



UNISON delegation to Palestine
3-9 April, 2016


the public service union

Published by UNISON
UNISON Centre
130 Euston Road
London
NW1 2AY
www.unison.org.uk



Introduction

Solidarity with the Palestinian people has consistently been high on UNISON's international agenda. Successive UNISON National Delegate Conferences have passed policy in support of justice and rights for the Palestinian people and this is reflected in our work. Through campaigning, projects and information we are able to work with and reflect the views of Palestinian trade unions, civil society and campaign groups.

In April 2016 UNISON took a delegation to Palestine and Israel to help develop its work. The delegation included members of the National Executive Council international committee and representatives of regions.

This report highlights some of the key issues that were raised by the organisations UNISON met with, and focuses on the occupation, workers rights and some of the projects UNISON supports.

UNISON would like to thank all the organisations that were able to meet with the delegation. We are particularly grateful to the Palestine Solidarity Campaign for facilitating the delegation.



Objectives of the delegation

- Build solidarity with the people of Palestine.
- Develop and increase links with Palestinian sister unions and civil society organisations working on Palestinian rights.
- Learn about the situation of the Palestinian people first hand, the impact of Israel's occupation and policies, and the struggle for human and workers' rights.
- Develop activists who will return with the knowledge and information to promote Palestinian people's rights and encourage branches and UNISON members to stand up for Palestine.



The Occupation

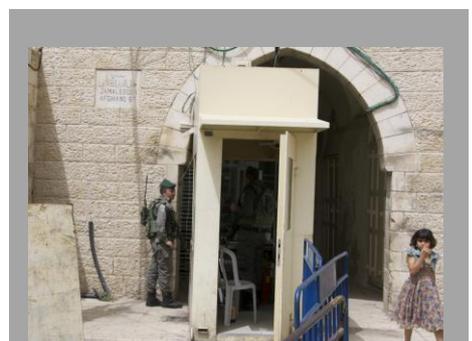
Israeli settlements dominate many parts of the West Bank, particularly the area described as 'Greater Jerusalem', the Jordan Valley and areas close to Tel Aviv. Expansion is rapid, with 1,344 new settlement units built in 2014 alone. There are now approximately 150 official settlements and 150 unauthorised outposts, although these are provided with security, power, water and roads by the Israeli government. The outposts are significantly smaller than settlements, but are gradually being recognised by Israel, paving the way for larger building programmes. Many are being established on hilltops stretching from the west to the east, gradually creating an addition barrier between the north and south of the West Bank.



Workers in Palestinian shops explained that they are often targets for the rocks, paint, bleach and excrement thrown by the settlers above, protected by dozens of heavily armed soldiers

The outposts are responsible for a high level of settler violence against Palestinians. In 2015 there were 132 reported cases of property damage and 89 casualties. Less than one per cent of settlers are prosecuted. In Hebron the delegation saw the impact of settler activity first hand. Although Hebron is under Palestinian control, the old city is a closed military zone, totally controlled by the Israeli Defence Force. Most of the old city's narrow streets sit beneath steel grids, there to protect the Palestinian population from the settlers occupying the properties above. Although the settlers are relatively few in number, the security operation to protect them is vast. Soldiers guard rooftops, street corners and the checkpoints around the Ibrahimi Mosque and Shuhada Street, parts of which are off limits even for international observers, including the United Nations.

The West Bank was divided into Areas A, B and C, as a temporary measure during the 1995 Oslo Accord negotiations. The Palestinian Authority has jurisdiction over the isolated and fragmented Areas A and B, making up 38 per cent of the land and including 80 per cent of the Palestinian population. Israel controls the larger, continuous Area C, consisting of 61 per cent of the land, including all the settlements.



Soldiers guard rooftops, street corners and the checkpoints around the Ibrahimi Mosque and Shuhada Street, parts of which are off limits even for international observers, including the United Nations



A military checkpoint controlling access to the Ibrahimi Mosque

In the South Hebron Hills the delegation saw the impact of Israel's aggressive planning laws on a Palestinian community, living on land they had purchased in 1948. Whilst the nearby settlement encroaches on their homes, the long-term residents explained how permit laws, which restrict the construction of structures from solar panels to animal shelters, are being used to demolish their homes. In 2014 Israel approved one Palestinian construction permit for Area C and displaced 1,215 residents. In 2016 the number of demolitions have increased significantly. The Israeli government have 11,425 outstanding demolition orders for Palestinian properties.

