



Here's our group. In September 2015 we went to Palestine at the invitation of the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) on a fact finding mission facilitated by the Tree of Life Educational Fund, of Old Lyme, CT.

Front, left to right:

Tree of Life Palestinian Guide and Translator Jirius Atrash

CT State AFL-CIO President Emeritus John Olsen

Retired UE International Representative and Education Director Carol Lambiase

Machinists Union Political Director for the Eastern States Conference Bill Shortell

Tree of Life Educational Fund Chairman Reverend David Goode

Back:

Former 1199 Vice President and labor lawyer John Fussell

CT State Building Trades President David Roche

Jack Brouillard

Tree of Life Executive Board member Elaine Brouillard

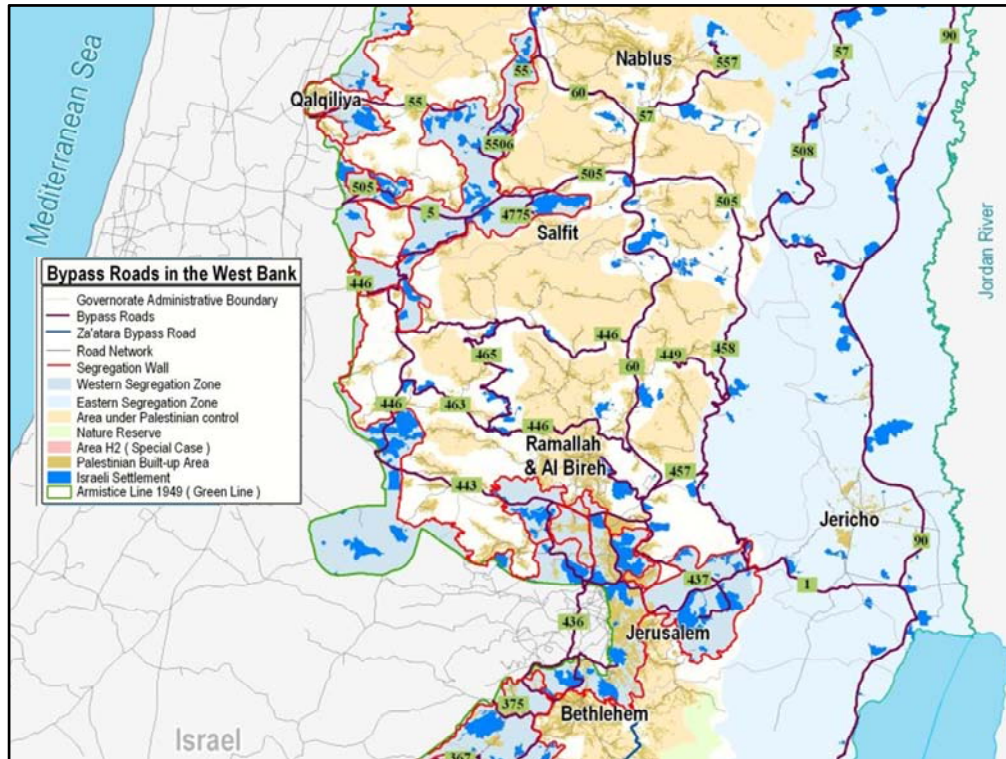
Steelworkers Union activist Anne Marie Miller



Map of West Bank, including section of Israel, showing places we visited.

This is where we were. It's called the "West Bank" because it is west of the Jordan River. Together with the Gaza strip, it will make up the country of Palestine, if the "two-state solution" ever gets negotiated. The West Bank is about half the size of Connecticut.

Gaza, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights make up the "Occupied Territories," which were seized from the neighboring Arab countries in the 1967 war.



DRIVING ON THE “BY-PASS” ROADS” (purple routes on map)

Our trip began, driving from the airport in Tel Aviv in Israel, driving to Nablus in Palestine on a By-Pass road.

These are called “by-pass roads” because they connect Israeli Settlements and “by-pass” Palestinian cities and villages. Only Israeli citizens can use them. We were allowed on, because our tour group was from Israel.

We were there on Yom Kippur, a Jewish holiday. The roads were almost empty.



SETTLEMENTS

On many hilltops in the West Bank is a Settlement of Israeli Jews. Many of the settlers come from the United States. The “Settlements” began after Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967. They are considered illegal by the rest of the world, and are built, in part, by the billions of dollars that the US sends Israel, every year. 15 years ago there were 200,000 people living in them, now there are 600,000. The cost of living for the people there is heavily subsidized.

