

# The Histadrut

**Its History and Role in Occupation, Colonisation  
and Apartheid**



**Trade Union Friends of Palestine**

*Campaigning in solidarity with the Palestinian People*

# The Histadrut:

## The General Confederation of Labour in the Land of Israel

### Executive Summary

The Histadrut was founded in December 1920 in British Mandate Palestine. From its inception its aims were neither to build workers' solidarity nor represent or campaign for workers' rights; instead it was founded as an exclusively Jewish organisation to facilitate the colonisation of Palestine. As such it worked in tandem with the Jewish Agency to promote the exclusion of Palestinian labour and produce and was at the forefront of the movement to turn Palestine from an Arab country into a Zionist one. Today it continues to work hand in hand with the Israeli government and promotes and defends policies that violate the basic civil, political and human rights of Palestinians.

### The Early History of the Histadrut

The Histadrut's main role during the British Mandate period (1920-1948) was to bring the Jewish work force under its control in order to ensure no solidarity or integration occurred between Palestinian and Jewish workers - a policy it called 'Labour Zionism.' Led by David Ben Gurion, the future Israeli Prime Minister and the man responsible for the expulsion of Palestinians in 1948-49, it actively promoted racial discrimination and boycotts. As an organisation it refused to countenance having Palestinians and Jews together in the same union with Ben Gurion railing against "the evil of mixed labour<sup>1</sup>." To this end it actively broke up unions like the Union of Railway, Postal and Telegraph Workers which had a mixed Jewish and Arab Palestinian membership<sup>2</sup> and likewise, as it established its own companies, eventually becoming the second largest employer in the country, it refused to employ non-Jews. Similarly it lobbied the British

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<sup>1</sup> David Ben Gurion, *Rebirth and the Destiny of Israel*, *Philosophical Library*, 1954, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Sawt el-Amel citing Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948*, University of California Press, 1996.

authorities for separate pay rates for Jews and Arabs<sup>3</sup> and despite excluding Palestinians itself, it did what it could to undermine Palestinian trade unions, ironically lobbying against them on the grounds that they were separatist, exclusionary and against the spirit of workers' solidarity<sup>4</sup>.



*Prospective Jewish immigrants were told, "Palestine is a land without a people for a people without a land."*

*Bringing western technology immigrants would 'redeem the land' and "make the desert bloom."*

Figure 1 Zionist poster from the 1920s encouraging eastern European Jews to come and 'redeem' the land.

Similarly when Palestinian workers took industrial action in support of representative national government the Jewish Agency and the Histadrut used the opportunity to fill their places, most

<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism*, Verso, 2008, p. 77.

<sup>4</sup> Sawt el-Amel citing Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948*, University of California Press, 1996.

famously during the 1936 Jaffa Dockers' strike when they established Tel Aviv as an alternative port to Jaffa.

Indeed a planned and structured discrimination, similar to that of Apartheid, was all pervasive in the actions of the Histadrut. Leading Labour Zionist, Haim Aslosoroff, suggesting in 1927 that Zionism should emulate South Africa's colour bar which excluded Black workers from skilled, unionised employment<sup>5</sup>.

In addition, coupled with a boycott of Palestinian labour was a boycott of Palestinian produce; David HaCohen, former managing director of the Histadrut construction company Solel Boneh described what this meant:

I had to fight my friends on the issue of Jewish Socialism, to defend the fact that I would not accept Arabs in my trade union, the Histadrut; to defend preaching to housewives that they should not buy at Arab stores; to defend the fact that we stood guard at orchards to prevent Arab workers from getting jobs there... to pour kerosene on Arab tomatoes; to attack Jewish housewives in the market and smash Arab eggs they had bought... to buy dozens of dunums [of land] from an Arab is permitted but to sell God forbid one Jewish dunum to an Arab is prohibited; to take Rothschild, the incarnation of capitalism as a socialist and to name him 'benefactor' – to do all that was not easy<sup>6</sup>.

Likewise French historian Nathan Weinstock records that a "mere rumour that a café in the exclusively Jewish town of Tel Aviv had taken on a few Arab workers provoked an angry gathering of thousands of demonstrators." Also "Every member of the Histadrut had to pay two compulsory levies: (1) 'For Jewish Labour' – funds for organising pickets, etc. against the employment of Arab workers, and (2) 'For Jewish Produce' – for organising the boycott of Arab produce<sup>7</sup>."

