



THE HISTADRUT AND ISRAEL'S SETTLER COLONIAL PROJECT IN PALESTINE



Histadrut Chair Arnon Bar-David signs a missile that will be dropped on the people of Gaza (2023)

HOT CARGO
No Labour for Genocide **KILLS**

Once the Histadrut is recognized as, in effect, an arm of the Israeli State rather than an independent trade union, their close relationship and apologetics for Israel's brutal treatment of Palestinians and Palestinian workers becomes less surprising.

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Introduction

Trade unions that practice racial discrimination against their own members, workers who are potential members, or any other population they relate to, do not deserve the honour of full membership rights in the international federations and institutions of the global labour movement.

Trade unions that are implicated in war crimes, genocide, or other crimes against humanity are equally undeserving of a seat inside the international house of labour. The Constitution of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), a global union federation claiming to represent 191 million workers in 169 countries and territories and has 340 national affiliates, proclaims its rejection of - among other social ills - colonialism, militarism and racism. Similar fundamental principles are included in the founding documents of essentially all international union bodies.

The genocide in Gaza has provoked worldwide revulsion and outrage across all sectors of society. For trade unionists, it has exposed how both these basic standards have clearly been breached by one supposed “trade union”: the Histadrut.

The Histadrut is referred to as Israel’s General Federation of Labour. It was founded in 1920 during British colonial rule and known at the time as the General Federation of Hebrew Workers in the Land of Israel. Although presented internationally as an Israeli “trade union,” the Histadrut has, since its founding, been an agent and organization of Zionism, tasked with settling and supporting exclusively Jewish workers and laying the foundation for the Zionist colonization of Palestine.

Today, with roughly 800,000 members and deep links to the Israeli state and military, it continues to serve as an active participant in the mass dispossession of Palestinians and in Israel’s apartheid regime of systematic discrimination against Palestinians. Recent events have laid bare the Histadrut’s complicity in Israel’s genocide. During an official tour of a weapons factory operated by Israel’s infamous Elbit Systems Ltd. in November 2023, Arnon Bar-David, the most senior elected leader of the Histadrut, stopped for a horrifying photo opportunity (see below).

The shell that Bar-David showed to reporters was described as destined for Gaza, and his handwritten text reportedly read:

*Greetings from the Histadrut and the workers of Israel.*¹



Even in his carefully formulated public statements, Histadrut Chair Arnon Bar-David has made the Histadrut's energetic support for what is called Israel's "war effort" very clear.

Every shekel for the war effort is important ... Unnecessary offices need to be abolished, and the money directed to the war effort.

(December 1, 2023)²

I am constantly working with senior security and economic officials to find the golden path that will allow us to ensure the strength of the state and rebuild it anew. (April 7, 2024)³

¹ Editorial Team, "Histadrut Chairman Calls for Elections," *This is the way*, December 1, 2023, <https://zoha.org.il/125718/>. (Google translation from original Hebrew)

² Yehuda Sharon, "Israeli labor union head: We need elections, Netanyahu shouldn't run," *Jerusalem Post*, December 3, 2023. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/article-775833>

³ Adi Marcus, "Bar David Calls for Elections in February 2025; Six Months into the War, the Government Needs to Reach Decisions," *Working for the workers of Israel*, April 7, 2024. Accessed August 10, 2025.

It is our duty to build military strength. The State of Israel needs fighters now.
(June 26, 2024)⁴

Such calls for more war and for military strength are effectively calls to continue the commission of war crimes and the genocide that is now widely recognized as such. There appears to be no record of the Histadrut being critical of Israeli atrocities – even those that the Israeli government and its military have admitted to having committed.

This chilling image of the Histadrut's top leader glorifying the weapons being actively used to carry out a campaign of genocide against Palestinian civilians should raise very serious questions for trade unionists in Canada. It flies in the face of the ITUC constitution and the basic principles of international trade unionism. Yet, national unions and union centrals in Canada, including in Québec, have so far remained silent.

Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) president Bea Bruske met with Histadrut representatives on December 13, 2023. She suggested that she was meeting them as "Israeli trade unionists who support a lasting peace." But this meeting took place a mere two weeks after Bar-David's bomb-signing photo opportunity shown above was taken and at a moment when the gravity of Israel's genocide was becoming widely recognized and condemned.⁵ The Histadrut continues to use such meetings with Canadian and other unions around the world to protect the State of Israel from legitimate criticism and to whitewash its ongoing crimes.

The fact that a supposed trade union leader would engage in such a cruel and mocking publicity stunt with actual bombs destined for civilian areas – for use in war crimes – is an utter betrayal of the labour movement's principles.