Israeli controls on the movement of Palestinians go deep into the West Bank. The system of settler only roads and 490 closures, including 60 checkpoints place additional restrictions on Palestinians, who should officially request permission to move from one Palestinian controlled area to another.

The 320km long Green Line marks the internationally recognized border between Israel and the West Bank. The huge separation wall by comparison is 720km long, annexing East Jerusalem and taking in huge swathes of the West Bank. 85 per cent of the wall has been ruled illegal by the International Court of Justice. The delegation heard how only 50 per cent of Palestinian farmers were able to access their land beyond the wall, and only nine gates were open for 12 hours a day. Virtually all these obstacles and barriers are established to benefit settlers, not to protect Israel.



Villagers in the South Hebron Hills explained how permit laws are being used to demolish their homes

In East Jerusalem restrictive legislation continues to be used to displace the Palestinian population. The Civic Coalition for Palestinian Rights in Jerusalem explained how since the annexation in 1967 the government has introduced countless restrictions, which have resulted in many evictions, home demolitions and displacements to make way for Israeli settlements.



Recently demolished home in East Jerusalem

Palestinians in East Jerusalem are only classified as residents and 14,450 have lost this right under Israel's absentee law, which requires Palestinians to prove their centre of life is in the city. The Jaffa Popular Committee also explained this same law was being used to push Palestinians from the coastal areas of the town. Access to services for the residents of East Jerusalem are highly limited, they pay the same taxes as those in the west of the city but only benefit from 15 per cent of the municipal budget. Checkpoints based all over East Jerusalem are also used to intimidate and harass Palestinian residents.



The delegation met with the Al Kurd family in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood who explained the impact of the occupation on their lives. Settler organisations, supported by the state have placed enormous pressure on residents in order to evict them. Several Palestinian families had left their homes after losing court cases to settler organisations over pre 1948 property claims. In the case of the Al Kurd family half of their home has been occupied by settlers, who they are forced to pay rent to. So far they have managed to resist eviction attempts but are subjected to regular attacks by their settlers' neighbours.

At almost every meeting the increasing scale of the occupation and the viability of a two state solution was discussed. Some argued that Israel's rapid escalation of settlement building would mean that a viable independent Palestinian state was no longer possible, instead arguing for a single democratic state. Others continued to make the case for a separate, independent, viable Palestinian state, including East Jerusalem, Gaza and the West Bank, alongside Israel.



Settlers occupy half of the Al Kurd family home

Workers' rights

The Palestinian economy is extremely fragile as a result of the occupation, resulting in high unemployment rates of 27 per cent for Palestinian workers. In the West Bank it is 17.7 per cent, whilst in Gaza it is 43.9 per cent. Female unemployment is significantly higher at 38.5 per cent than male unemployment at 23.9 per cent. Youth unemployment is also extremely high. As employment in Palestinian controlled areas is limited, many are forced to seek work with Israeli employers on settlements or within Israel itself.



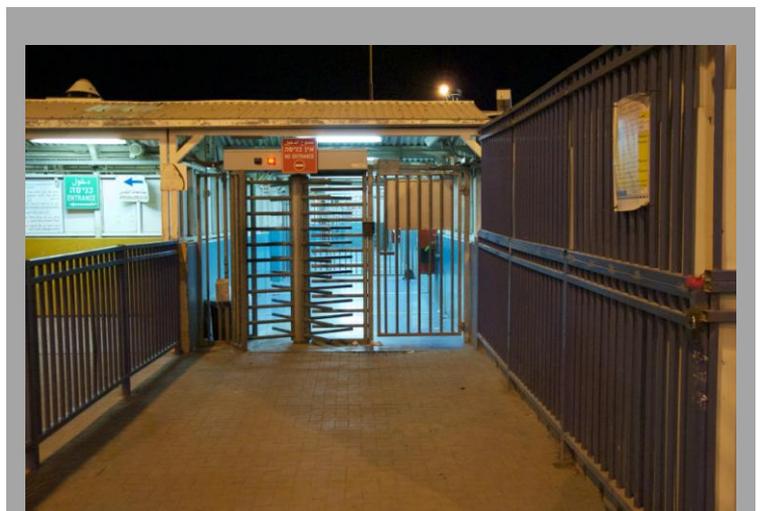
Meeting with the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions in Ramallah