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<sup>5</sup> Zachary Lockman, Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948, University of California Press, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> David Hirst, The Gun and the Olive Branch, Nation Books, 2003, second edition, p. 185, citing *Haaretz*, 15 November 1969.

<sup>7</sup> Nathan Weinstock, Zionism: False Messiah, Ink Links Ltd, 1979, p. 184.



*“to pour kerosene on Arab tomatoes; to attack Jewish housewives in the market and smash Arab eggs they had bought...”*

**David HaCohen**

**Figure 2. Zionist poster from the 1930s encourages immigrants to buy only Jewish produce, (Israel MFA).**

All this activity was aimed at creating an exclusively Jewish state and the Histadrut always closely aligned itself with the Jewish Agency, the Jewish National Fund and the Jewish Colonial Agency. It was through the Histadrut that Mapai, the Israeli Labour Party led by Ben Gurion was founded, and indeed also the Haganah, the Jewish paramilitary organisation that became the Israeli Army. Indeed throughout the Mandate era the Histadrut in collaboration with the Jewish Agency actively colluded with Britain to deny Palestinians their right to self-determination, its construction company Solel Boneh building many of the forts and border fences that cemented British colonial rule<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Segev, One Palestine Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate, (2000), p. 417.



**Figure 3. British police barracks at Latrun built by the Histadrut during the 1936-39 Arab Revolt for self-determination.**

That all these Zionist organisations envisioned the ethnic cleansing of Palestine as a solution to their ‘Arab problem’ is not in doubt; both in their practice and their statements, their aim was always a Palestine with as few Palestinians as possible, as Joseph Weitz, friend of Ben Gurion and head of the Jewish Colonial Agency outlined in 1940:

Among ourselves, it must be clear that there is no place in the country for both peoples together... there is no other way but to transfer the Arabs from here to the neighbouring countries. Transfer all of them, not one village or tribe should remain<sup>9</sup>.

Little wonder then that speaking years later Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir remarked that when she joined the Histadrut Executive Committee in 1928 it “wasn’t just a trade union organisation. It

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<sup>9</sup> Uri Davis, *Apartheid Israel: Possibilities for the Struggle Within*, London, Zed Books, 2004, p. 20.

was a great colonising enterprise<sup>10</sup>.” Similarly, Ben Gurion paid tribute to its importance when he stated that without the Histadrut, “I doubt whether we would have a state<sup>11</sup>.” What this meant for the Palestinians was expulsion, dispossession and exile, something the Histadrut has still to acknowledge any responsibility for.



*“The inhabitants of Lydda must be expelled quickly, without attention to age.”*

**Military order personally approved by Ben Gurion.**

**Figure 4. David Ben Gurion, General Secretary of the Histadrut, and Golda Meir, Political Officer, both later became Prime Ministers of Israel. Under Ben Gurion’s leadership Palestinians were systematically expelled from the country. Yitzhak Rabin for example recalled that after the capture of Lydda and Ramle, Ben Gurion issued the order to drive out the 50,000 inhabitants<sup>12</sup>. Speaking in 1949 Ben Gurion himself said of the 750,000 Palestinian refugees, “The old will die and the young will forget.” Golda Meir was even more blunt, refusing to recognise the Palestinians as a people, she simply stated in a 1969 interview, “they did not exist.”**

<sup>10</sup> *The Observer*, 24 January 1971, quoted by Uri Davis, *Utopia Incorporated*, Zed Press, p. 142.

<sup>11</sup> *Moed*, Histadrut Department of Culture and Education, 1963, p. 3, quoted by Arie Bober (ed.), *The Other Israel: The Radical Case Against Zionism*, p. 125.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Martin Gilbert, *Israel: A History*, (1998), p. 218.

## The Histadrut after 1948

Once Israel became independent the Histadrut became extremely powerful. Owning some of the biggest companies in Israel it became the country's largest employer and by 1983 some 85% of Israel's wage earners were members<sup>13</sup>. Despite this success discrimination against Israel's Arab citizens remained endemic both within the Histadrut and within the government. Israel's Arabs, although promised full equality by the Israeli Declaration of Independence, were placed under martial law until 1966 and were only permitted to join the Histadrut in 1959.