International legal bodies and all credible international human rights groups and organizations enforcing international humanitarian law have recognized the gravity of the humanitarian catastrophe in Palestine, and particularly in Gaza. It is worth highlighting some of their conclusions:

<https://global.histadrut.org.il/news/bar-david-calls-for-elections-in-february-2025-six-months-into-the-war-the-government-needs-to-reach-decisions/>

⁴ Adi Marcus, "Histadrut Chairman: Calls For Urgent Elections, An End To The Fighting – To Bring Back The Hostages," Working for the workers of Israel, June 26, 2024. <https://global.histadrut.org.il/news/histadrut-chairman-calls-for-urgent-elections-an-end-to-the-fighting-to-bring-back-the-hostages/>. In a 2009 statement following Israel's "Operation Cast Lead" bombing campaign on Gaza, the Histadrut defended it as "acting with great restraint." Israel had "no choice," it claimed, "but to respond to repeated attacks and aggression as an act of justifiable self-defence." Histadrut Statement on the situation in Southern Israel and Gaza, 13 January 2009, cited in Michael Letwin, "Labor Zionism and the Histadrut." *Labor for Palestine* (blog), September 4, 2011. <https://laborforpalestine.net/labor-for-palestine-briefings/labor-zionism-and-the-histadrut/>.

⁵ Bea Bruske, "Meeting with PGFTU and Histadrut," Facebook, December 13, 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/profile/1015693614/search/?q=histadrut>

- On December 29, 2023, South Africa filed a case against Israel's violation of the Genocide Convention through its acts against Palestinians.
- On January 26, 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an order that determined that allegations that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza are "plausible."⁶ The order imposed a set of provisional measures on Israel requiring it to take immediate preventative action. The court agreed with the Government of South Africa that "the conditions required by its Statute to indicate provisional measures are met".

This ICJ decision set in motion a more comprehensive investigation into the allegations and clarified a set of binding legal obligations on all states that are party to the Genocide Convention – including Canada.

- In November 2024, the International Criminal Court issued warrants for the arrest of the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, and then Minister of Defense, Yoav Gallant, after finding reasonable grounds to believe that both Israeli leaders "...bear criminal responsibility for the following crimes as co-perpetrators for committing the acts jointly with others: the war crime of starvation as a method of warfare; and the crimes against humanity of murder, persecution, and other inhumane acts."⁷
- On December 5, 2024, Amnesty International concluded that Israel is committing acts that are prohibited by the Genocide Convention, stating that, "Amnesty International has found sufficient basis to conclude that Israel committed, between 7 October 2023 and July 2024, prohibited acts under the Genocide Convention, namely killing, causing serious bodily or mental harm and deliberately inflicting on Palestinians in Gaza conditions of life calculated to bring about their physical destruction in whole or in part."⁸

Israel's Histadrut has ignored these recent terrible crimes – just as it has done for previous Israeli crimes throughout its history. In fact, the Histadrut has consistently refused to condemn the criminal, and now openly genocidal, acts by the State of Israel, its military, or its leaders. In its public statements since October 7, 2023, Histadrut leadership has demonstrated unlimited

⁶ International Court of Justice, "Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel) Request for the Indication of Provisional Measures," Order of the ICJ (International Court of Justice, January 26, 2024), <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203447>

⁷ International Criminal Court, "Situation in the State of Palestine: ICC Pre-Trial Chamber I Rejects the State of Israel's Challenges to Jurisdiction and Issues Warrants of Arrest for Benjamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant | International Criminal Court" (International Criminal Court, November 21, 2024). <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-state-palestine-icc-pre-trial-chamber-i-rejects-state-israels-challenges>.<https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/situation-state-palestine-icc-pre-trial-chamber-i-rejects-state-israels-challenges>International Criminal Court

⁸ Amnesty International. "Amnesty International Concludes Israel Is Committing Genocide against Palestinians in Gaza," December 5, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/>.

rhetorical and political support for the Israeli government and the military force that is carrying out this genocide.

“Cut Ties with the Histadrut” in Canada

In this context, Labour for Palestine - Canada re-affirms its support for the original 2007 call from the trade unions and worker organizations of Palestine for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) on Israeli institutions.⁹ Our call to Cut Ties with the Histadrut is part of our broader Hot Cargo Kills Campaign. In building this campaign, we recall the appeal from Palestinian trade union organizations that have explicitly asked that the Histadrut be included in the call to boycott:

It is imperative to recognize that, 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 recognize the full rights of the Palestinian people.¹⁰

The call from 2007 was reiterated and expanded in May 2011 following a conference organized by an even larger Palestinian Trade Union Coalition for BDS (PTUC-BDS). They issued the following statement:

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.¹¹

The importance of these calls from virtually all the organized unions of Palestine is even clearer today. This current catastrophic situation must prompt a complete re-examination of the relationships that unions in Canada and Québec have with the Histadrut by association and

⁹ The 2007 call from Palestinian unions and worker organizations affirmed its support for the 2005 appeal from Palestinian civil society for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions. See <https://bdsmovement.net/call>

¹⁰ Labour Committee – Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid, “Labour for Palestine: A Reader for Unionists and Activists in the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Campaign against Israeli Apartheid” (Coalition Against Israeli Apartheid, 2008), 37-38.

