when Israel fired rockets indiscriminately into the 365km² Gaza Strip, we can only imagine the terror of the 1.8m Palestinians trapped inside.

And when he relates that 18,600 homes were destroyed, along with 75 hospitals and clinics, 100 UN facilities and electricity and water institutions, we can only picture the devastation to their homeland and their daily lives.

That devastation continues today because Israel maintains a tight grip on the border crossings; less than 1% of the construction materials required to rebuild Palestinian homes have been allowed to enter Gaza.



Left: an Israeli soldier at a checkpoint.
Right: the wall looms over passing traffic.



I never knew what to expect, and I certainly found the unexpected.

The dramatic moments – tear gas and guns and checkpoints – of course are the easy things to recall.

But what I think stays with me on a more visceral level is a sense of the oppression under which the Palestinians labour, a sense that grew day after day until initial shock turned into disbelief and then outrage.

I feel I should say something about the legal position. Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention states: "The occupying power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own population into the territories it occupies."

That's happened, and is happening now. The settlements are becoming cities in their own right.

I don't know what the ultimate answer to the question is.

But the delegation convinced me of this: I am absolutely sure that we need to raise and maintain international awareness and inquiry until Israel takes steps to ensure the Palestinians are afforded freedom, equality and democracy.

We need to keep telling the story.

**Paul Scholey, Operations Partner
Head of Employment Rights
Morrish Solicitors**

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of permits for Palestinians wishing to build on their own land are turned down.



Call into Israeli settlement in Jordan Valley – amazing contrast in living standards to Palestinian villages.



Visit Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem, witness children being tear gassed.

1,500 people in Gaza last year died under Israeli fire.

1%



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556,000



Israeli settlers have moved into the West Bank, contravening the Geneva Convention.

600



number of Palestinian homes on the West Bank without a permit demolished by Israel.

Away from Gaza, Dr Lein tells us 80% of the 2.7m Palestinians in the West Bank live on less than 40% of the land because 556,000 Israeli settlers have moved in, contravening the Geneva Convention.

Any Palestinian wishing to build on their own land needs a permit from Israel. 95% of permits are turned down, but Palestinians build anyway because they need somewhere to live. Last year Israel demolished 600 homes built without a permit, displacing 1,215 people. There are currently 11,425 homes awaiting the same fate.

“This is not allowing people to address the needs of their lives,” he concludes. “Israel building new settlements is further entrenching the situation and making it harder to achieve a two-state solution.”

www.ochaopt.org

Israel began construction of the 420-mile wall in 2002. Palestinian land is confiscated to build it, cutting off hundreds of farmers and traders from their land and means of economic survival. In 2003 a UN report condemned the wall as illegal and “an unlawful act of annexation” and in 2004 the International Court of Justice ruled the wall breached international law.



Approximately 80,000 people live behind the wall in Shuafat, a refugee camp in East Jerusalem.



Settlements, settlements, settlements. Everywhere you go there are more settlements being built; roads and railways under construction to link them and the Wall extended to separate settlers from the Palestinians. This is no longer an occupation – it is the theft and colonisation of Palestine.

With each visit I make, it is ever clearer that Israel does not want a solution that involves a free Palestine, it just wants to rule and control all the land from the River Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea. We saw Bedouin in the process of being forcibly moved from their traditional land, children in the Refugee Camp being teargassed and everywhere you went – settlers arrogant in the knowledge that they were immune to the normal rule of law.

Palestinian villages are being demolished, over-built by settlements and re-named. History is being re-written before our eyes. It must stop.

Hugh Lanning, Chair of Palestine Solidarity Campaign



Questioned by police as we stop in Slawnian Lowze, where Israel wants to demolish 95 Palestinian homes to create a park.



Every time Palestinians hold protest meetings, they are arrested and their tent HQ destroyed. However, another is soon in its place.

Israeli soldiers evict Palestinian pensioner

“I won’t go anywhere until I die”

We’ve all experienced noisy neighbours, right? We complain to the authorities and they sort out the problem. But what if the authorities were the ones who installed the noisy neighbours?