However, even following the admission of Arab Israelis the Histadrut has frequently shown an unwillingness to campaign for equal rights in the workplace; a 2009 Knesset parliamentary committee on fair employment, for example, found that although Arab Israelis make up over 20% of the population, only 6% of public sector employees are Arab, and that those who are employed invariably occupy menial positions. What this means for governance and democracy is neatly summarised by Israeli politician Ahmed Tibi: "The absence of Arabs in [senior] roles means they have no say in [government] ministries decision-making processes<sup>14</sup>." Indeed, according to the Association of Civil Rights in Israel, Arab citizens of Israel "have suffered entrenched discrimination since the establishment of the State<sup>15</sup>," a fact that even former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert acknowledged in December 2008: "It is terrible that there is not even one Arab employee [out of 900] at the Bank of Israel<sup>16</sup>."

Sadly this is a discrimination that the Histadrut has not only failed to challenge but has in many cases encouraged. A 1989 report found that Histadrut companies had the worst record of systematically excluding Arab workers<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> The Jerusalem Post, <http://newstopics.jpost.com/topic/Histadrut> 7 April 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Ahmed Tibi quoted by Jonathan Cook, *Arab Israeli Barred From Public Sector Employment*, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=19277>, 30 December 2010.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.acri.org.il/eng/story.aspx?id=695>, 30 December 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Ha'aretz, "Olmert decries 'deliberate and insufferable discrimination' against Arabs," 11 December 2008, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/olmert-decries-deliberate-and-insufferable-discrimination-against-arabs-1.257103>

<sup>17</sup> Ahmad H. Sa'di, "Incorporation without integration: Palestinian citizens in Israel's labour market," || *History of the Human Sciences*, August 1995.





*Arab citizens of Israel  
 “have suffered  
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**The Association of Civil  
 Rights in Israel**

**Figure 5. 1954 Histadrut poster encourages Jewish workers to build up the state. At this time Arab citizens of Israel were not permitted to join the Histadrut.**

Despite extensive restructuring in the 1990s leading to the Histadrut selling off many of its companies and renaming itself the New Histadrut, there has been no change in its attitude towards defending Arab workers. Recently the Histadrut has failed to speak out when an Arab hotel manager was fired when he refused to forbid his Arab co-workers from speaking Arabic (2003); or intervene when McDonald’s Israel banned its employees from speaking Arabic (2004), or when Arab employees at a building site had their helmets marked with a red X to facilitate assassination in case of emergency (2004)<sup>18</sup>. Indeed, in 2009 when Israeli Railways sacked 150 Arab workers because they had not served in the army the Histadrut was again silent, leaving Wahbe Badarne, director of Labourer’s Voice to comment: “Unusually for a trade union, poor workers, and that

<sup>18</sup> Sawt el-Amel, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948*, University of California Press, 1996, p. 21.

means, overwhelmingly, Arab workers, are simply not on the Histadrut's agenda. It is there to protect the jobs and good salaries of workers in the large state corporations and government offices<sup>19</sup>.”

Unsurprisingly then whilst the Israeli NGO, the Adva Centre for Information on Equality and Social Justice in Israel, lists 14 organisations that advocate for Israeli Arab employment rights, the list does not include the Histadrut<sup>20</sup>.

Significantly however, the Histadrut's discrimination against Arab citizens of Israel extends beyond the economic sphere and has also been evident in colluding with the state to deny them their political rights. For example, in 1976 when Palestinian citizens for the first time protested the confiscation of their lands by calling a strike (Land Day), a day incidentally during which the Israeli police force shot dead six protestors, the Histadrut actively campaigned against the strike. The local media reported it planned to take reprisal measures and dismiss workers who participated in the strike, whilst a leaflet distributed amongst Arab workers warned them against absence on the day of the strike, stating absent workers would not be given trade union protection by the Histadrut<sup>21</sup>. Similarly, despite a spate of new racist legislation discriminating against Israel's Arab citizens being passed in the Knesset (The Reception Committee Law, The Citizenship Law and the Nakba Law, all 2011), the Histadrut has been conspicuous by its silence; though, given the Histadrut's record both with regard to Palestinian rights, and its earlier sustained support for South Africa's Apartheid regime, this is only to be expected<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Wahbe Badarne quoted in Jonathan Cook, *Israel Railways accused of Racism over sacked Arab Workers*, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=13074>, 30 December 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Adva Center: Information on Equality and Social Justice in Israel, *Non-Discriminatory Hiring Practices in Israel towards Arab Citizens, Ethiopian Israelis and new immigrants from Bukhara and the Caucasus*, (November 2008), <http://www.adva.org/uploaded/Affirmative%20Action%20in%20Israel%20in%20the%20Area%20of%20Employment.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> “Position Paper: Sawt el-Amel's Assessment of the Histadrut,” [http://www.socialistproject.ca/inthenews/Histadrut\\_English.pdf](http://www.socialistproject.ca/inthenews/Histadrut_English.pdf) 8 April 2011.