¹¹ Palestinian Trade Union Coalition for BDS, “Palestinian Trade Union Coalition for BDS (PTUC-BDS) Formed at Historic Conference,” May 4, 2011. (Emphasis added). <https://www.bdsmovement.net/news/palestinian-trade-union-coalition-bds-ptuc-bds-formed-historic-conference-0>

affiliation with the ITUC, other Global Union Federations and international labour bodies, and the CLC.

To put it simply, **Labour for Palestine believes that the time has come for all unions of principle in Canada, Québec, and around the world, to completely sever and refuse all relations with the Histadrut.** Whether this is formally called a “boycott”, a “suspension of relations,” or something else, the point is that the Palestinian labour movement – like the labour and working-class movement of Black South Africa at the height of its brutal apartheid system – is appealing to us all to act and to do so urgently. In today’s circumstances in Palestine, we have a responsibility to support this call and to do whatever we can to advance its goals.

For unions in Canada to officially suspend relations with the Histadrut would be a substantial, peaceful means of sanctioning the State of Israel and the wider institutional apparatus it uses to maintain an apartheid labour regime and to enable the ongoing settler colonization and genocide. **For the reasons set out above, and for further reasons we outline below, the Histadrut has no legitimacy to represent workers within the ITUC or any other international bodies.** It should face the same fate at the ITUC as the racist, pro-apartheid and colour-barred TUCSA of South Africa faced in the 1960s at the ILO, the ICFTU and many other international bodies: an official suspension of all relations.¹²

Smashing ‘Arab Eggs’: Over a Century of Histadrut Support for Israeli Colonization and Apartheid

Since its inception in 1920 in the time of British colonial control (and then in 1922, the formal British Mandate), the Histadrut has been a central organizational instrument for the Zionist movement’s colonization of Palestine and for Israel’s apartheid regime. While publicly represented as a “workers’” organization, the Histadrut was more a complex of employer enterprises and an administrative body for a pool of ethno-nationally defined – i.e. Jewish, immigrant / colonist – labour than it ever was a “union” in any conventional sense.

A. Early history of exclusion and discriminatory wages

The Histadrut was essential to building out and expanding Jewish settlement in Palestine. It organized and allocated the labour inputs required for that expansion project. Its explicit premise and goal was a racially segregated labour market serving Jewish settlers and newly

¹² The ITUC Constitution (2023) “proclaims the right of all peoples to self determination and to live free from aggression and totalitarianism” and “rejects recourse to war to resolve conflict, and condemns terrorism, colonialism and militarism, as well as racism and sexism”.

arriving immigrants looking for work and housing.¹³ It was also a sponsor and manager of a wide range of business enterprises and agencies needed for settlement – and thereby an employer of thousands of workers who were ostensibly Histadrut “members.”

The settler-colonial project being facilitated by the Histadrut was never going to be straightforward in a territory that was, up until the 1910 period, over 90% Palestinian Arab, and where the wages paid to Jewish workers were substantially higher. The strategy developed by so-called “Labour Zionism” and “Socialist Zionism” required a complete distortion of the essential socialist principle of class solidarity across ethnic or racial identities. In its place, the Histadrut asserted the primary importance of “Jewish labour” or “Hebrew labour,” which in practice meant that the “socialist Zionists” of the Histadrut in Palestine were, among other activities, mobilizing against, picketing, and even attacking employers who continued to hire and employ Palestinian Arab workers.¹⁴

The Histadrut’s exclusionary labour project had obvious contradictions for genuine socialists – in Palestine and abroad – who understood their political project as one of unifying the working class against their exploiters. The socialist tradition teaches the importance of building that class unity across all national, racial, and religious differences. Reversing this class-focused thinking was inevitably going to be challenging for “Labour Zionism.” Indeed, one early leader of the Histadrut, David HaCohen, complained about how difficult it was to carry out:

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 do all that was not easy.¹⁵

B. Histadrut as the largest non-state employer in Israel

After its establishment, the Histadrut quickly became a major employer in Mandate Palestine and eventually became the *largest non-state employer in Israel*. Serving as what later Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir called a “great colonizing agency,”¹⁶ the Histadrut established and

¹³ See Zachary Lockman, “Land, Labor and the Logic of Zionism: A Critical Engagement with Gershon Shafir,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 9–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2012.10648824>.

¹⁴ For details, see Sai Englert, “Hebrew Labor without Hebrew Workers: The Histadrut, Palestinian Workers, and the Israeli Construction Industry,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 52, no. 3 (July 3, 2023): 23–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0377919X.2023.2244188>.

¹⁵ Cited in Trade Union Friends of Palestine, “The Histadrut Its History and Role in Occupation, Colonisation and Apartheid” (Trade Union Friends of Palestine, June 16, 2011), 4.