That’s exactly what happened to 71-year-old Nabeel Al-Kurd, who’s lived in the same house in East Jerusalem since 1956. He decided it was time for him and his wife to give some space to the other eleven family members – including his 94-year-old mother – so built an annex next to his home.

But because he didn’t have a permit, Israeli soldiers smashed down his door at 5am, kicked him out and threw his furniture out on the street. A couple of hours later, Israeli settlers moved their own furniture in.

The settlers, young, idealist Zionists, were placed there by the Israeli authorities to force Nabeel out of his home. They did their best – playing loud music, insulting his family, even letting their dogs attack him – but Nabeel stayed firm.

“I won’t go anywhere unless I die, when I shall go to the cemetery,” he says, defiantly. “The settlers are there to provoke conflict. Always the police are coming, always we are scared about the children. We don’t allow them out because they get into fights.

“The settlers don’t stay here for long. They are only here to prove they are controlling the house, then new ones move in. They want us to leave. This is a silent war, not a war with tanks like in Gaza. We ask you to raise your voices, to tell people of our situation.”

Nabeel’s situation is far from unique, as Ingrid Jaradat Gassner from the Civic Coalition for Palestinian Rights tells us earlier in the day.

“What is going on in Palestine is far worse than apartheid because not only do Palestinians face racism and discrimination every day, but Israel wants them to leave the land,” she says.

“The settlers should not be here in East Jerusalem. Israel treats East Jerusalem as its own territory. It is in complete control over

Right: Nabeel’s furniture thrown on to the street. Far right: Nabeel with his granddaughter.



Far left: Nabeel outside his home. Left: settlers challenge his family. Above: the dog that attacked Nabeel.



July 24th Hottest day – 112 degrees F – when we visit AL-araquib, an unrecognised Bedouin village in the Negev Desert.



Sheik Sayah al-Touri tells us five years ago 573 people lived here. Now only 22 remain. The others have been forcibly evicted.



construction, allowing settlers to build, but not Palestinians.”

Jerusalem, like Berlin during the Cold War, is divided into East and West. The West is the Jewish area; the East is the Palestinian area. In 1967, Israel granted permanent Israeli residency to Arabs living in the city at that time. Those not present lost the right to reside in Jerusalem.

To build homes on their land, Palestinians must first seek a permit from the Israeli government, which turns down 95% of applications. When the alternative is being made homeless, it is no surprise Palestinians build houses anyway. There are currently 20,000 houses in East Jerusalem built without permits. A third of the population risks eviction from their homes if the state decides to demolish their homes.

“If their homes are demolished, they leave East Jerusalem and their residency is revoked – it’s Catch 22,” explains Ingrid.



At least Palestinians living in East Jerusalem have some semblance of freedom, even if it is in the shadow of the barrier. If they live on the West Bank their lives are controlled by soldiers, checkpoints and the dreaded barrier.

They are not allowed to use the new highways running between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem or serving the new settlements. They have to use old roads, detouring around the new ones, sometimes more than doubling their commute times.

They have to drive around the outside of Jerusalem while Israelis can drive through the city. Palestinian homes have water tanks on the roof so when Israel decides to cut off the mains water, they have reserves. Israelis are waved through checkpoints, Palestinians forced out of their vehicles and searched.

When you witness the inequality, it’s hard to argue with Ingrid’s description of apartheid.



Having followed the situation in Palestine for over forty years, I thought I was an expert. Having been there, I realise I knew nothing.

Nothing could have prepared me for the injustices that I saw. Settlements that I envisaged as villages at best, turned out to be huge towns. People evicted from their homes in Palestinian districts, so that Israelis can move in beggars belief. Seven year old children tear gassed for laughing at soldiers, people having their homes bulldozed because they didn’t have permits to build extensions, while Israelis are building settlements on Palestinian lands on, and on the list grows. Nothing can describe the suffering of the Palestinian people.

Their friendliness, bravery, and fortitude in such circumstance humbled me totally.

It is obvious that the Oslo Agreement is dead in the water. The West, and indeed the whole world, need to wake up and act to stop this inhumanity taking place, and they must act yesterday before it’s too late.

Peter Pinkney, RMT President



We meet Imad A. A. Temiza, Head of Palestinian Postal services workers union, (PPSWU) in Hebron.