<sup>22</sup> For information on the Histadrut's support for South African Apartheid see, “Briefing: Labour Zionism and the Histadrut,” the International Jewish anti-Zionist Network and Labor for Palestine (US), 13 April 2010, <http://www.laborforpalestine.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Histadrut-Briefing.pdf>

## The Histadrut and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

Since June 1967 Israel has occupied the Palestinian Territories of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem. Throughout that time hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have worked for Israeli employers both inside Israel and in industrial zones and settlements in the Territories. Many have been employed in appalling conditions with no security of tenure, a lack of health and safety protection and no minimum wage<sup>23</sup>; emblematic of their status in Israeli society is that the places where Palestinian day labourers gather to be hired are openly referred to as “slave markets.”<sup>24</sup>



**Figure 6. Lucky Palestinian workers with permits queue at the Bethlehem checkpoint to enter their capital city. Queues begin as early as 2am even though the checkpoint does not open until 5am. Well over 90% of Palestinians are illegally denied access to their capital city, East Jerusalem.**

<sup>23</sup> For information on conditions of employment in settlements see, *International Labour Office, The situation of workers of the Occupied Arab Territories*, 2009, [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_106367.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_106367.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> David Hirst, *The Gun and the Olive Branch*, Nation Books, 2003, second edition, p. 146.

Palestinian workers inside Israel are denied the right to be represented by Palestinian unions and have never enjoyed the protection of the Histadrut, membership being denied to them<sup>25</sup> even though a condition of their employment has been the payment of 1% of their wages to the Histadrut as “an organising fee<sup>26</sup>.” Describing the situation, Manawel Issa Abdellal of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions stated, “The Histadrut has failed to represent any Palestinian workers inside Israel and the PGFTU is forbidden from defending Arab workers in such areas. It is very painful. We can see, witness, and hear of Israeli brutal exploitation of Arab workers, but we cannot do anything... It can only remind us of the Cantons of the Apartheid State of South Africa<sup>27</sup>.”

Nevertheless, in 2008, most likely in an attempt to blunt the growing Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Campaign, the Histadrut did agree to return a percentage of the money it had illegally taken as organising fees to the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU). Something which is today trumpeted by the Histadrut and Trade Union Friends of Israel as a landmark agreement but which leaves around \$30 million unaccounted for<sup>28</sup>.

In addition since the 1990s the Israeli government has imposed a further 2% levy on construction workers to promote the training of recent Russian Jewish immigrants; a situation that Jerusalem based economist Shir Hever has stated means in effect that Palestinian labourers are required to “subsidise the training of workers meant to replace them<sup>29</sup>.” Sadly, Hever further comments that the Histadrut has not only failed to challenge this discrimination but has in fact endorsed it<sup>30</sup>.

Worse still Hever’s 2009 report, “State Robbery,” found the Histadrut to be complicit in the Israeli government policy of deducting approximately a fifth of Palestinian workers’ wages supposedly as contributions towards welfare benefits, benefits which are for the most part denied to Palestinian

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<sup>25</sup> *Palestinian Workers Rights: A report commissioned by the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group*, May 2010, p. 26, <http://www.phrmg.org/Palestinian%20worker%20rights.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Arab American Union Members Council, <http://aaumc.org/drupal/node/26> 7 April 2011.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Cook, “Israel Stole \$2 Billion from Palestinian Workers,” *The Electronic Intifada*, 4 February 2010, <http://electronicintifada.net/content/report-israel-stole-2-billion-palestinian-workers/8664>

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

workers. The report finding that only around 8% of the money deducted was actually used to benefit Palestinian workers, whilst around 90% was passed to the Israeli Finance Ministry where it has been used to fund infrastructure projects, including illegal West Bank settlements<sup>31</sup>. As Shir Hever states, “This is a clear-cut case of theft from Palestinian workers on a grand scale... There are no reasons for Israel to delay in returning this money either to the workers or to their beneficiaries.<sup>32</sup>” However, it is a theft the Histadrut choose to be complicit with.