¹⁶ Cited in Tony Greenstein, “Histadrut: Israel’s Racist ‘Trade Union.’” *The Electronic Intifada* (blog), March 9, 2009. <https://electronicintifada.net/content/histadrut-israels-racist-trade-union/8121>.

financed a wide range of businesses and agencies: construction companies, social service and health care agencies (serving the Jewish population exclusively), newspapers, banks and other financial institutions, as well as the illegal paramilitary group Haganah.¹⁷

Notwithstanding this organizational complexity, the allocation of labour and the determination of wages have been key functions for the Histadrut from its inception. This initially took the form of a campaign for “Hebrew Labour” and the targeted displacement of Palestinian Arab workers. Early Histadrut and “Labour Zionist” leader Haim Arlosoroff explicitly cited South Africa’s proto-apartheid “colour bar” labour laws restricting native African workers from certain occupations as a relevant reference point and model to learn from. Historian Zachary Lockman recalls that,

Arlosoroff argued that the Jewish workers in Palestine, confronted as they were with a market dominated by cheap and abundant Arab labor, faced the same basic situation as white workers in South Africa.¹⁸

Recognizing this difficulty, Histadrut leaders such as Arlosoroff, and General Secretary David Ben-Gurion, refined and developed an early form of proto-apartheid settler colonialism, using coercion and violence to enforce what was effectively an extra-legal colour bar on Palestinian Arab workers. Once the Israeli State was established, “large-scale state intervention” became available to “reserve much of the Israeli labour market for Jews.”¹⁹

C. Histadrut - established illegal paramilitary force

Given the current context of war crimes and genocide, the Histadrut’s original role in establishing the illegal paramilitary force, the Haganah, is worthy of consideration. For a supposed trade union to sponsor a paramilitary force may seem strange. But once the openly settler-colonial character of the Zionist project that established the Histadrut is recognized as a project against working-class resistance, the picture becomes clearer. One begins to understand why, for example, the Haganah was regularly deployed against Palestinian workers, most notably during the Great Revolt of 1936-1939:

¹⁷ For details, see Katherine Nastovski, “What Is the Histadrut? A Short Backgrounder on the Histadrut’s Role in Building Apartheid in Palestine,” 2007.

¹⁸ Zachary Lockman, “Land, Labor and the Logic of Zionism: A Critical Engagement with Gershon Shafir.” *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012), p 23.

¹⁹ Ibid. p 28. Lockman underlines the complexity of this, showing that Palestinian workers with Israeli citizenship would become increasingly important to the economy for a period of time.

During the 1936–39 Arab Revolt... the Histadrut provided British Mandate authorities with strikebreakers... its militias participated in securing key British infrastructure, such as pipelines and railways.²⁰

In 1948, during the *Nakba*, the Histadrut's Haganah was re-designated as the so-called "Israel Defence Force" (IDF) – now widely referred to as the "Israel Occupation Force" (IOF) by Palestinians.

In the early years of the State of Israel, the Histadrut's proto-apartheid policies were enacted formally and "legally," with Palestinian Arab membership in the Histadrut explicitly prohibited. The organization's colonial and racially exclusive character was openly and even proudly acknowledged by its various leaders both before and after 1948. In 1960, General Secretary Pinhas Lavon described the organization in the following terms:

The foundation of the Histadrut was a central event in the process of the rebirth of the Hebrew people in its fatherland. Our Histadrut is a general organization to its core. **It is not a workers' trade union**, although it copes perfectly well with the real needs of the worker.²¹

This conception of an organization dedicated to the "rebirth of the Hebrew people in its fatherland" is reflected in the organization's original name: "General Federation of Hebrew Workers in the Land of Israel". As an ethno-national organization dedicated to the political project of Jewish colonization of Palestine, the Histadrut was not established to support and defend *workers* as workers, but to support and defend *Jewish* workers and arriving Jewish settlers seeking work - *against* Palestinian Arab workers. As such, from its inception in 1920 until 1959, the Histadrut completely barred Palestinian Arab workers from its membership and aggressively opposed several attempts to unify workers' struggles across these identities.²²

The imprint of the racial discrimination in the Histadrut's origin story continues today. Sai Englert's recent summary of the role of the Histadrut in Israel's construction industry provides a stark illustration of how this operates:

The Histadrut's top-down strategy in the construction industry plays an important pacifying role. It...protects the interests of its Jewish members in permanent, skilled, and managerial positions, while simultaneously allowing Israeli capital to profit from a highly

²⁰ Sai Englert, "Hebrew Labor without Hebrew Workers: The Histadrut, Palestinian Workers, and the Israeli Construction Industry," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 52, no. 3 (July 3, 2023): 23–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0377919X.2023.2244188>.

²¹ Lavon is cited in Haim Hanegbi, "The Histadrut: Union and Boss," Matzpen.org/English, February 10, 1972. <https://matzpen.org/english/1972-02-10/the-histadrut-union-and-boss/Hanegbi>. Hanegbi argues that "the entire organization of the trade union was subordinated to the management and to the political bosses – who were always from Zionist parties. There has never been the least trade-union independence in the Histadrut."

²² Nastovski, "What Is the Histadrut? A Short Backgrounder on the Histadrut's Role in Building Apartheid in Palestine," 1.

flexible, disciplined, poorly paid, and barely protected Palestinian and migrant workforce. The fact that it does so while simultaneously presenting to the world its “achievements” as proof of its own—and Israel’s—progressive nature, only adds insult to injury.