Hebron, a city of 630,000 in the Judean mountains, has been taken over by 400 settlers, guarded by 3,000 soldiers.

Art as resistance

Too much of the world is silent to the suffering of the Palestinian people. Unlike Israel, Palestine has no access to the funds required for global media propaganda. Instead, they turn their defiance into art. All these images come from the wall in Bethlehem.



Palestinians are not allowed to move freely around their own city.



July 25th We meet Assaf Adiv from Wac-Ma'an, an independent union for Arab and Jewish workers, in Nazareth.



We also meet truck drivers organising against long hours and low pay.



We enjoy some olive oil made by a Palestinian workers' co-operative www.sindyanna.com.

A date with the Palestinian unions fighting for workers' rights

Workers in the UK face hazards every day, but I doubt many have been bitten by a snake up a tree.

That's a real threat for date-pickers in the Jordan Valley, lifted into palm trees by cranes and left there, without food or water, for as long as three hours.

"Snakes climb the trees to go after eggs," explains Wael Natheef of the Jericho branch of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions. "If you're a worker, where do you go to escape a snake? It is very dangerous work."

On the ground workers face different problems, namely exposure to pesticides, as well as low pay, racial discrimination, sexual harassment, blacklisting and, bizarrely, lie detectors.

But despite all this, unions are growing in the Jordan Valley, as organisers steal into villages after nightfall to teach workers about their rights.

"It is tough, but we start," says Wael, whose organisation is helped by Kav LaOved, an Israeli labour rights group campaigning for rights for workers employed by Israelis.

Small groups of Israeli settlers have occupied the land, employing Palestinian and Thai workers on low pay. Employers avoid labour laws by sub-contracting work, allowing them to deny knowledge of H&S breaches, underpayment and illegal hiring of children.

A couple of days later we visit Nazareth, where we meet Assaf Adiv, leader of Wac-Ma'an, an independent union for Arab and Jewish workers in Israel.

"Solidarity with Palestine is a principled position everyone should adopt – we want workers to meet, to look into each other's eyes and break down the wall," he says.

"Not everything to do with Israel is negative. This is not a struggle of one race, one society, it is a human struggle. We are all working for justice: freedom is a slogan that can unite Jews and Arabs."

We hear from truck drivers attempting to organise against worker exploitation, low pay and long hours which could be fatal if they fall asleep at the wheel.

"Israel has very good labour laws ... but they aren't implemented," says driver Shuki Shabso. "The bosses send us on safety courses one day, then the next day they tell us to break the safety rules."

"But they are clever. They cheat you in such a way you cannot sue them. Other drivers are afraid to join the union because they threaten us, but they cannot threaten me because I am not afraid."



Below: a patient is transferred from an ambulance on the Palestinian side to one on the Israeli side having waited in the queue with the other traffic at the checkpoint despite its emergency lights flashing.

Right: a watchtower looks over the wall at Ramallah as Palestinians queue to get through the checkpoint.



July 26th We travel to Ramallah to meet Shaher Saed from the PGFTU, who tells us workers face daily harassment from the police.



We find time to visit the tomb of the late President Arafat.



People in Ramallah are so desperate to work they risk six months in prison by climbing over or tunnelling under the wall.

Shaher says the PGFTU tries to stop the middle-men but, although they can find their telephone numbers, they can never confirm the men's or where they are, so the police never take action.

"The occupation is giving our people a hard time ... the borders, the checkpoints, the wall," he sighs. "We are fighting on so many levels."



We also meet the PGFTU in Ramallah, where Shaher Saed says unions' biggest campaign is to get employers to pay the national minimum wage. Palestinian women are being paid less than a quarter men's wages, but the Israeli government refuses to enforce labour laws.

"Every day it is criminal," he says. "We do what we can but the government does nothing."

People in Ramallah are so desperate to work they risk six months in prison by climbing over or tunnelling under the wall. For those who can afford it, middle-men charge as much as €400 for permits to get them through the wall to work.



