



A REPORT FROM LO INTERNATIONAL DEPARTMENT

Trade union solidarity with Palestine

Otto Widmark



The Swedish Trade Union Confederation

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Foreword

THE SITUATION IN PALESTINE is unsustainable, the struggle of Palestinian women and men for a life without violence and murder has been going on for over 70 years. The desire for a life in peace, a job to live on with good working conditions and the possibility of free movement between Palestine and Israel are at the top of the list. Children and young people must have hope for a future where democracy leads the way for Palestinians and Israelis to live side by side. Israel must respect international law. Trade union solidarity is a way to give support on the path towards the goal. LO (Swedish Trade Union Confederation) together with other international organisations, provides support that includes training for trade union elected representatives to exert influence in the workplace. Social dialogue, organisation and democratisation are components of this training. Together we can take action for a life of dignity!

Oscar Ernerot

Head of LO International Department





1. A country under occupation

BETWEEN THE BEACH on the Gaza Strip and the beach in Tel Aviv it is barely seventy kilometres, about the distance from Borås to Gothenburg. Despite the proximity, it is like two different worlds. Tel Aviv is a liberal modern city with millions of visiting tourists every year. In the Gaza Strip, 63 per cent of the population is dependent on humanitarian aid for their survival.¹ These huge differences between people characterise Israel and Palestine.

The Palestinians' right to security, livelihood and a dignified life is restricted by the Israeli occupation. Israel fragments and divides the Palestinian territory, undermining the conditions for establishing an autonomous state.²

It prevents economic development, creates unemployment, poverty and desperation in the occupied population.³ It also divides the Palestinian population living under different conditions and different levels of Israeli oppression, depending on where they live. The occupation is characterised by systematic and recurring violations of international law.

The Gaza Strip has been subject to an Israeli-Egyptian blockade since 2007. The result is that more than two million people live in what has been called the world's largest outdoor prison. Israel decides which people and goods can be brought in and out of the Gaza Strip. This has destroyed the domestic economy and unemployment is over 50 per cent.⁴ For young Palestinians, unemployment is almost 80 per cent.⁵ Half the population lives below the poverty line. This is a situation created by political decisions and not a natural disaster.

1 OCHA Humanitarian Needs Overview OPT 2,022 https://www.ochaopt.org/sites/default/files/HNO_2022.pdf.

2 Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, Francesca Albanese A/77/356 21 September 2022.

3 See for example the ITUC's 2021 Palestine Report: Workers' Rights in Crisis: Palestinian workers in Israel and the settlements https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ituc_palestinereport_en.pdf.

4 54 per cent according to the ITUC's Palestine Report.

5 OCHA Briefing 21 June 2022 <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/fifteen-years-blockade-gaza-strip>.



Different conditions apply to Palestinians in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, but for them too, Israel restricts how Palestinians are allowed to travel and where they can work. Those who are considered residents of East Jerusalem can visit and work in both East Jerusalem and Israel, but do not have citizenship and are not allowed to vote in elections to the Israeli parliament. Israel determines who should be counted as residents in Jerusalem and Israel is accused by human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch of systematically discriminating and making it difficult for Palestinians to live in East Jerusalem.⁶

Palestinian residents in the West Bank need special permits to visit Jerusalem, Gaza or the rest of Israel. In the West Bank, Israeli settlers and Palestinians live under different laws and have different opportunities. Israeli settlers, a phenomenon contrary to international law, live under the same Israeli civil laws as other Israeli citizens, while Israel has Palestinians tried in military courts. The West Bank is divided into different levels of Israeli control. This division of the country prevents

⁶ See for example the Human Rights Watch report "A threshold crossed" from April 2021 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apart-heid-and-persecution>.



economic development. Area C is the largest part of the occupied West Bank and Israel exerts virtually unlimited control over the area. About 400,000 settlers live in the area. The majority of the West Bank's Palestinians live in Areas A and B, and the Palestinian Authority is also represented here.

Some 5.3 million Palestinians live in occupied Palestine. Of these, about 40 per cent are refugees who originate from what is now the state of Israel but who are not allowed to return. In total about 5.7 million Palestinian refugees have been registered by the UN. In addition to refugee camps in the occupied areas, about 3.3 million Palestinian refugees live in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.

The occupation creates poverty and unemployment

About one and a half million Palestinians are poor, more than one in four.⁷ The unemployment rate in Palestine is about 25 per cent and in the Gaza Strip it is over 50 per cent.⁸ The private sector in both the West

7 World Bank, Palestinian Territories' Economic Update – April 2022 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/westbankandgaza/publication/economic-update-april-2022>.

8 ITUC's Palestine Report.



Bank and the Gaza Strip is weak. It is difficult to support a family on the Palestinian statutory minimum wage of about SEK 4,500 per month. Of those working in the Palestinian private sector, about 30 per cent do not even receive the minimum wage.⁹

The lack of opportunities to earn a living in the Palestinian economy means that many Palestinians look for work in Israel where wages can often be at least twice as high as in the West Bank. In order to work in Israel, Palestinians from the West Bank need work permits linked to specific employers. This system is criticised and exploits Palestinian workers. Many are forced to pay a significant part of their wages to intermediaries who will “help” them to get work and work permits. The International Trade Union Confederation has called for the abolition of this system and reforms in the construction sector, for example.