The Histadrut continues to fight for the defense of Hebrew labor in construction and does so at the expense of the majority of the industry’s Palestinian and migrant workforce.²³

The Histadrut Today: Discrimination, Close Ties with Military and State, and Funds Stolen from Palestinian Workers

The Histadrut’s origins as an agency of colonial settlement deeply shaped its fundamental operation and the forms its discrimination continues to take today.

A. Ongoing discrimination through different means

While the Histadrut technically permitted Palestinian citizens of Israel to fully join the organization in 1959, and to vote in 1965, it continues to discriminate against Palestinian workers in several ways. It also continues a full bar against Palestinian workers employed in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) that even the United Nations recognizes as illegally occupied by Israel.²⁴

Jewish Israeli workers living in the illegal settlements carry full Israeli citizenship rights – and rights to join the Histadrut. Palestinian workers on their own land, even those working alongside Jewish Israeli Histadrut members, have no such rights.²⁵ The apartheid character of Israel’s labour regime - administered and defended by the Histadrut - continues.

²³ Englert, *ibid.* p 39

²⁴ A 2021 article in *Jerusalem Quarterly* journal states that “The most powerful Israeli union, the Histadrut, has never allowed Palestinians from the occupied territories to become members.” See Morton-Jerome, Ethan. “The Struggle for Palestinian Workers’ Rights in Israeli Settlements: The Case of Maan v. Zarfati Garage.” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 86, Summer (2021). <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1651520>.

²⁵ Ethan Morton-Jerome points out that in the case of a high-profile labour dispute at a West Bank settlement auto repair shop, the second-class and segregated status of fired Palestinian union organizer Hatem Abu Ziadeh was stark. While “Israeli citizens who work in the garage are members of the Histadrut and are covered by a collective agreement,” Palestinian workers barred from membership in Histadrut were forced to organize their own separate union. While they were eventually successful, there was no support from Histadrut which, in Morton-Jerome’s assessment, “does not assist Palestinian workers on the settlements.” For details, see his “Palestinian Labor in West Bank Settlements.” University of Arkansas, 2018. <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/2707/>.

B. Direct ties with military and state committing war crimes & genocide



Lt Col Peter Lerner, IDF Spokesperson on CNN, May 2024; Facebook photo.

Lerner retired after a 25-year career with the IDF. Currently, and prior to his redeployment to the IDF after October 7, 2023, he served as the Director General of International Relations for the Histadrut.

The Histadrut's deep operational integration into the workings of the Israeli military also aligns with its very close relationship with successive governments of the Israeli State. They have accepted money paid directly from the Israeli government to fund a propaganda effort against growing support for BDS among international labour organizations. While "clandestine" and highly secretive, the *Jerusalem Post* revealed in 2017 that

Likud Minister of Public Security and Strategic Affairs Gilan Erdan was working with the Histadrut Labor Union...on a pilot project to send emissaries to several European capitals and strengthen its ties with the local unions, and the ministry will fund delegations to Israel, with the participants and content chosen by the Histadrut.²⁶

Once the Histadrut is recognized as, in effect, an arm of the Israeli State rather than an independent trade union, their close relationship and apologetics for Israel's brutal treatment of Palestinians and Palestinian workers becomes less surprising.

²⁶ Lahav Harkov, "Erdan: 'We Have a Broad Government Program to Fight Boycotts,'" *Jpost.Com (The Jerusalem Post Online Edition)*, May 5, 2016.

C. Stealing from Palestinian workers to finance apartheid and genocide

In a 2010 report, Israeli researchers Hanna Zohar and Shir Hever showed that over many years the Histadrut had received very large sums of money, forcibly deducted by the State of Israel from the paycheques of Palestinian workers. Only 8% of this money was allocated to services and benefits for the workers represented by the Histadrut. The remainder was kept either by the Israeli Ministry of Finance or given to the Histadrut for other purposes.

This is the most scathing example, but not the only one, of cruel theft under the protection of a government decision, the declared goal of which is “protection” of Palestinian workers.²⁷

These researchers showed that some of the uses of these stolen Palestinian worker funds were especially cynical. An example is the financing of portable stoves for Israeli soldiers during Operation Cast Lead (2008-2009).²⁸ Such abusive treatment has continued even in recent months.

In January 2024, in the midst of accelerating IDF attacks on Gaza, the Chair of the Histadrut announced to the public that he had reached an agreement with the government to establish a new special levy on all workers in Israel – including Palestinian workers.²⁹ The program was set up to provide a new cash grant program to attract and compensate IDF Reservists being mobilized for ‘Operation Swords of Iron.’ To be clear, this program for worker-funded grants to IDF reservists was reported to be an agreement that the Histadrut leadership brokered behind closed doors with government ministers. Media reports did not refer to a democratic ratification process or membership vote on this decision.