I am both proud and honoured to have taken part in the PSC delegation to Palestine. It was a truly unforgettable week; disturbing, upsetting, alarming, yet also enlightening. The Palestinian people live under an illegal occupation governed by walls, razor wire, watch towers, checkpoints and permits. The oppression they endure is not only physical but also economic and cultural. The people of the OPTs stand up to their Israeli oppressors with dignity and bravery. They command great respect and admiration but will not prevail unsupported. Pressure must be put on the Israeli government. The international community must act with a programme of boycott, divestment and sanctions. The trade union movement can play a significant role in any such action both in the UK and globally. I have never been more certain of the importance, relevance and value of ASLEF's commitment to an internationalist agenda.

Marz Colombini: ASLEF Executive Committee Member



Arafat's image looks down on us as we wait for a shave.



We meet Omar Barghouti, founder of the Palestinian National Boycott Committee...

Occupying Hebron via the back door

He sounds like a comedy character from a Louis de Berniere novel: the man who enters his house by his back window.

But for him – and his neighbours – it's no laughing matter: they are not allowed to access



Netting erected over Hebron's market protects shoppers from rubbish thrown by Israeli settlers.

their homes via the front door because Israeli settlers have taken over the street.

Some 400 settlers descended on the West Bank city of Hebron (pop 63,000) after the 1994 massacre of 29 Palestinian worshippers at the historic Ibrahimi Mosque.

Guarded by 3,000 members of the Israeli Defence Force, their presence is seen as provocative by Palestinians, for whom parts of their home city, including the centre and, at times, the mosque, have become no-go zones.

Children face long walks to get to school after their usual routes were blocked off, where Palestinians are allowed to go depends on the whim of an Israeli guard at a checkpoint.

Hebron's underground market is covered with nets and sheets to protect Palestinians from urine, spit and rubbish thrown by settlers above. The city's commercial centre – once described as Hebron's Oxford Street – is like a ghost town, with more soldiers than shoppers.

There was recently a three-month curfew, when residents were only allowed out of their homes for two hours a week to get food. This is an occupation.

But this control is not sufficient for Israel, which plans to demolish 95 Palestinian homes to create a security buffer zone to protect settlers.

As one man told me: "With 400 settlers, Israel has taken over our city." Or as Louis de Bernieres might have said: "The city where Palestinians have no life."



In the 21st Century, the era of 24 hour media, both news and social, it can't be that people are unaware what is happening to the Palestinian and other indigenous people in Israel.

Is it that we don't care? Or is it one of those problems that we leave on the 'too difficult' pile in the hope of others dealing with these real and urgent issues?

Having witnessed first hand and heard the testimonies of many of those suffering from economic and social-engineered deprivation, often resulting in hunger and death, I have to speak. There is no easy solution but unless we highlight the inequities and bring pressure for change to achieve a civil society of equals with the same rights and futures and the freedoms we take for granted, we are failing in our duties as human beings sharing the same planet. It's time to bring dignity and hope to an area that needs it.

Mick Whelan, ASLEF general secretary



...he tells us Palestinian unions support the boycott, saying it's a price worth paying.



Next we visit Dr Mustafa Barghouti, GS of the Palestinian National Initiative, who also backs the boycott.

Where Palestinians are allowed to go depends on the whim of an Israeli guard at a checkpoint.



Left: a Jew chases after a soldier remonstrating with him for failing to stop us.

Above: Palestinians queuing to get into Hebron.

Middle: soldiers patrolling Hebron's empty shopping street.

Bottom: the man who enters his house by his back window.



I suppose I went over to Palestine not knowing what to expect. Of course, like everyone I'd seen the reports on television and read the articles. I'd seen the photographs of the wall and heard stories of the troubles and the tear gassing.

I'm not sure that anything could have rightly prepared me for what we actually found. Oppression, subjugation and control are an everyday way of life for the Palestinian people. Every facet of their lives is controlled. Whether they can go to work or take their produce to market is at the whim of an 18 year old Israeli soldier. Whether they can take a shower depends on how much water Israel will let them have that day. I think for me the most stark contrast was the lush green Israeli settlements when compared to the dry barren earth within Palestine.

The mass media, if you are lucky, gives you a balanced report of what is going on. There is no balance between Israel and Palestine.

