

The Struggle of the Palestinian Workers in the West Bank and Gaza

Why we call for Boycott, Divestment & Sanctions...

Palestinian grassroots Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign - www.stopthewall.org

1. Current Labour Situation

Today, the construction of the apartheid Wall, continuous military attacks, colonization of our lands, resultant skyrocketing unemployment, siege imposed by the Israeli Occupation for 6 years, and international sanctions held against us for over one year have brought our economy to the verge of collapse. To illustrate the Occupation's destruction of our economy, please consider that since Autumn 2001:



- **432 industrial factories** have been destroyed or damaged;
- **9,735 small shops and street stands** destroyed;
- **National and international trade has been almost made impossible** by the general closure, approximately 500 checkpoints and road blocks in the West Bank, construction of three fortified "terminals" cutting the West Bank effectively into three Bantustans, and complete isolation of the Gaza Strip;

● The Wall's construction is de facto annexing some 47% of the West Bank, isolating communities into Bantustans, ghettos and "military zones", thus making **agriculture impossible**.

This has had dramatic consequences on the already precarious and oppressive working and living conditions of the Palestinian labour force:

- **Unemployment** has risen from 5 % before 1993 and 10% in 1999 to **~50% in 2006**, leaving about 350,000 workers unemployed;
- **More than 62.6% of all Palestinian families lost more than half of their income** (61.3% in the West Bank and 65.6% in the Gaza Strip) since the start of the Intifada. This adds to the dramatic fall of per capita income during the Oslo period;
- **50% of the families** (and thus 70.6% of the total population) in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are living **under the poverty line** of 2\$ per day.

Working conditions are based on heavy exploitation and hardly any protection. More and more, the only employment options for Palestinian workers are with Israeli companies complicit with the Occupation and its racist policies of oppression and de-humanization.

- Average **weekly work hours** in 2004 for Palestinians employed by Israeli companies were **46**.
- While Palestinian workers should be covered by collective Israeli contracts, Israeli employers exploit the fact that this law is never enforced in favour of Palestinians, and thus **the majority of Palestinian workers are deprived of their full salary and/or benefits**.

Under both local (Israeli and Palestinian) and international law, the responsibility of providing suitable work opportunities lies with the Occupation, since Israel controls the resources and borders of the entire area.

2. The History of Palestinian Labour Organizing

Palestinian trade unions have been struggling for the rights of workers and Palestinians since the **1920s** when the **Arab Workers Palestine Society** was founded in Haifa. The creation of the state of Israel, forcing one third of the Palestinian people to become refugees, has been a serious blow as well for labour action. It was not until **1965** that a new Palestinian labour union was founded in Gaza City, the **General Union of Palestinian Workers (GUPW)**. As the Palestinian people are dispersed all over the world, the union had as its aim to defend the workers' rights of Palestinians everywhere, and consequently set up branches all over the globe.

The trade union movement within the West Bank and Gaza started to grow only in the **1970s** and had to strike a difficult balance between class and national liberation struggle. The various factions of the Palestinian nationalist movement set up affiliated trade unions as front organizations and began to compete with each other; for example, Fatah-dominated **General Union of Palestine Labor Vocational Association** increasingly dominated the work opportunities. In the **'80s**, the Occupation forced Palestinian trade unionism to go underground. In the early **1990s**, under pressure from the PLO, the West Bank and Gaza Palestinian union movement came together, and by **1993** had formed the **Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU)** - theoretically a branch of the GUPW - to represent the PNA and the Oslo agreements within the Labour movement.

The **Histadrut**, which until then had used its influence within the international labour movement to keep Palestinian trade unions isolated, saw in the PGFTU a suitable partner for its politics and paved the path for international recognition of the newly-formed body, bypassing all other Palestinian trade union bodies.



*Top left: Nazlat Issa's entire market has been destroyed for the Apartheid Wall.
Above: Palestinian labourers demand decent work.*

3. Racial Capital and a Labour Market under Occupation

Since its inception, the Occupation has expropriated from Palestinians a major part of the resources necessary for its war against us and the colonization of our lands.