65 per cent of those employed in Palestinian controlled areas work for small businesses, typically with 5-10 employees. Unions voiced concerns that the Palestinian Authority has failed to implement laws that adequately protect workers, including any trade union laws. The Palestinian minimum wage is \$385 a month, significantly below the Israeli minimum wage of \$1,500. Work is low paid and precarious, particularly for women and the five per cent of children in employment. Unions criticized recent social security laws as they fail to provide adequate protection for workers, particularly women, children and disabled people.

Approximately 52,000 Palestinians have permits to work in Israel. They are forced to endure long queues and humiliating treatment at checkpoints from the early hours of the morning in order to access work. Most are employed in the construction industry, and rely on labour brokers who take a significant proportion of pay, sometimes up to 40 per cent. Workers should be protected by Israeli labour law and receive the minimum wage, but rarely do. Many are also forced to pay fees to the Israeli trade union, Histadrut, to cover representation and health insurance, neither of which they receive.

A further 30,000 Palestinians take enormous risks to seek work in Israel without the correct documentation, either climbing the wall or hiding in vehicles. Those who get work receive lower pay and harsher conditions. PGFTU explained there are sections of the Israeli military dedicated to capturing these undocumented workers. In March 2016 alone 1,400 were arrested, resulting in imprisonment or heavy fines.

Approximately 26,000 Palestinians work on the illegal Israeli settlements inside the West Bank, many without the correct documentation. Although Israeli labour law should apply, it is rarely implemented. Many Israeli employers instead apply defunct 1967 Jordanian law, despite the Israeli court ruling in 2007 that this was illegal. Most are employed in constructing the vast settlements that now dominate the West Bank, whilst others work in agriculture, the industrial zones and tourist areas. The number of work permits provided by the Israeli government to work in Israel or the settlements



Palestinians are forced to queue at checkpoints from the early hours of the morning to seek work in Israel

fluctuates and had recently decreased. In January Israel placed a temporary ban on Palestinians entering settlements in parts of the West Bank in response to a number of stabbing incidents.



Many Palestinians are employed in constructing the vast settlements that dominate the West Bank

Many of the organisations we met explained that most Palestinians were reluctant to work for Israeli employers in the settlements, but this was the only option available to them in the absence of a viable Palestinian economy.

The delegation met with a broad range of trade union federations and worker organisations including the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) nationally, as well as the Jericho branch, The General Federation of Independent Trade Unions, the General

Union of Palestinian Workers, Democracy and Workers Rights Centre (DWRC), Knowledge and Socialist Thought Institute, Workers Advice Centre (WAC-MAAN) and the Workers Hotline (Kav LaOved). Whilst all work for Palestinian workers rights, there are some differences in strategy, systems of democracy, political alliances and methods of organising.



UNISON supports a project with the Knowledge and Socialist Thought Institute (KSTI) in Ramallah, providing long-term training courses to potential trade union leaders. The Institute is also supported by UNISON North West region

Bitter dates

The Jordan Valley is a narrow, fertile strip of land running alongside the River Jordan between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. Because of its potential to produce fruit and vegetables all year round, what was Palestinian farmland is now exploited by large agricultural settlements, exporting a huge range of agricultural products. To keep their profits high and avoid any responsibility for their workers, these Israeli farms rely on labour brokers for a plentiful supply of cheap Palestinian labour. Pay is below the minimum wage, and the holiday, sickness and other benefits they are entitled to under Israeli law are denied.



Meeting with date farm workers in the Jordan Valley

Pay is below the minimum wage, and the holiday, sickness and other benefits they are entitled to under Israeli law are denied.