Mick Carney, TSSA president



He calls for non-violent resistance, such as protests, stories, peace marches and hunger strikes.



On the way back to Jerusalem our minibus is boarded by soldiers.

Luxury denied to Palestinians

If one day in Palestine could sum up the contrast between the lives of Israelis and the lives of Palestinians, it was the day we visited an Israeli settlement in the Jordan Valley.



Guarded by heavy gates and armed soldiers, the settlement is meticulously clean and has a freshly-painted children's playground, along with a swimming pool and a tennis court.

Yet a few kilometres away, in the hilltop village of Zbeidat, buildings are crumbling and rubbish is strewn in the streets, under the permanent gaze of an Israeli watchtower.

"We pay the same taxes as the Israelis, but we do not get the same services," explains mayor Hasan Jarmi (above). "We do not get rubbish collections, so we have to pay for our own, but we can afford only to pay once every six weeks."

But rubbish collections are the least of the worries for the citizens of Zbeidat. The big problem comes from the vice-like grip Israel holds over the valley: the land, the work, the resources.

"Settlers are the biggest problem for Palestinian workers," says Hasan. "The government gives them everything they need, but we have no support."

"For us, farming is a war – a war to get enough water and land for our crops."

Not only does Israel control 95% of the valley, but it controls access too, erecting random checkpoints in the name of "security" to stop Palestinian farmers taking their produce to market. Often farmers are detained for 24 hours, meaning they have to turn back because their produce is ruined.

"Life is not easy for us," says Hasan, defiantly, "but we continue to fight until we have our rights."



Settlers' swimming pool and tennis court in the Jordan Valley.



My reaction on visiting Palestine was one of shock, horror, anger and hope.

Shock at the fact that in the 21st century, the global community continues to allow this illegal occupation. In their own land, Palestinians are living in the equivalent of prison camps as their villages, towns and cities are surrounded by high walls with watch towers, whilst the occupier controls entry and exit points.

Horror at seeing Israeli soldiers firing tear gas at a group of kids, none of whom were older than nine. They were unarmed and presented not even the slightest of threats to an invading army hiding behind thick concrete walls.

Anger that as settlements continue to proliferate, colonists persist in illegally grabbing Palestinian land.

But also hope, that what I saw in Nazareth, with Jewish and Arab workers fighting together for a better future, spreads like wildfire across this troubled land.

Manuel Cortes, TSSA general secretary



While outside, children try to make a living by selling items to drivers queueing to get through the checkpoint.



July 27th On our final morning we meet MP Haneen Zoabi, who is very clear the Israelis have occupied her lands.

We want to live in peace. And tents.

In 1948 there were 100,000 Bedouin living in the Negev. Now there are only 10,000.

For a man whose world is falling down around him, Sheik Sayah Al-touri has a terrific sense of humour.

His Bedouin family has lived in the Negev Desert for generations but Israeli settlers have their eye on the fertile land they call home.

“One night they bring police and bulldozers to demolish our tents,” he says. “Bulldozers? If they’d asked me, I could have taken the tents down in two minutes!”

In 1948 there were 100,000 Bedouin living in the Negev. Now there are only 10,000. Five years ago 573 people lived in Sayah’s village of Al-araqib. Today just 22 remain, the others having been forcibly evicted into a nearby township.

“They tell us ‘You have a home, a microwave, a washing machine – you are modern!’, he says. “But we are happy with our life here. We do not want to move. We want to live free with our animals. We love our space. We can’t be squeezed into refugee towns.”

Settlers, who have already demolished most of the houses and uprooted all the olive trees, challenge him to prove he owns the land, demanding to see documents. But documents are not the Bedouin way of life.

Pointing to the village’s cemetery where his ancestors are buried, Sayah says: “We have witnesses here that show we own the land. We’ve been here for centuries. Israel was born yesterday. Who gives them the right to steal our land?”

His son, Aziz Abu Mdign, shares his father’s anger. “Israel wants us to be slaves. I was born here, married here, had my kids here. Our life was so, so beautiful. The best life. But Israel steals our land, kills our culture and leaves us with nothing.”

Sayah, despite everything, is conciliatory. “We have no problem with the Israeli people. We can live in peace, side-by-side with the Israeli people, but this brutal, unfair policy creates hatred and tension for a new generation.