Aside from the economic assets and resources stolen from the Palestinian refugees in 1948 and the economic exploitation of the Palestinian Israeli ID holders as cheap labour, the military occupation and colonization of the West Bank and Gaza could not have been protracted for 40 years if Israel did not otherwise take economic profits from it. Economic development in the West Bank and Gaza strip since 1967 has been artificially geared towards **dependency on the Occupation's economy** via the destruction of Palestinian agriculture and the hampering of industrial development:

- **Lack of control over water, land, resources and borders** has made Palestinian exportation of products and exploitation of natural resources impossible. Palestinian production has decreased and focuses only on marketing in the West Bank or Gaza. The entire economy has failed to diversify or industrialize, leaving the economy dependent on Israeli subcontracted activities.
- The **closures and checkpoints** ensure that Palestine's economy is completely dependent on the decisions of the Occupation manipulated to fit the interests of its economy.
- **All West Bank banks had been closed** after the '67 occupation, restricting any possible investment.
- The Occupation imposed **heavy import duties on West Bank agricultural produce** and restricted the use of irrigation while Israeli goods were allowed to flood freely into the West Bank.
- Worsening the situation, a study conducted in 1998 found that Palestinian businesses seeking to **export or import** through Israeli ports face transaction costs that are **on average 35 percent higher than for Israeli firms** in the same industry.
- Palestinian workers were driven from their land and turned into relatively **cheap labour for Israeli factories** and construction companies. Before 1948, some 80% of the Palestinian people were farmers, and in 1967, around 70% of Palestinians within the West Bank and Gaza received their livelihood from agriculture. Today, only



17% of the population in the West Bank and Gaza are still able to base their livelihoods on the fruits of their lands. With the completion of the Apartheid Wall project, this number will decline even further.

- Although Palestinians are paid less than other workers in the Occupation market (an average daily wage of \$27.40), the wages are still higher than in the domestic market (\$13.40), which encourages people to seek employment outside the Green Line or in settlements. This **drove labour prices artificially up**, rendering emerging Palestinian factories non-competitive. These circumstances have the **double effect** of fueling the Occupation with **exploitation of Palestinian labour** and markets and **maximizing the cost of political resistance**.

The Palestinian economy saw its dependence on Israel increase during the Oslo period. The Occupied Territories was forced to rely on Israel as the principal market for absorbing its labour and goods - in 1998, Israel took in 96% of West Bank and Gaza exports, up from 90 percent in the 1980s. Israel remains the source of 76% of all imports. As a result of the isolation of the Gaza Strip from the West Bank, trade between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank fell by 22% between 1992-96, severely harming the economy.

The future economic "development" envisaged by the Occupation and its international allies, such as the World Bank, are best represented by the plans for massive **industrial zones** built on Palestinian land. The Eretz industrial zone close to the Gaza Strip is being used as the catalyst and model for the way in which Palestinians dispossessed of their land and imprisoned by the Wall can be put to work as cheap labour. The industrial zones around the Bantustans are not new ideas; they are reminiscent of the economic **models of racial capital promoted by apartheid South Africa** in Bantustans like the Ciskei and Bophuthatswana.

Proposed are a series of new or revitalized industrial zones:

- Primary among these are zones that **would be located in areas close to or on the Green Line**, including sites close to Jenin, Tarkumiya and Rafah, which already have backing with several European and US firms.
- Further **industrial parks are planned in "Seam Zones"** in Palestinian land isolated behind the Apartheid Wall and the Green Line, such as the so-called Tulkarm Peace Park where construction is already underway. Construction has involved using around 600 dunums of land from the villages of Irtah and Farun that have been confiscated by the Wall.

The industrial zones are designed to serve the needs of the industry markets of the Occupation, whether by doing the most environmentally destructive production in Palestinian areas or by providing cheap labour.



Above: The Apartheid Wall isolating Ramallah from Jerusalem, between the walls the fortified checkpoint of Qalandiya.

Top right: Tulkarem District: New industrial zone built on Palestinian land behind the Wall.

4. Working under Occupation

a. Pass laws: Excluded or Enslaved

The policies of exploiting Palestinian workers in Israeli industries have developed in various directions, creating distinct rules and conditions for Palestinians working within Palestine '48 and those in the settlements, those with working permits and those without. The permit regime has created political control of Palestinian workers and regulation of their flow within the Israeli economy according to the needs of the Occupation. The workers that crossed the Green Line without permits were harassed, arrested and humiliated if caught by the Occupation forces, yet their flow was conveniently tolerated as they constituted a very cheap and completely unprotected labour force.