Through such programs, the Histadrut leadership continues to facilitate the extraction of funds from Palestinian workers’ paycheques, forcing them to help finance a military widely recognized to be carrying out an illegal occupation, dispossession, war crimes, and genocide against the Palestinian population.

D. Bad faith deal-making with Palestine’s largest union body, the PGFTU

Within a year of the 2007 call from Palestinian trade unions in support of the international BDS campaign – and for unions to break all relations with the Histadrut – an agreement between the Histadrut and the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) was announced

²⁷ Hanna Zohar and Shir Hever, “Israel Owes Billions of Shekels to Palestinian Workers,” *Socioeconomic Bulletin No. 25*, Economy of the Occupation, January 2010, p 7. The authors point out that since 2009 Palestinian workers – citizens of Israel – were re-defined as “foreign workers”.

²⁸ Ibid. p 14

²⁹ Dori, Oren. “Histadrut Agrees to Workers Financing Reserve Soldier Grants.” *Globes*, January 11, 2024, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-histadrut-agrees-to-workers-financing-reserve-soldier-grants-1001467659>.

on August 6, 2008. While the full text of that agreement does not appear to have been released, the Histadrut, and defenders of Israel, have referenced this agreement as proof of the promise of peaceful co-existence and of the Histadrut's commitment to Palestinian workers – and of the need for unions around the world to maintain normal relations with the Histadrut.

These self-interested claims should be rejected entirely.

The text by Hanna Zohar and Shir Hever cited above, published shortly after the August 2008 agreement, underlines its coercive and inequitable character. It includes the following:

On 6 August 2008, the Histadrut signed an agreement with the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU). The Histadrut transferred to the PGFTU the amount of US\$3.6 million (NIS 12.76 million, according to the exchange rate on the date of the agreement), an amount meant to represent the organizing fees collected since 1993. According to our calculations, from 1993-2008 the Histadrut collected organizing fees from the Palestinian workers in Israel in the amount of NIS 66.2 million (not including interest): **more than five times the amount returned by the Histadrut.**³⁰

This agreement appears to have imposed conditions on the autonomous decision-making of the PGFTU itself, restricting them from joining their name to calls to support the global BDS campaign. If so, this would mean that the Histadrut was negotiating with PGFTU the conditions for the return of money that had been “stolen” (in the words of Zohar and Hever) from Palestinian workers with the active involvement of the Histadrut itself.

These severe limitations and the apparent policy conditionality attached to this 2008 agreement makes it a further illustration of the severe power imbalances faced by Palestinian unions. It is a reminder that trade unionists in Canada need to respond positively to the 2007 call from Palestinian unions – including the PGFTU itself – by ending all relations with the Histadrut.

³⁰ Zohar and Hever, p 12. This report shows that the US\$3.6 million transferred to PGFTU as part of this agreement represented just 11% of the amounts deducted from Palestinian workers since 1970. Emphasis added.



Histadrut chair Arnon Bar-David shown with Israel's far-right Minister of Finance, Bezalel Smotrich. Since June 2025 Smotrich has been sanctioned by Canada and four other countries for inciting "extremist violence and serious abuses of Palestinian human rights." Photo: Histadrut spokesperson's office.

The Historic Precedent for Anti-Racist Labour Inter-nationalism: Fighting Apartheid in South Africa

The Histadrut's involvement in Israel's crimes should have implications for its position and affiliation in international institutions of the labour movement. Why has that not happened yet?

From the perspective of trade union internationalism, the political alliance between the State of Israel and apartheid South Africa is an obvious reference point.

Notwithstanding the Cold War anti-communism of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in the 1950s and 1960s, the organization was still pressed by its more

progressive affiliates from the global South (and its competition with the more militant and anti-imperialist WFTU) to enforce restrictions against openly racist “colour-barred” unions such as the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) of South Africa.³¹

By the 1960s and 1970s, the apartheid government of South Africa faced widespread condemnation in the international community, and this provoked significant trade sanctions and civil society boycotts. Disturbingly, the Histadrut itself played a direct role in undermining these peaceful forms of international pressure by filling in and replacing the supply of key goods that were becoming unavailable.

South Africa’s respected anti-apartheid trade union, the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) recalled the Histadrut’s historic collaboration with apartheid South Africa in 2011.