100,000 Palestinians work in the Settlements and in Israel proper. Much of our trip was learning about their very difficult lives. More on this, later.



WATER

One of the first things our guide pointed out was the black water tanks on the roofs. That was how you could tell the homes of the Palestinians from those of the settlers. The settlers get unlimited 24 hour water piped in. Palestinians get a fraction of the water the settlers get and only once every 2 weeks at a higher price. They have to store it in tanks on the roof. More on the Water War later.



NABLUS.

Nablus is the oldest continually inhabited city in the world, 5000 years. It is the cradle of the Palestinian resistance. We were there at a peaceful time in between intifadas. “Intifada” is the Arab word for uprising, which comes when the Palestinian youth, so poor and jobless and oppressed rise up and throw stones in resistance.

Occupying Israeli soldiers regularly stop cars, search, detain and arrest Palestinians.

~ Palestinian average annual per capita income is \$2000 compared with \$30,000 for Israelis

~ 23% unemployment rate in the West Bank



When we were there the kids were friendly and curious. From what we are reading in the papers it looks like the 3rd intifada may have begun. More on that, later.



The core of the Nablus economy is soap production, made from local olive oil.



PGFTU

The next day we had a formal meeting with the Executive Board of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, composed of the leadership of the unions for Tourism, Construction, Agriculture, Transport, Public Service, and others. They represent 17% of the workers on the West Bank.

John Fussell, one of the leaders of our group, labor lawyer and board member of the Tree of Life Educational Fund, gave greetings from the CT Trade Union movement.

Carol Lambiase, retired International Representative and Education Director of the United Electrical Workers, presented the PGFTU with a copy of the UE resolution for Justice and Peace for the Peoples of Palestine and Israel.

23% of the workers in the declining West Bank economy are unemployed, making them a “reserved army of the unemployed” as the General Secretary of the PGFTU, Shaher Sa’ed, called it. This means there is a huge surplus of workers who are forced by employers against their will to bid wages down to poverty levels.

Israel recently passed a minimum wage law, but it is unenforced.



Sa'ed also touched on the “catastrophe of Gaza,” where the people live under a state of siege, and unemployment runs to 50%. We were unable to visit Gaza.

The PGFTU is very interested in occupational safety and health. We may have an opportunity to help them with educational materials.

Everywhere we went leaders talked about the plight of the Palestinian workers in the Settlements and in Israel. We heard the details in our next meeting, which was in Qalqiliya, a town entirely surrounded by the Separation Wall, also known as the Apartheid Wall, because of the similarity to conditions in pre-democratic South Africa.



THE WALL

Originally built with the stated intent of providing security for Israel, the Wall also serves as a way of annexing Palestinian territory, and filling all the communities which it disrupts with a sense of doom. The majority of the Wall is built on Palestinian land, not on the border between the two countries. The path of the wall encompasses 107 illegal Israeli settlements. It divides Palestinian villages, farmland and families.



We went from the modest union office in Qalqiliya, after meeting with local leaders, to view one of the border crossings Palestinian workers must go through to get to work in Israel or the settlements. The West Bank is covered with checkpoints. 100,000 workers a day must pass thru them. It takes hours in both directions. A typical construction worker, with a job on the other side of the Wall, gets up at 2:00 AM, gets to the Wall at 3:00, waits in line to be searched, x-rayed, and often harassed, to get thru at 6:00, and finally arrive at his worksite at 7:00 AM. After an 8 hour workday they get back home at 8 or 9 in the evening.

We met a few days later with a brave group of these workers. They are not pictured or named, for their security. Their children were with them, happy, well-behaved kids, a little bored at our long meeting. When it came their turn to speak, they were eloquent in their anger at not being able to see their fathers.

Some Palestinian women work in the Settlements, as well, as housekeepers.

The union leaders in Qalqiliya were proud of their achievements in regulating the passage thru the checkpoint, which earlier had been a chaotic crush.

On our way to our next stop, Bethlehem, we were treated with our own grim experience at a checkpoint. No pictures because the soldiers, with their assault rifles, don't allow it.



JERUSALEM

The next day we joined the pilgrims and tourists visiting the Holy Sites. A few days later the violence of the contradictions of the occupation again broke out, and Israel put East Jerusalem under lockdown, closing the sites.