Obtaining a permit entails:

1. Obtaining possession of a **magnetic card** from the offices of the Occupation forces, often located within settlements in the West Bank. This process can take weeks and those who have been involved in political activities- a designation embracing the majority of the Palestinian population- are denied cards.
2. Card holders can then apply for a **working permit**. Ever-changing restrictions based on age, sex and area of residence are applied to filter out only a fraction of those for permits.
3. Israeli occupation authorities then issue work permits as requested by Israeli companies. Bypassing the Palestinian authorities that are supposed to issue the lists of applicants, the de facto procedure is that Israeli employers give directly list of names to the Occupation authorities for approval. This installs an almost medieval **client system of dependency**.
4. All permits can be canceled by the decision of the Israeli army.

The nightmarish procedures of the "permit system" and the overall tendency of the Occupation to keep all loopholes for exploitation open for its capital has created "**permit brokers**", Israeli companies that for a fee obtain permits for Palestinian workers without actually employing them. Of the 25,000 workers from Gaza that pass through Erez daily, only 10,000 have regular work- the rest are "black market".

To members of the Palestinian Authority (PA), wealthy Palestinian business persons, and some collaborators, **VIP passes** are issued. This system enables a select elite to maintain political and economic control over the rest of the Palestinian population, and assures the continued prosperity of all the Palestinian monopolies.

"At the **Erez border crossing**, the primary point of entry to Israel, Palestinian workers are forced to walk two kilometers through a dusty passageway more suitable for cattle than for human traffic. This passage has been dubbed 'the Passageway of Death.' Once through the Passageway of Death, workers are forced to wait in crowded lines as Israeli soldiers search their clothes and other belongings. Soldiers regularly verbally abuse workers during exchanges at the border crossing. Because a worker never knows how long the delay will be, or how strict the searches will be on any given morning, he must leave his house in the dark of night every day to be sure of reaching his destination in time. For example, one worker from the Jabalya refugee camp described his routine: 'I wake up at 2 a.m., at 3:20 I am at the checkpoint. Sometimes I get to Tel Aviv at 5:45 even though work starts at 7:00 because you never know how long it will take.'" *Publications&Reports, The Palestinian Human Rights Monitor, <http://www.phrmg.org>*

b. Checkpoints: Permanent Control

Even being in possession of a permit and work is no guarantee that movement will be allowed through checkpoints, as the major entrances and exits to and from cities are closed without stated reason, preventing everyone (even those with permits) from passing.

At the checkpoints, Palestinian workers suffer various types and degrees of abuse by the Occupation forces:

- **Unpredictable delays**
- **Restricted passing hours**
- **De-humanizing procedures**
- **Physical violence** or, at worst, **killing**
- **Confiscation of permits** and magnetic identification cards. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Labor, Israeli border police stripped 2,400 workers of their permits or magnetic cards during the first six months of 1998.
- **Israeli intelligence uses the threat of permit withdrawal** to gather information and in some cases to recruit collaborators. According to a study by the Center for Democracy and Workers' Rights a total of 90.1% of the workers interviewed said they feared being subject to this kind of pressure on their way to work.



Palestinian women crossing the worker's checkpoint in Qalqiliya to reach their jobs.

c. Further Institutional discrimination:

- Israel's **National Labor Court** forces Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza to provide deposits of many hundreds of dollars, which far exceed the usual amounts awarded for court expenses by labor courts.
- **Taxes** are taken out of Palestinian paychecks (25.1% of their total check) by the Occupation, under the guise that these are for social services (which the Palestinians are not entitled to). In particular:

Despite the fact that the rates deducted by the **National Insurance Institute** (NII) from the wages of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza and Israelis are the same, the benefits are not. Workers from the West Bank and Gaza are entitled only to compensation for work accidents and employer bankruptcy. Their wives can claim a maternity allocation only if they give birth in a hospital within the Green Line. Palestinian workers are denied all the other benefits to which Israeli workers are entitled: old age pensions, disability payments, unemployment benefits, low-income supplements, child benefits, nursing care, etc.

- Occupation courts have ruled that if employment of a Palestinian worker is terminated due to military restrictions, the employer does not have to provide **severance pay**.

- Tax authorities have performed large-scale income **tax miscalculations** (of course, in favor of the Occupation) for Palestinian workers that are estimated to up to \$100,000,000.

- Money paid by the West Bank and Gaza workers to the **pension fund** and National Insurance for services they are not entitled to has been stolen and transferred to a secret fund.

Israel, as a UN member state, is itself a signatory to international pacts and conventions guaranteeing workers' various social and economic rights, and is therefore bound to implement them.