We will not forget that the Israeli trade union federation Histadrut, which serves the racist Israeli state and the Jewish working class like White trade unions in South Africa served the racist state and the White working class, actively collaborated with the South African apartheid state. Iskor steel company, 51 percent of which was owned by Histadrut’s Koor Industries and 49 percent by the South African Steel Corporation, for example, manufactured steel for South Africa’s armed forces. Partly finished steel was shipped from Israel to South Africa, enabling the apartheid state to escape tariffs. Other Histadrut companies such as Tadiran and Soltam were equally complicit in supplying South Africa with weapons.³²

For these reasons, COSATU has regularly reiterated its international call to the labour movement for Histadrut to be expelled from the ITUC and other international labour bodies. Their call reflects the powerful precedent set in the 1960s when the racist and discriminatory white South African union federation called TUCSA was effectively expelled from the ILO in 1963 and blocked from the ICFTU in 1969, both decisions a consequence of TUCSA’s acceptance of the South African government’s segregationist and racist apartheid labour regime. As Roger Southall recalls,

The ICFTU was forced to shift its ground...TUCSA was informed in 1970 that it would be neither “appropriate nor productive” for it to dispatch a delegation to visit ICFTU headquarters.³³

³¹ For details of this history and the CLC’s involvement, see Katherine Nastovski, “Workers Confront Apartheid: Comparing Canadian Labor Solidarity Campaigns against South African and Israeli Apartheid,” *WorkingUSA* 17, no. 2 (June 2014): 211–37. <https://doi.org/10.1111/wusa.12108>.

³² Vavi, Zwelenzima. “COSATU Presents on Apartheid to the Russell Tribunal on Palestine.” London: Russell Tribunal on Palestine, November 8, 2011. (Accessed April 16, 2025) <https://laborforpalestine.net/2011/11/08/cosatu-presents-on-apartheid-to-the-russell-tribunal-on-palestine/>

³³ Roger Southall, *Imperialism or Solidarity?: International Labour and South African Trade Unions*. (Cape Town, S.A: U. of Cape Town Press., 1995).

From that time until the dissolution of South Africa's formal apartheid system in 1994, both the ILO and the ICFTU refused to formally recognize or engage in regular relations with the TUCSA or any other South African union with racially discriminatory bars to membership. This was a high point of labour internationalism, and an illustration that there were fundamental principles that the international house of labour was going to be pressed – even reluctantly - to uphold. These same fundamental principles are at stake in the case of the Histadrut today.

Conclusion

It is important to recognize that the Canadian labour movement has made significant progress since the period when the Histadrut represented one of the CLC's most significant partners and allies in the Cold War era. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Canadian labour movement expressed "active and long-standing support of Israeli policies and practices". A 1996 CLC Convention resolution committed to "continuing...[the CLC's] longstanding relationship with the Israeli Histadrut".

Recognizing this, a growing number of affiliate unions and union locals – including many involved in Labour for Palestine - have been calling for change. They have been calling on the CLC to show genuine solidarity with Palestinian workers and unions by responding fully to the calls to isolate Israel's apartheid system using various forms of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS).³⁴

However, while several major union organizations have formally endorsed some form of BDS (CUPE Ontario, CUPW, Unifor and PSAC), no national union in Canada has yet announced an explicit breaking of ties with the Histadrut. The CLC has not made any commitments regarding BDS and continues to meet with and politically support the Histadrut.

As recently as January 16, 2024, the CLC issued a weak and belated public statement on the crisis in Gaza that expressed its support for an ITUC statement endorsing a ceasefire. It referred to its work of "engaging and collaborating with unions from around the world, including in Palestine and Israel" - a clear reference to its continuing engagement with the Histadrut. Further, the statement endorsed ITUC and ILO "actions," including "meeting with representatives of the Histadrut...to understand the challenges faced by Israeli trade unionists who support a lasting peace."³⁵

³⁴ Katherine Nastovski, "Workers Confront Apartheid: Comparing Canadian Labor Solidarity Campaigns against South African and Israeli Apartheid," *WorkingUSA* 17, no. 2 (June 2014): 229-230. Nastovski provides a detailed review of the emergence of union solidarity with Palestine, especially after the 2005 appeal for BDS and the formation of a formal Canadian Labour For Palestine organization.

³⁵ "CLC Executive Committee Reiterates Its Support for ITUC's Call for an Immediate Ceasefire in Gaza | Canadian Labour Congress," (Accessed April 19, 2025). <https://canadianlabour.ca/clc-executive-committee-reiterates-its-support-for-itucs-call-for-an-immediate-ceasefire-in-gaza/>

The CLC's continuing engagement with the Histadrut while its leaders are signing bombs destined for Gaza's civilian population and collaborating with Israeli government and military war criminals, is completely unacceptable. In a recent (July 2025) letter to Prime Minister Mark Carney, CLC president Bea Bruske did finally admit – after 22 months of mass killings and malnutrition leading to starvation - that the intensifying crisis in Gaza “can only be described as a genocide.”³⁶ Yet, the Congress and its president continue to recognize and formally meet with the genocide-complicit Histadrut as a fully recognized and legitimate union counterpart.

The Campaign to Cut Ties with the Histadrut

In this light, Labour For Palestine - Canada formally calls for all union federations, national and regional affiliate unions, locals, solidarity committees, and rank and file members, to respond actively to the principled calls from our Palestinian union counterparts to fully suspend all relations and cut ties with Israel's Histadrut organization until such time as their legitimate demands are met.

There are a range of activities and actions that can be taken up in support of this call, from the most ambitious – working to have our unions pass resolutions supporting BDS and the suspension of relations with the Histadrut - to simple steps to provide accurate information and education about the struggle of Palestinian workers within our memberships and union networks. Widely circulating this background document by email, on social media, and by hand in meetings, will serve to get this information out to activists and workers across the country.