WATER

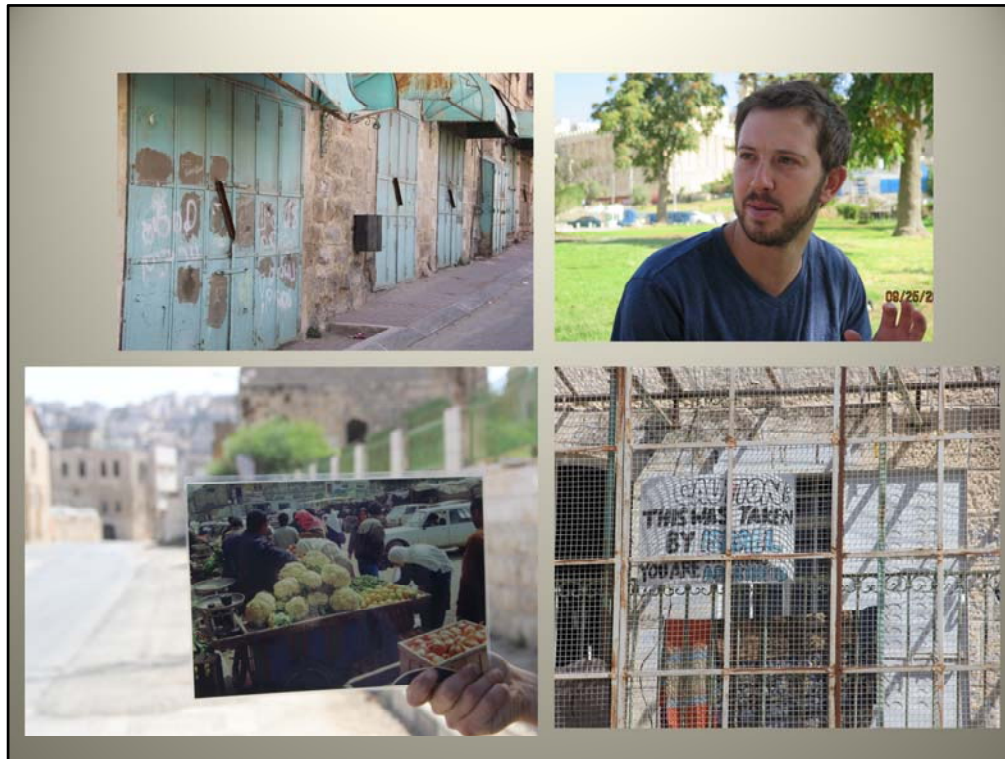
The government of Israel controls the water supply for both peoples. The average Palestinian gets 19 gallons per person per day. Settlers get more than five times as much, more than the average American uses. In the US we use more water to flush our toilets than Palestinians get for all their uses.

Palestinian farmers have also been deprived of adequate water.

Jane Hilal, an expert on the struggle over water, met with us to explain this and other facts, when we got back from Jerusalem. Israelis have unlimited access to water, while the Palestinians are strictly rationed. Half of their meager supply comes from the public water agency, and, in the winter, when it rains, from cisterns which store the rainwater.

Israel often destroys these cisterns, "for security reasons." This is a catch-all phrase for unexplained punishments of Palestinians.

Access to water is a major question of conflict between the two nations. Despite detailed discussions about the technology of water use in the talks in the 1990's, Israel insisted on leaving the question of control to the "final status" negotiations, which have never been completed.



HEBRON

Some of us knew from our reading of the tensions in Hebron, about the 600 heavily armed Settlers smack in the middle of an Arab town of 50,000, often guarded by thousands of Israeli soldiers, but we were unprepared for the “Ghost Town.”

An angelic young man, Nadav, a former Israeli soldier who had been stationed in Hebron, gave us a guided tour and a history lesson. He is a member of “Breaking the Silence,” a thousand ex-soldiers, who have publicly confessed the horrors they inflicted on the Palestinian people. Hebron had been the commercial center for a region of half a million people. Now it has hundreds of formerly busy shops, with their doors welded shut by the Israeli army; thousands of people thrown out of work.

All for “security reasons,” the safety of the illegal settlements. Nadav told us about a process called “mapping.” Soldiers bang on the doors, at two in the morning, of homes of families known to be innocent of any wrongdoing. They roust everyone out of bed, interrogate everyone, search every inch of the home, emptying out closets and dressers, throwing everything into a jumble.

“Why,” We asked, “would they do that to innocent families?”