Barkan industrial park (Salfit district):
According to the Al-Rissalah newspaper, 60 workers were fired from the Technoplast plastics factory after striking in protest of consistent working violations. Some of the workers said that they toil strenuous 12-hour days, every day of the week. Anyone who misses work because of illness is sent home for a week or more without pay. Overtime and minimum wage are not paid.
(Publications & Reports, Palestinian Human Rights Monitor)

d. Discrimination in Israeli industries

The institutionalized racism of the Occupation allows the Israeli employers to further add to the exploitation of the Palestinian workers as legal or trade union backing for the workers from the West Bank and Gaza is completely lacking. Some of the most typical forms are:

- Even in cases where workers are paid nominally minimum wage, **many workers are cheated of their wages** as on their pay slips the working hours and days will appear drastically reduced.

- Underreporting of work days or work hours also **curbs other benefits**. A PHRMG study shows that the large majority of workers from the West Bank and Gaza are forced to accept underreporting.

A study done by Center for Democracy and Workers' Rights shows that 94.6% of the interviewed Palestinian workers receive wages which are insufficient to



Palestinian workers on their way home from their work place.



Palestinian workers build the Israeli economy.

Jordan Valley:
Workers in the settlements earn between 50 to 60 Shekels [approx. \$12 to \$14] for a 7-hour workday, from 6 a.m. to 1 p.m. Workers are unregistered and don't receive payslips, the firing of workers has no restrictions and employers often delay paying wages. Without vacation payments, workers often are compelled by the dismal economy to work 7 days a week. In some worksites, there are no scheduled lunch breaks and restroom facilities are often absent. Safety equipment is missing. Date crops workers during the fruit thinning season are forced to spend three to six hours a day sitting at the top of a palm tree. Using a crane, the employer lifts the worker to the top of the palm tree and leaves him there to labour for long hours with no way of getting down.
(Information from: Work at Any Cost: Employment of Palestinian Agricultural Workers in Jordan Valley Settlements, Salwa Alinat, Kav LaOved's Palestinian project coordinator, Monday, 16 October 2006)

cover their daily needs and 85.2% of them who work with Israeli employers **work on the basis of daily hire**.

In order to bolster the colonization of the West Bank, the Occupation runs a **racist dual system in settlements** that excludes Palestinians from the Israeli labour laws. While Jewish Israeli workers are fully protected by the laws and their trade union, in the case of Palestinian workers, the industries are exempted from paying any fringe benefits, such as traveling expenses, vacation pay or work clothes. Pay for severance, sick leave or accident leave are less than that stipulated by Israeli law. It has further reduced the hurdles to work permits allowing unmarried and people younger than 25 to get a permit in order to encourage more Palestinians to accept such exploitative work.

5. The Histadrut - in defense of the Occupation

The Histadrut has since its formation in 1920 been performing a crucial role within the Zionist project to **conquer the land for Jewish labour**.

Liberal and egalitarian rhetoric is not enough to disguise a reality of racism and that it is a driving force behind the Occupation.

In 1970, it reached an agreement with the Occupation's Ministry of "Defense" pledging that "every worker from the 'administered territories' should enjoy full professional protection at his/her workplace, and his/her social and economic rights should be secured."

Instead, the Histadrut and Israel have been violating Palestinian workers rights in uncountable ways, among them are:

- When the Occupation arrested and **deported Palestinian trade union leaders** in the 1970s and '80s, the Histadrut kept silent. ● Instead of acting like a labor union in the workers' defense, the Histadrut **accepted the army's criteria for distributing work permits** mentioned above.

- The Histadrut's handling of the Palestinian workers did not differ greatly from that of personnel ("manpower") companies, "because by means of the regime and the military control, it took workers from the Territories and attached them to employers, while in return getting cheap labor for its own enterprises and an additional source of membership

dues." (The Unmaking of the Histadrut, Dani Ben Simhon, www.workersadvicecenter.org/delegation-document2.htm)

- It did **recognize unionism by Jewish illegal settlers** in the West Bank and Gaza settlements, but never considered Palestinians workers from the West Bank and Gaza.

- Although they pay dues to the Histadrut, West Bank and Gazan workers are **not entitled to vote in union elections, nor to take part in local workers' councils**. They are even denied observer status on plant workers' committees.

- It **never objected to the mass arrests** of Palestinian workers from the West Bank and Gaza that had reached their workplaces without proper "permits".

