

Trade Unions & Palestine : what can the unions do for international solidarity?

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Background

Within the present-day territory of Israel, one and a half million Palestinians (20% of the population) live as second-class citizens and suffer discrimination. They are disadvantaged by legislation with regard to nationality and marriage, access to the resources of work, trade unions, culture, health, education and even building permits, which they are hardly ever granted. Note that they are not protected by the Histadrut trade union, which only protects Jews.

In the West Bank, Palestinian working conditions are not regulated by any law. They do not have the protection of a minimum wage, minimum age for employment, nor any limit to the hours worked. The Wall physically prevents tens of thousands of Palestinians from reaching their families, places of work, agricultural lands, schools, universities or hospitals. Currently, the unemployment rate there is 19% and 25% of the population are subject to food insecurity.

One and a half million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip experience extreme and systematic oppression: total blockade, deprivation of basic goods, frequent bombing raids, etc. It is estimated that 120,000 private sector jobs have been lost since the siege began in 2007 and that 40% of the population is unemployed. The 40,000 people working in the agriculture sector are affected by the destruction of over 46% of the arable land.

Finally, nearly 6 million Palestinians now live in exile and are faced with the impossibility of returning to their land. To varying degrees, all Palestinians (11 million people, half of whom have refugee status) experience segregation on a daily basis.

The trade union response

The international trade union movement has always demonstrated its commitment to human rights through actions of solidarity with oppressed people, or by adopting sanctions against oppressive regimes. It is essential to strengthen the relationships between Palestinian trade unionists and trade unionists throughout the world, to develop solidarity campaigns and to transmit the testimony of Palestinian workers to trade unionists and workers in general, in order to spread knowledge about the current situation of apartheid, military occupation and neoliberal austerity imposed on the Palestinian people. The participation of numerous trade unions in the various Freedom Flotillas to Gaza is, from this point of view, an essential sign of solidarity with the Palestinians.

While this solidarity is expressed in various forms (civil missions to Palestine, demonstrations, lawsuits etc.), one of the most active campaigns at the moment is the international campaign for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions against Israel. This campaign, launched in 2005 in response to a call from over 170 Palestinian organisations, including all Palestinian trade unions, demands an end to the occupation and colonisation, the removal of the Wall, the lifting of the blockade on Gaza, complete equality of rights for Palestinians living in Israel and the implementation of the right of return for Palestinian refugees, in other words: basic compliance with international law. This

campaign is, like that for the boycott of South Africa during the 1980s, a non-violent citizens' action campaign, initiated by the Palestinians themselves, to generate a current of international opinion in favour of respecting the rights of Palestinians.

The BDS Campaign

The 2005 call for action has been increasingly echoed worldwide, supported by numerous individuals, trade unions, political parties and other organisations wanting to concretely demonstrate their international solidarity. Adopting the BDS measures has now become the most important form of trade union solidarity with Palestinian civil society in general, and the Palestinian working class in particular. Trade unions must use their position as major players in civil society to support campaigns for consumer boycotts and for business divestment, as well as calls for sanctions against the state of Israel, as long as it persists in violating international law, United Nations resolutions and decisions of the International Court of Justice.

Thus, Western companies such as Caterpillar (which manufactures bulldozers that destroy Palestinian houses), or Starbucks (which gives financial support to the Israeli army) have been targeted in the same way as Israeli companies such as Carmel, Elbit or Jaffa. The Norwegian government has withdrawn its capital from several Israeli companies that invest in the illegally occupied territories. Bolivia and Venezuela have broken off diplomatic relations with Israel. Film directors and actors such as Ken Loach, Jean-Luc Godard, Susan Sarandon and Meg Ryan; musicians such as Annie Lennox, Roger Waters, Elvis Costello, Stevie Wonder, Salif Keita and Massive Attack; writers such as Naomi Klein, Alice Walker and John Berger have publicly refused to participate in events in Israel. In addition, numerous academics, teachers and teaching unions throughout the world have also publicly called for the breaking off of agreements with Israeli academic institutions. In Israel, this movement is encouraged by the Boycott From Within association, and was recently joined by 150 Israeli academics, writers, artists and actors who refused to appear or work in the illegally occupied colonies.

Trade union examples

In February 2009, as a demonstration of protest against Israel's war upon the Gaza Strip, a South African dockers' trade union launched a boycott against Israeli shipping and cargo. Following the murderous Israeli attack on the Freedom Flotilla in 2010, the Swedish dockers' union refused to handle over 500 containers during a week-long boycott of Israeli imports and exports and Californian dockers in Oakland blocked the unloading of an Israeli cargo ship for 24 hours.

In South Africa, local authority workers' unions backed the creation of an "Israeli Apartheid-free Zone" where local authorities would not have any link, whether sporting, trade, academic or cultural, with the Israeli regime. Similar campaigns were conducted by trade unionists in Ireland and Australia.

Agriculture sector unions, such as the French Confédération Paysanne, committed themselves to the BDS campaign against Agrexco-Carmel and its successor, Mehadrin, Israeli companies marketing fruit and vegetables, 70% of which come from illegal settlements, and which profit from EU subsidies that put both Palestinian and European farmers at a disadvantage.

Trade unions are also involved in action against companies targeted by the international BDS Campaign, such as the Franco-Belgian bank Dexia, involved in financing Israeli colonies and the French companies Alstom and Veolia, which are involved in the operation of a tramway linking Jerusalem to the West Bank colonies. Those companies have lost a number of contracts as a result. Recently, the Anglo-Danish security company G4S has been targeted by the international campaign.

This company has been denounced by UNISON (UK), COSATU (South Africa) and Abvakabo (Netherlands) for its active collaboration in the daily oppression of the Palestinians. Similarly, a campaign is under way in France against the telephone company Orange, because of its investments in Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories. The French unions Solidaires and the CGT are putting pressure on management, in the framework of a campaign destined to become international, given that Orange operates in many countries where there is an active BDS Campaign.

The Palestinian unions also ask their international colleagues to break off relations with the racist Israeli union, the Histadrut. Many individual unions, as well as the national Trades Union Congresses of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England and South Africa have broken off such relations or initiated a procedure for doing so.

List of unions involved

In April 2011, a conference was held in Palestine to found the Palestinian Trade Union Coalition for BDS (PTUC-BDS), which brings together all Palestinian union branches. This is the contact point for trade unions across the world that are involved in BDS. A partial list is given below:

Australia: MUA

Basque Country: LAB

Brazil: CSP-Conlutas and CUT

Canada: SEFPO and STTP

Egypt: EIUF

France: CNT, Confédération Paysanne and Solidaires

Great Britain: GMB, RMT, TGWU, TUC and Unison

Ireland: ICTU

Italy: FLAICA-CUB and USB

Norway: LO

Scotland: STUC

South Africa: COSATU

Spain: CCOO, CIG, IAC and USO

Sweden: LO

All trade unions in Cuba, the countries of the Arab League and of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, including the International Federation of Arab Trade Unions,

Public Services International (PSI, representing 20 million workers)

There are also a large number of student unions: from the Universities of York, Regina and Toronto in Canada; the Universities of Berkeley, California and Oberlin, Ohio in the USA; the University of Sydney in Australia; the Universities of Manchester and King's College London in Britain; the

University of Assé in Quebec; the Federation of Francophone Students in Belgian; the Solidaires students union in France; as well as from teaching unions such as Emancipation, SUD-Education and SUD-Recherche in France, FNEEQ in Quebec, UCU in the UK and TUI in Ireland.

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P.S.

* May 10, 2014:

http://laboursolidarityandstruggle.org/site_english/?p=221