The delegation met with workers from the date farms. They endure long days on tree top platforms, picking fruit in the baking heat. They take home as little as £14 a day, once the labour broker has taken their cut. Serious injuries such as lost eyes and broken limbs are common, but instead of paying for treatment in Israeli hospitals, workers are often dumped at checkpoints or outside Palestinian hospitals, and expected to pay their own costs.

Organising in this environment is a major challenge for the PGFTU in Jordan. Workers are fearful of being blacklisted or losing their jobs or permits to work. Since they started working with Kav LaOved, with the support of the UNISON International Development Fund, they are beginning to challenge some of the worst practices of settlement farms by using the Israeli legal system. Kav La Oved with the PGFTU train agricultural workers on their rights, including how to record their pay and hours when payslips are not provided. They send official letters on behalf of workers demanding backdated pay, and when this doesn't work they pursue cases through the courts. Through this work they are undermining the occupation. If labour law is properly enforced in the West Bank then farming becomes a far less attractive proposition for Israeli settlers.



Palestinian farm land in the Jordan Valley in the Jordan Valley is dominated by vast agricultural settlements



Agricultural settlements rely on a plentiful supply of cheap Palestinian labour

Kav LaOved, the Workers' Hotline, has been working to defend workers' rights in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories since 1991. They campaign, provide advice and legal support, monitoring and research to support the most disadvantaged workers, particularly Palestinians and migrant workers.

UNISON has worked with Kav LaOved for 10 years, including supporting projects working with Thai migrant workers, carers and most recently Palestinian agricultural workers in settlement farms in the Jordan Valley.

Gaza

This delegation, like many other trade union delegations, was unable to visit Gaza, as access to the area is highly restricted. Meetings with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and others did however highlight the continuing poverty and denial of rights.

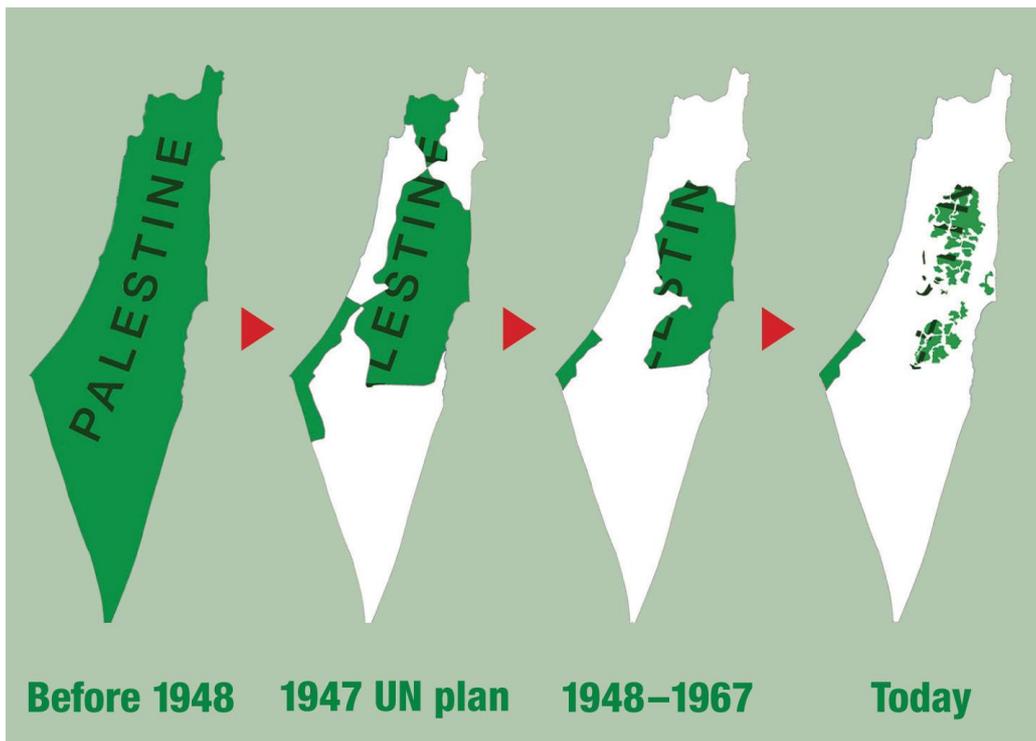
Goods and people continue to be highly restricted entering/leaving Gaza. However, medical patients seeking treatment in East Jerusalem and business people are normally given permission to leave. 6,800 people from Gaza had applied to run in the recent Bethlehem marathon, all were refused. As well as restrictions from the Israeli government, the Hamas government also place some restrictions on movement in and out of Gaza.