“We want the new generation to grow in patience, tolerance and understanding, and love each other. We want to live in peace. And in tents.”



Top: Sheik Sayah Al-touri
Left: Aziz Abu Mdign
Above: the cemetery at Al-araqib



“You came to my homeland. It was not the Palestinians who emigrated. It was you.”



“If you don’t accept I’m an indigenous person, then go back. Don’t come.”

Palestinian unions call for boycott

Trade unions in Palestine are asking their UK counterparts to boycott Israeli goods.

A statement signed by 14 unions calls for the boycott until Israel ends its occupation of Arab lands, dismantles the wall running through Jerusalem, gives Palestinians equal rights to Israelis and allows Palestinian refugees to return home.

"Palestinian workers will suffer as a result of a boycott," concedes Omar Barghouti, the founder of the Palestinian National Boycott Committee, when we meet him in Ramallah.

"But freedom has a price and we're prepared to pay that price. Every resistance carries a price tag. If we don't do this, we choose either armed resistance or we surrender. And we will never surrender to the occupation as our fate."

The boycott is also backed by Dr Mustafa Barghouti, general secretary of the Palestinian National Initiative.

"We'd like British trade unionists to adopt the boycott of Israeli goods," he tells us. "A boycott is not against the Israeli people, but against Israeli policy."

MP Haneen Zoabi is one of a collation of 13 Arab MPs in the Knesset. We meet her in East Jerusalem, where she told us we – as UK trade unionists – have more power over her government than she does.

"It doesn't matter what we say. The Israeli government doesn't care about the Palestinian

people, but it does care about what people in the world think of Israel. "Nothing will change here, the occupation will continue until Israel pays the price, economically, politically and diplomatically."

The main target for the boycott is Hewlett Packard, which not only profits from developing systems to racially profile Palestinians and track and control their movements, but is also complicit in the Israeli apartheid which limits the parts of the West Bank which they can access, and which restricts their freedom of movement. HP is also contracted to provide the Israeli navy's IT infrastructure.

You can also put pressure on companies such as Ahava, G4S, Sodastream and Veolia to cancel their contracts in Israel.

Finally, agricultural produce from illegal settlements built on Palestinian land is being sold in UK supermarkets. Check whether the produce says "Product of Israel" and, if it does, then put it back on the shelf in solidarity with the Palestinian people.

More details on how to support the BDS movement can be found here:

www.bdsmovement.net



"Freedom has a price and we're prepared to pay that price."



Reading information is never the same as seeing what's going on. Seeing Palestinian workers walking to and from work through heavily-armed guarded barricades with only two entrances into their villages is worse than apartheid.

We have to support the struggle for justice for Palestinians because all they want is freedom to be a nation and to live in peace. From children to adults I found them beautiful human beings wanting the same as ourselves.

I can't imagine what the poor people in the Gaza Strip are going through with the Israelis controlling everything from water, electricity, gas, natural commodities and the nautical occupation of their natural resources into the Sea being cut off. The free world has to take some form of collective responsibility to resolve this terrible situation.

Solidarity, peace and, above all, freedom for the whole of Palestine – we will not STOP supporting the cause.

Colin Smith, ASLEF



"You want my land, you want to expel me. It is ethnic cleansing. You hope the old will die and the young will forget."



"We will not forget. It is our history. We know our history. You don't. We know the names of the trees. You don't."

During the week we were in Palestine, three Palestinians were shot dead by Israeli forces.

They were 19-year-old Muhammed Ahmad Alawneh from Burkin, near Jenin (top), who was shot in the chest after picking up a stone, 52-year-old Falah Abu Maria from Beit Omar, near Hebron, who shot twice in the chest after throwing a plastic plant pot at soldiers and (bottom) 20-year-old Muhammed Abu Latifa from Qalandia refugee camp near Ramallah, who fell to his death from a rooftop after being shot by police.



She finishes by calling for a secular, equal democratic state, saying: "We must be here as equals."



As we fly home, our thoughts are with all the friends we have left behind. We vow to tell their story to the world.



A young Palestinian girl runs through the streets of Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem.