**Figure 7. Palestinians at work building the illegal Israeli settlement of Har Homa that separates East Jerusalem from Bethlehem. Unfortunately due to the Israeli occupation these are frequently the only jobs these workers can find; to add insult to injury they are denied union representation despite being made to pay an organising fee to the Histadrut.**

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

Politically and practically the Histadrut has always supported the occupation. Its former construction company, Solel Boneh, built many of the early settlements<sup>33</sup>; the Yashav Bank, which it owns a 25% stake in, operates in occupied East Jerusalem<sup>34</sup>; and Israelis living in the illegal settlements are entitled to Histadrut membership whilst of course their Palestinian neighbours are not.

Politically Histadrut claims to be in favour of a two state solution yet it recognises Israel's illegal annexation of the occupied Golan Heights and East Jerusalem, and despite the growing international consensus that Israel is fully to blame for the collapse of the peace process, the Histadrut chooses instead to place the blame on the Palestinians. In all respects then the Histadrut merely trumpets the views and positions of the Israeli government, which is only natural given its close ties to Israel's political parties and the Israeli Labour Party in particular<sup>35</sup>. Indeed Histadrut Chairman Ofer Eini stated as recently as March 2011, "I will never attack our prime minister when I'm in another country. That's my rule. I can only support him"<sup>36</sup>.

The Histadrut also supported Israel's illegal war on Gaza in 2008-2009<sup>37</sup>, a war in which 1,385 Palestinians were killed, including 318 children<sup>38</sup>, and which saw the large scale commission of war crimes and possible crimes against humanity<sup>39</sup>. Likewise the Histadrut supports the illegal

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.whoprofits.org/Company%20Info.php?id=545> and Tony Greenstein, "Histadrut: Israel's Racist 'Trade Union,'" published Electronic Intifada, 9 March 2009, <http://electronicintifada.net/content/histadrut-israels-racist-trade-union/8121>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.whoprofits.org/Company%20Info.php?id=889>

<sup>35</sup> See *Report of the UNISON delegation to Palestine and Israel, 27 November – 3 December 2010*, "Hussain Al-Foqaa, the President of the PGFTU Public Services Federation said in our meeting with him that the Histadrut had failed to make a significant statement on the peace process. He criticised the Histadrut for only wanting to talk about trade union issues and not taking a leading role in supporting the peace process. Such a position was untenable in the context of the Israeli Occupation. Shaher Sa'ed also criticised the Histadrut's stance. He wondered why the Histadrut could not take a different position from that of the Israeli government and he wanted the Histadrut to take a clear position on the Occupation and the settlements," <http://www.unison.org.uk/file/reportDelegation02010.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> "Histadrut Head tells US Jewish Leaders: Don't Underestimate BDS Movement," Jerusalem Post 10 March 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/International/Article.aspx?id=211524> 8 April 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Histadrut *Statement on the situation in Southern Israel and Gaza*, 13 January 2009, <http://www.palestinecampaign.org/files/Histadrut%20Statement%20on%20Gaza.pdf>, 31 December 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Figures from B'Tselem, The Israeli Human Rights Centre for Information in the Occupied Territories, [http://www.btselem.org/English/Gaza\\_Strip/20091227\\_A\\_year\\_to\\_Castlead\\_Operation.asp](http://www.btselem.org/English/Gaza_Strip/20091227_A_year_to_Castlead_Operation.asp)

<sup>39</sup> Report of the United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict: Executive Summary, [http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/12session/A-HRC-12-48\\_ADVANCE1.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/12session/A-HRC-12-48_ADVANCE1.pdf), 31 December 2010.

blockade of Gaza, viewing only humanitarian assistance as appropriate<sup>40</sup>, and yet this is a blockade that according to the Palestinian Medical Relief Society has caused a malnutrition rate of 52% amongst Palestinian children<sup>41</sup>, and which the International Committee of the Red Cross has condemned as an illegal collective punishment<sup>42</sup>. Similarly a Histadrut statement on the Israeli attack on the Gaza Freedom Flotilla makes no mention of the fact that Israel initiated the illegal attack but rather blames the human rights activists on board for their own killings: “the conduct of the flotilla organizers, through the rejection of the Israeli proposal, was to attain provocation to strengthen Hamas, agitate the real peace efforts in the region and create an incident which now threatens to unravel the delicate diplomacy...”<sup>43</sup>,