“Our continual orders,” he replied, “were to make the Palestinians feel ‘hunted.’”



SAMI'S FARM

After that disturbing experience, we drove to “Sami’s Farm.” A prosperous small farm with olive trees, vegetables, grapes, fruit trees in Area C of the West bank. Area C is under the complete control of the Israeli military. We drank cardamom coffee in his humble, homey living room, and listened to his courageous, tragic story.

His wife had been shot dead at a checkpoint “accident.” The farm has been in his family for generations, the pretty old house was in need of repair, but the laws in Area C permit no repairs or new buildings by Palestinian land owners. Their condition is constantly monitored.

Nevertheless, we had an uplifting experience helping to plant apple trees. On our way to the new orchard, Sami showed us dying olive trees that had been sprayed with herbicide by nearby Settlers. Sami’s farm is completely surrounded by new Settlements. They have offered him large sums to sell out, but he won’t, so they harass him.



MEMBER OF THE KNESSET, AIDA TOURNA-SLIMAN

The next day we drove thru the bright sunshine to the prosperous seaside resort of Akko, (Acre in English). It was our first view of the blue-green Mediterranean. Akko was a crusader fort, now it throngs with affluent tourists. It is surreal, knowing that the living hell of Gaza is 100 miles down the coast.

Aida is a newly-elected member of the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, from the Arab Joint List. This is a left-led coalition, which brought in 13 members. There was a record turnout of Palestinian voters. Benjamin Netanyahu, who has pledged never to agree to a Palestinian state, was recently re-elected Prime Minister, by the slimmest of margins.

Aida was elected Chair of the Knesset Woman's Committee.

She told us that Palestinian schools in Israel receive 29% of the funding per pupil of the Jewish schools. The government also allocates 2% of the daycare budget for Arab children. There are 1.7 million Arabs living in Israel, not counting the 3 million in Gaza and the West Bank.

She believes that the "two-state solution," the subject of more than 20 years of on-again, off-again negotiations, is "fading out" as a real possibility. On the other hand she sees "Jewish Democracy as a contradiction." The solution is a secular democracy, including the West Bank and Gaza, with equal rights for all.

We talked intensely for two hours, crammed into her little office. Her energy and intelligence made us believe a solution was possible. We tried to assure her of a growing support for the Palestinian cause in the US.



RAMALLAH

The next day we drove to the capital of the Palestinian Authority, Ramallah. The PA is the mostly fruitless attempt to gain rights for the Palestinians under Israeli domination.

There we met with the Deputy Labor Minister, who gave us more information about the lives of the Palestinian workers in the Settlements and Israel. None of them are allowed to live “outside the Wall.” In fact if they get hurt on the job, they are driven, bleeding, and dropped off at the nearest check-point.

Carol Lambiase presented the Deputy Labor Minister another copy of the UE Resolution which calls for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions against Israel (BDS) and end of U.S. military aid to Israel, until the Palestinians get their freedom.

We also met the hard-working Abla Masroujeh, who works for the Solidarity Center, associated with the US AFL-CIO. She spoke about the plight of women agricultural workers who work in dangerous conditions for \$10-15 per day.



FRESH WIND IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT

On our last day before our flight home, we went to Jaffa to meet the national leadership of WAC-MAAN, the Workers Advice Center.

Their Director, Assaf Adiv, outlined for us the decline of the Histadrut, former labor powerhouse of Israel, which doubled as the largest employer. Histadrut does almost no organizing today. We were unable to get them to meet with us.

Assaf also gave us a brief outline of the course of the Israeli economy, which has become highly monopolized, after a wave of privatization.

WAC-MAAN recently won a court victory that enabled them to organize a large group of truck drivers. Truckers in Israel are paid the minimum wage with bonuses for deliveries, a kind of piecework, which leads to overwork and unsafe conditions.

WAC-MAAN vows to break this system and bargain fair compensation for their members.

Wafa Tiara, the head of WAC-MAAN's woman division told us that 73% of Palestinian women are unemployed. She said their goal is to "empower women in the workplace, in society and at home."

WAC-MAAN is funded in part by a big, increasingly successful art show, named "Bread and Roses," after the historic strike by the IWW in Lawrence, MA. Artists show their work and give 75% of the sale price to WAC-MAAN.

Weary from such a full schedule and a load of heavy facts, we made our way back to the US, eager to spread the word of the Palestinian struggle, and to gather help from American workers.