The dual list, covering the import and export of materials places major restrictions on trade as well as rebuilding efforts following the 2014 invasion. By the end of March only 17 per cent (3,000) of the 18,000 homes destroyed or damaged in 2014 had been repaired or reconstructed as a result of limits on construction materials. Essential repairs to Gaza's water and sanitation system have not been possible since the 2014 attacks, leading the UN to estimate that the area will be uninhabitable by 2020.

Very few trucks are permitted over the border, in comparison with 2008, so traditional exports of agricultural products, fish and furniture are severely limited, further weakening the Palestinian economy. The lack of an external market as well as limits to Gaza's nautical border have reduced the number working in the fishing industry to 3,500, down from 10,000 in 2000.

Egypt's attitude to Gaza changed in 2013, resulting in tunnels being closed off. These were previously used to import fuel and building materials, and were vital to the economy. The number permitted to cross the Rafah crossing has been massively reduced, with a total closure in some months.

Unemployment in Gaza is exceptionally high at 43.9 per cent. Youth unemployment is over 60 per cent. This, along with the restrictions on access, creates a difficult environment for trade unions to organise. Whilst the PGFTU and independent trade unions continue to have a presence in Gaza, Hamas affiliated unions have also seen some growth.



Boycott Divestment and Sanctions

UNISON has supported Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel since 2007, one of the first trade unions in Europe to do so. We see BDS as a practical way to force the Israeli government to end its repression of the Palestinian people and contribute towards the building of peace.

Nearly all the organisations the delegation met in Israel and Palestine are committed BDS campaigners and welcomed UNISON's work on the issue. Support for BDS in the West Bank is strong, but buying non Israeli goods is difficult as the Palestinian economy is completely undermined by the occupation. This makes Palestinians far more reliant on international solidarity to ensure BDS achieves its goals.



The Israeli government have withdrawn Omar Bhargouthi's travel permit as a result of his BDS activities

It is a tense time for BDS campaigners globally. Britain and Germany are following France and the US in introducing anti BDS laws. Israel has just held an international anti-BDS conference at which Israeli Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz called for the "civil assassination" of BDS leaders, including Omar Bharghouti from the Boycott National Committee (BNC) who the delegation met in Ramallah.

The BNC is the largest coalition in Palestine, bringing together a broad movement of civil society including unions, campaign groups and NGOs. The General Federation of Independent Trade Unions and the General Union of Palestinian Workers also attended the meeting as affiliates.

Omar explained that Israel's violent reaction to the BDS Movement is a result of its success, and stressed the need to grow the BDS Movement internationally. The BNC is calling for an international conference on BDS.

He told the delegation about the impact of the BDS campaign in Europe, and the number of multinational companies which were withdrawing from Israel or the occupied West Bank. The UN Human Rights Council has agreed to establish a database listing companies involved in the occupation, despite the opposition of Israel, with the US and the UK, and this should encourage more companies to withdraw from the Occupied Territories.

The Women's Coalition for Peace, in Tel Aviv, highlighted the increasingly difficult situation for Israeli NGOs supporting BDS and Palestinian rights. The Anti Boycott Law, Nakba law, the recent NGO transparency bill and increasing censorship are being used by the Israeli government to silence NGOs. Physical threats and cyber attacks are also being used to intimidate.



Meeting with Women's Coalition for Peace in Tel Aviv

WAC MA'AN

The Workers Advice Centre WAC-MA'AN was established in the late 1990s as an independent representative workers organisation. They work both in Israel and the West Bank. UNISON has supported WAC-MA'AN's work for a number of years through the UNISON International Development Fund (UIDF), including organising workers in the industrial zones of Area C and more recently a project to improve the situation of Palestinian women in East Jerusalem.