*Despite supporting the Israeli attack on Gaza and the ongoing blockade, Histadrut claims it “will not cease its efforts to promote peace and mutual understanding...”*

**Figure 8. Women sit amongst the wreckage of their destroyed homes in Gaza in the aftermath of Israel's 2008-09 assault, an assault the Histadrut supported, as indeed it still supports the illegal blockade of the territory.**

Finally, the Histadrut is at the forefront of trying to blunt the growing Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement. Whilst the Histadrut attempts to present itself as a supporter of the peace process, co-existence and cooperation, it continually fails to acknowledge that there can be no respect or reconciliation whilst one people dominates, rules over and exploits another people.

<sup>40</sup> *Histadrut Statement on Gaza*, 10 June 2010.

<sup>41</sup> PMRS: “52% of Gaza Children Suffer from Malnutrition, <http://www.imemc.org/article/59031>, 30 December 2010.

<sup>42</sup> The International Committee of the Red Cross, *Gaza Closure: Not Another Year!*, 14 June 2010, <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/update/palestine-update-140610.htm>, 31 December 2010.

<sup>43</sup> *Histadrut Statement Regarding Flotilla Attacks*, [http://www.tufi.org.uk/news/Flotilla\\_attacks\\_Histadrut\\_Statement.html](http://www.tufi.org.uk/news/Flotilla_attacks_Histadrut_Statement.html), 31 December 2010.

Unfortunately the Histadrut is not only part of this process of domination but has utilised its supposedly left wing credentials to pose as the acceptable face of the Israeli occupation. To this end it has misrepresented the position of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, claiming it does not support the Boycott movement<sup>44</sup> when in fact it has continually reiterated its call for a boycott of Israel until it abides by international law and human rights standards<sup>45</sup>. The PGFTU was in fact particularly scathing of the Histadrut's attempt to use its name to whitewash Israel's crimes, stating clearly as regards the blockade of Gaza and the killings of the Freedom Flotilla activists:

Instead of denouncing the killing of the civilians on the Flotilla, and demanding an end to the military blockade imposed for more than three years on Gaza, the Histadrut exploits a union to union cooperation [agreement] to handle industrial complaints for Palestinian workers as a cover to escape from the ethical responsibility as free, independent trade unions, to condemn the crime which was strongly denounced by all freedom lovers around the world.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Histadrut Resolution: Peace and Co-operation*, September 2009, <http://www.tufi.org.uk/news/Histadrut%20Resolution%20%20Peace%20and%20Cooperation-Sept%2009.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> PGFTU Statement, 25 November 2009, <http://www.bdsmovement.net/2009/a-statement-by-the-palestine-general-federation-of-trade-unions-pgftu-and-the-palestinian-trade-union-blocs-and-frameworks-596>

<sup>46</sup> PGFTU Statement 3 June 2010, <http://bandannie.wordpress.com/2010/06/07/pgftu-nablus-vs-histadrut/>, 31 December 2010.



## Conclusion

In 2009 the Director General of the International Labour Organisation, Juan Somavia stated:

In the face of economic and social hardship, Palestinians nurture noble aspirations, as my representatives have again found. The large majority want to get on, in peace, with plans for their own future, their children and their statehood. These aspirations are constantly challenged by today's grim prospects, which leave little room for hope. Yet hope is vital to counter extreme alternatives that hold no future<sup>47</sup>.

The issue then for trade unionists is whether continued engagement with the Histadrut can be considered as a positive dialogue that contributes to the achievement of legitimate Palestinian aspirations, or whether in actual fact such a dialogue merely reinforces Israel's colonial occupation.

One answer was perhaps suggested by UNISON Scottish Regional Delegate, Mike Kirby, who in 2009 reluctantly felt the need to call for a review of his union's relationship with the Histadrut:

Conference, I believe in dialogue with all parties. History in Northern Ireland illustrates the necessity. The potential for capacity building and joint vocational training with PGFTU and Histadrut is inspiring. However, when Histadrut condones the excess of 'Operation Cast Lead' in Gaza, when Histadrut is accused of organising in the illegal settlements, we must review our relations and contracts<sup>48</sup>.