Although the Histadrut realized that in order to co-opt the Palestinians and render them less threatening was to allow them as members in the union, and dropped the requirement that all members had to be Jewish, the essence of its politics and aims ultimately have remain unaltered - the conquest of Palestinian land for Jewish labour.

In fact, the Histadrut owns the **kibbutz** and **moshav** cooperative agriculture settlements, which control a large amount of land, and which expressly only allow Jews to be members. When the "New" Histadrut with its new terms was to be formed, the section running settlements was formally excorporated and until today refuses non-Jewish kibbutz and/or moshav members.

Within the framework of "**Jewish labour first**", the Histadrut:

- Was **convicted of discrimination** in July 2005 (by the very Occupation Courts!) for signing a collective agreement to prevent hotel workers without national identity cards, such as foreign workers and West Bank and Gaza Palestinians, from receiving benefits.
- Supported the Occupation's campaign in 2002 to forcibly expel foreign workers, in defense of Jewish labour. In fact, Histadrut Chairman in the Western Galilee, Asher Shmueli, stated that foreign workers "are employed in some work places under most disgraceful slavery conditions, while Israeli workers are rejected and are unable to find jobs."

The Histadrut intentionally profits from **forced deductions from Palestinian paychecks** for membership fees that did not correspond to union services.

- In 1995, the Histadrut signed an agreement with the PGFTU obligating Histadrut to pay the Palestinian union 8 million shekels as **compensation for the money that it had wrongfully collected from Palestinian workers** in the past, although Palestinians estimate the sum owed them at 1.5 billion shekels. Until today (2007), only 1 million shekels have been transferred, while money continues to be wrongfully collected from the Palestinians, enriching the bank accounts of the Histadrut.
- Even if the Histadrut boasts that some hundreds of Palestinian workers were offered **legal aid**, because the entire Palestinian work force is being exploited, help for such few numbers would comprise only a non-sincere and ineffectual action, not a true defence of workers' rights.

The Histadrut **directly assisted South African apartheid**, generating huge profits from it:

- In 1973, while the global trade union movement was gearing up to boycott apartheid in South Africa, the Histadrut-owned company Koor founded a joint corporation with the South African company Iscor - **Iskoor**. The joint venture produced armor plate for Israel's Merkava I tanks and South Africa's 150 Centurion tanks, personnel carriers and first scout cars. South Africa sent the alloys; Israel provided the formula; Iskoor near Tel Aviv did the work.
- Koor further invested in so-called **border industries** at the outskirts of the Bantustans, such as the Tradiran plant at Rosslyn and an agricultural chemical plant near the Transkei. These industries, similar to today's "industrial zones" near the Wall, were developed to exploit the oppressed of the apartheid regime.
- At the height of the anti-apartheid movement in the mid-1980s, the Histadrut established links not with the mass movement of the South African trade unions but with **unions sponsored by the white apartheid regime** and the Bantustan administrations. The latter had made it one of their tasks to campaign against the ever-stronger global boycott movement.



6. Workers solidarity - struggling for Palestinian liberation

The exploitation of Palestinian workers and the destruction of the Palestinian economy are pillars of Israeli occupation and apartheid. The struggle for socio-economic rights and justice of the Palestinian workers is thus an integral part of the Palestinian national struggle for liberation.

The struggle for decent work in Palestine is not only a struggle for better working conditions, salaries and benefits but also a struggle against a well-structured system of permits, exclusion, harassment and oppression imposed on the workers by the Occupation.

International solidarity for Palestinian workers is thus foremost solidarity against the Occupation. On February 11, 2007, the Palestinian workers' federations and vocational and professional trade unions **reaffirmed the Unified Palestinian Call for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions** issued on July 9, 2005, and called for workers solidarity to:

- **Boycott and divest from Israel**
- **Work towards sanctions upon Israel**
- **Boycott the Histadrut** (Israeli trade union federation)

They appealed for such actions "until Israel stops its crimes against our people and implements international law and human rights."

This call addresses the Arab and International Trade Unions and, in particular, the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions, the Arab League, the Arab Labour Organization, the International Labour Organization, the International Trade Union Confederation, the Organization of African Trade Union Unity and our Palestinian people and the international community.



11/2/2007 - Palestinian trade unions call for boycott, Divestment & Sanctions. (Right to Left: PGFTU, Coalition of Independent Democratic Trade Unions, GUPW)