9 ITUC’s Palestine Report.

2. *The Palestinian trade union movement*

JUST LIKE THE Palestinian society in general, the Palestinian trade union movement is characterised by the oppression and separation policies of the occupying power. LO's sister organisation, the PGFTU (Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions), is the largest Palestinian trade union federation. Trade union members and leaders from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank cannot meet because of Israel's blockade and restrictions.

The high unemployment rate, not least in the Gaza Strip, which is a consequence of the impact of the occupation on economic development, also complicates trade union work and organisation. The Palestinian trade union does not have the opportunity to organise Palestinian workers in East Jerusalem, in settlements or in Israel. During the second intifada in the early 2000s, the Israeli military regularly raided the PGFTU office.

The Palestinian authorities as well as the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip also limit the democratic space for trade unions and civil society in Palestine. The Palestinian trade union movement also has internal problems where the competition between various political parties and the goal of national emancipation have left their mark on the organisation.



3. Trade union solidarity

LO HAS SHOWN its trade union support to Palestine and the Palestinian trade union PGFTU over many years.

LO has supported the PGFTU in educating new and young trade union leaders in organising, recruiting, collective bargaining and labour market issues. The project has consisted of a number of workshops and training sessions in order to assist the PGFTU in its ongoing generational renewal. The objective is to strengthen the participants in their leadership within the Palestinian trade union.

For many years, the LO District Gotland has been working together with a Palestinian women's organisation in East Jerusalem, the Al Mortaqa Women's Organisation. In the project, they work to strengthen women's ability to support themselves, helping them and their families out of poverty and strengthening women's independence. Their knowledge of their rights in the labour market is low and many can be exploited. Therefore, Al Mortaqa provides information about their rights and can provide legal assistance.

Together with the German Trade Union Federation DGB and the Israeli trade union Histadrut, LO has been running projects for Palestinian workers who want to work in Israel. In September 2022, a pilot project was completed for Palestinians who want to work as electricians in Israeli industry. As a result of this project, a historic cooperation agreement between the PGFTU and Histadrut has been signed for continued support for Palestinian workers in Israel. The cooperation makes it easier for Palestinian workers and strengthens their situation in Israel.

LO and its affiliated trade unions are members of the Olof Palme International Center, which supports Palestinian civil society in its work for peace, democracy and equality. It has a particular focus on workers, women and young people and their democratic right to influence their communities. The Palme Center also works together with Israeli human rights and peace organisations.

At its 2012 Congress, LO resolved to demand a lifting of the blockade

against Gaza, a stop to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the dismantling of all settlements. At the same Congress, LO resolved to review its financial assets in companies with economic interests in the illegal Israeli occupation and at the same time called for employers to cease operations in companies that make money from the settlements. Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are contrary to international law and are an obstacle to a two-state solution based on international law. Trade with the settlements risks legitimising the occupation and violations of international law.

Every year at the International Labour Conference attention is drawn to the occupation by the ILO Director-General as well as in many of the worker's delegates' speeches. Below is one such example.

In 2018 Oscar Ernerot gave the following speech at the ILO International Labour Conference as Sweden's worker's delegate:

On behalf of LO and TCO I want to express our profound solidarity with the working men and women of Palestine. The Director General's report about workers of the occupied Arab territories demonstrates that the decent work deficit in Palestine is alarming – We share the hopelessness and the urge for immediate change to address the reality of the ongoing de-development.

We together with the global trade union movement strongly condemn the extreme violence conducted by Israel last week: the violence and the killings must stop immediately. The ILO was formed to preserve and develop peace; the action taken by the government of Israel is in direct conflict with that goal.

The occupation must end; the trade blockade must be terminated, and the daily harassment of civilians must be stopped. The workers of Palestine can no longer be denied the right to decent work and a better future.

We welcome the Swedish government's recognition of Palestine as a state and we believe that it will support the progressive forces both in Palestine and Israel to act towards achieving a two-state solution.

We want to reaffirm our support to finding a lasting solution that will lead to Israel and Palestine living side by side in peace and security but today all we can see is an unfair occupation leading in the opposite di-



rection. It is only when dialogue replaces violence that a just, two-state solution can be achieved.

The Swedish workers will continue to provide solidarity and support to the Palestinian workers.

The speech was interrupted by the Jordanian chairperson of the conference who did not want the Swedish delegate to criticise the occupation, but it was again taken up by the Secretary General of ITUC (International Trade Union Confederation) Sharan Burrow.

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Unfortunately there are numerous conflicts in the world and the long-standing conflict between Palestine and Israel is deeply concerning. The importance of trade union solidarity can never be emphasised enough, as the trade union struggle for everyone's right to organise freely and for good working conditions is one of the pillars of human rights and contributes to a democratic society. Through your own trade union, via central organisations such as LO, and through international cooperation between organisations such as the Olof Palme International Center, you can give your support to various projects through your commitment. In this short report, we tell you about Palestine and some of our past and continuing initiatives.

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