Given the history of Histadrut's collusion in and profit from the occupation of Palestinian territory, including its support for racial discrimination and colonization, its refusal to defend the rights of Palestinian workers and to oppose the ongoing daily repression of the Palestinian people, it is not surprising that sections of the international trade union movement, including the British TUC and the Scottish TUC, are either severing or reviewing their relationship with this organisation. In the words of a 2007 Palestinian Labour Coalition:

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<sup>47</sup> International Labour Office, *The Situation of Workers of the Occupied Arab Territories*, 2009, [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_106367.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_106367.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/conf2009/story15.htm>

Since its inception, the Histadrut has supported the occupation and enacted racist policies against our workers, denying them their rights. It has kept silent in front of Israel's crimes against our people throughout the decades of occupation. We are thus asking the international trade unions to boycott the Histadrut to pressure it to guarantee rights for our workers and to pressure the government to end the occupation and to recognise the full rights of the Palestinian people<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> *Statement In The Occasion Of The Workers' Boycott Call*, 11 February 2007, General Union of Palestinian Workers, Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, Coalition of Independent Democratic Trade Unions, General Union of Palestinian of Labour Vocational Associations, Palestinian Farmers Union, 11 February 2007, <http://www.stopthewall.org/downloads/pdf/S-F2.pdf>

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# Palestinian Trade Union Coalition for BDS (PTUC-BDS)

## Statement of Principles & Call for International Trade Union Support for BDS

### Extract

**Occupied Palestine, 4 May 2011** – *In commemoration of the first of May – a day of workers struggle and international solidarity – the first Palestinian trade union conference for boycotts, divestment and sanctions against Israel (BDS) was held in Ramallah on 30 April 2011, organized by almost the entirety of the Palestinian trade union movement, including federations, professional unions, and trade union blocks representing the entire spectrum of Palestinian political parties. The conference marked a historic event: the formation of **the Palestinian Trade Union Coalition for BDS (PTUC-BDS)** as the largest coalition of the Palestinian trade union movement. **PTUC-BDS** will provide the most representative Palestinian reference for international trade unions, promoting their support for and endorsement of the BDS Call, launched by Palestinian civil society in 2005, guided by the guidelines and principles adopted by the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions National Committee (BNC), of which PTUC-BDS has become a key component.*

The global trade union movement has always played a key and inspiring role in its courageous commitment to human rights and adoption of concrete, ground-breaking, labor-led sanctions against oppressive regimes in a show of solidarity with oppressed peoples around the world. The trade union boycott of apartheid South Africa stands out as a bright example of this tradition of effective solidarity. Trade unions today are taking the lead in defending the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, justice, freedom, equality and the right of return of our refugees as stipulated in United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194. Many of them have heeded the call from Palestinian civil society, and its labor movement in particular, to adopt BDS as the most effective form of solidarity with the Palestinians in our struggle to end Israeli occupation and apartheid.

The Conference decisively condemned the Histadrut and called on international trade unions to sever all links with it due to its historic and current complicity in Israel's violations of international law and Palestinian rights. The Histadrut has always played a key role in perpetuating Israel's occupation, colonization and system of racial discrimination by:

1. Publicly supporting Israel's violations of the Fourth Geneva Convention and other tenets of international law

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2. Maintaining active commercial interests in Israel's illegal settlement enterprise
  3. Allowing Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank to join the organization
  4. Supporting Israel's war of aggression on besieged Gaza in 2008/9; it has later justified Israel's massacre of humanitarian relief workers and activists aboard the Freedom Flotilla on 31 May 2010
  5. Illegally withholding over NIS 8.3 billion (approximately \$2.43bn) over decades of occupation from wages earned by Palestinian workers from the Occupied Palestinian Territory, deducted for 'social and other trade union benefits' that Palestinian laborers from the OPT have never received.

Recalling the trade union maxim "an injury to one is an injury to all", and given the global trade union movement's historic role in effective international solidarity with oppressed peoples around the world, **PTUC-BDS:**

- Calls on trade unions around the world to review and sever all ties with the Histadrut.

Such non-violent measures of accountability must continue until Israel fulfils its obligations under international law in acknowledging the Palestinian people's inalienable right to self-determination, and fully complies with international law.

Briefing paper written by Richard Irvine

**Cover Image:**

Palestinian workers queue at Gilo Checkpoint separating East Jerusalem from Bethlehem.

**Back Image:**

Palestinian workers queue at 4 am, Qalqilya checkpoint, West Bank © Richard Wainwright, 2010.



**Trade Union Friends of Palestine, May 2011**

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