Women activists explain the challenges they face accessing employment and social security

The delegation heard from women activists involved in this project about the challenges they face accessing social security benefits and employment support from the Employment Bureau and Social Security Department. They explained how they face racist tactics, disguised as bureaucracy to prevent them accessing benefits including losing documents, setting unrealistic demands for information and accusing women of missing appointments they weren't informed of.

Many of the women are from the Shafat refugee camp in East Jerusalem, one of the poorest areas in the city. The camp is surrounded by a wall and entrance is controlled by a checkpoint with restrictive opening hours, which prevent many from accessing employment. Residents pay taxes to the municipality, but don't benefit from basic services.

UNISON's support enables WAC-MA'AN to place activists outside the bureau to advise women of their rights and inform them of the process and the barriers they are likely to face. The project is already increasing the success rate of applications for social security benefits.



Restrictive checkpoint opening hours at the Shafat refugee camp in East Jerusalem make it impossible for many of the residents to get regular work

Itinerary

Monday 4 April

Meeting and tour the Jaffa Popular Committee
Coalition of Women for Peace, Tel Aviv
Kenyon Institute

Tuesday 5 April

Briefing meeting at UN OCHA, East Jerusalem
PGFTU and Kav LaOved, Jericho
Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, Jerusalem

Wednesday 6 April - Ramallah

Democracy and Workers Rights Centre
Boycott National Committee
Palestinian Authority
Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions
Knowledge and Socialist Thought Institute

Thursday 7 April – Jerusalem

Workers Advice Centre (WAC-MAAN), Jerusalem
Coalition for Civic Rights in Jerusalem

Friday 8 April

Visit to the old city of Hebron
Visit to communities in the South Hebron Hills

Saturday 9 April

Tour of Jerusalem Old City



Checkpoints are located all over East Jerusalem



Entry to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem is highly restricted for Palestinians



Participants

Paul Glover is chair of UNISON's International Committee and is a member of UNISON's National Executive, representing the energy sector.

Josie Bird is a member of UNISON's National Executive. She is a member of UNISON's International Committee and Industrial Action Committee, Chair of Finance & Resource Management Committee and Chair of UNISON's Newcastle City Branch.

Naomi Junnor is a member of UNISON's National Executive, representing Scotland and a member of the International Committee. She is also a branch steward.

John Campbell is Deputy Convenor and International Lay Representative for UNISON's Yorkshire and Humberside Region.

Samuel Macartney is Chair of UNISON Scotland's International Committee.

Conor Mc Carthy is Branch Secretary for Royal Hospital Trust Branch, Northern Ireland

Jordan Stapleton is a steward for UNISON Derbyshire County Branch, East Midlands Region.

Glen Williams is UNISON North West Region President and a member of the region's International Committee. He is UNISON Sefton Branch Secretary.

Mark Beacon is International Officer for UNISON

Tricia Rich is Deputy Director of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign

Martial Kurtz is Campaigns Manager of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign



Recommendations

- Continue campaigning for an end to the occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, highlighting the scale and impact of the settlements, and the impact of discriminatory laws and practices on the Palestinian population.
- UNISON supports a two state solution with a viable, democratic Palestine in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, alongside Israel. This position should be reviewed, including a consultation of branches and partners in Palestine; recognising that there are a broad range of views on a solution to the situation.
- Further develop campaigning in support of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS), ensuring that campaign work clearly articulates Palestinian and Israeli support for the campaign.
- Campaign against the imposition of new laws designed to restrict BDS.
- Continue campaigning against the exploitation of Palestinian workers in Israel and the settlements , and for decent work for the Palestinian population, through a viable Palestinian economy.
- Continue supporting organisations defending Palestinian workers' rights through the UNISON International Development Fund.
- Support campaigns against forced demolitions and evictions in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Israel. Put pressure on the UK government and EU to speak out when temporary shelters provided to homeless Palestinians in Area C of the West Bank are demolished by Israeli security forces.
- Work with UNISON's self organised groups to support their campaigns on the rights of Palestinians and human rights defenders.
- Provide activists with tools to promote UNISON's work on the situation in Palestine to members, including facts about the impact of the occupation.
- Encourage branches to affiliate to the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and take up actions in support of Palestinian rights.

Published by UNISON
UNISON Centre
130 Euston Road
London
NW1 2AY
www.unison.org.uk