Labour For Palestine - Canada is committed to ensuring that the genocide-supporting Histadrut is not welcome in Canada. This means that we plan to ensure that any attempts by Histadrut leaders or officials to participate in any labour movement or other public activities here will be met with forceful opposition, information pickets, and other forms of principled opposition and protest.

Fortunately, we have strong expressions of worker and trade union solidarity with Palestinian workers to build on. In Canada, solidarity activists within the four major union bodies that have already endorsed BDS (as noted above) have an opportunity to strengthen those commitments further by extending them to include cutting ties to the Histadrut.

One union Local, CUPE 3902 (representing educators at the University of Toronto), demonstrated important leadership in 2015 by passing a BDS resolution that explicitly declared it would “dissociate from Israeli trade unions which are complicit in the occupation.” The Nova Scotia Federation of Labour passed a Hot Cargo resolution at their convention in October 2025

³⁶ “Canada's unions applaud recognition of Palestinian statehood and urge further action to end the crisis in Gaza,” Accessed August 11, 2025.

<https://canadianlabour.ca/canadas-unions-applaud-recognition-of-palestinian-statehood-and-urge-further-action-to-end-the-crisis-in-gaza/>

that included a commitment to “cut ties with the Histadrut.” These initial steps are important, and now – in the circumstances of the ongoing genocide – must be extended by all principled unions in this country.

At the international level, there are already an impressive number of national unions and even central federations that have formally suspended or ended all ties with the Histadrut. This includes several UK unions with connections to the Canadian labour movement, including Unison³⁷, Unite³⁸, and the University and College Union (UCU).³⁹

Several national labour centrals affiliated to the ITUC have also broken off relations with Histadrut. The Scottish Trade Union Council (STUC) has “no plans to re-engage with Histadrut.”⁴⁰ All ties have been broken off since 2010 following the STUC’s declaration of support for BDS and its decision to ‘review’ their relationship with Histadrut. When the Histadrut themselves responded by breaking off ties with STUC, the relationship ended.⁴¹ As the powerful statement on the STUC website affirms:

The STUC believes that trade unions across the world should act for international justice and adhere to our slogan ‘An injury to one is an injury to all’. Thus the STUC has no plans to re-engage with Histadrut until it is able to act meaningfully to urge restraint on the Israeli state and an end to the occupation and killing in Gaza.⁴²

Even the UK’s Trade Union Congress (TUC), one of the highest profile union centrals in the world, voted to “review” its relations with Histadrut in September 2011 and to encourage its affiliate unions to do likewise.

This list captures only a small part of the picture of the Histadrut’s increasing isolation from principled unions. Strong and ongoing work is underway in Ireland, Spain, Brazil, and South Africa. (See the list compiled and attached here as an Appendix). As already shown above, the declaration of support by South Africa’s COSATU federation for severing ties with the Histadrut carries an especially significant weight, setting an example for trade unions in Canada.

³⁷ See “Major UK Trade Union Backs Boycott of Histadrut,” June 23, 2012. Accessible at:

<https://www.bdsmovement.net/news/major-uk-trade-union-backs-boycott-histadrut>

³⁸ Membership support for Unite’s “non-engagement” with Histadrut was “reaffirmed” at its July 2025 policy conference. A summary of the union’s policy position can be accessed here: <https://unitedleft.org.uk/unite-ec-statement-on-palestine-passed-overwhelmingly-at-policy-conference/>

³⁹ See report on passage of Motion 31 in May, 2010: <https://bdsmovement.net/news/ucu-passes-important-bds-resolution>

⁴⁰ STUC policy statement as posted to their website: <https://www.stuc.org.uk/campaigns-int-palestine-1/>

⁴¹ This decision was so widely circulated that it was reported by the *Jerusalem Post*, as follows: <https://www.jpost.com/international/scottish-labor-federation-reaffirms-its-support-for-boycott>

⁴² STUC, *ibid*.

It is urgent that workers, trade unionists, and union bodies in Canada and Québec rise to this challenge. The current conjuncture, including the direct involvement of the Histadrut in the ongoing genocide in Gaza, has opened a key opportunity for the Canadian labour movement to respect its responsibilities to Palestinian unions and labour organizations that continue – in the face of ongoing catastrophe – to implore us to act now. As recently as May 1, 2025, the major Palestinian unions re-issued their fundamental appeal to their supporters in the international labour movement:

Our struggle for justice in Palestine is inseparable from the global struggle against systemic racism, exploitation and oppression. The 2024 decisions of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) – that Israel is plausibly committing genocide, that its occupation is illegal, and its policies amount to apartheid – make ending all complicity in Israel’s crimes and imposing targeted, lawful sanctions, including a two-way military embargo, not only a moral but also a legal obligation for states and corporations. The same applies to all unions.⁴³

Their statement concludes with a clear appeal to unions to pursue all steps toward “**cutting all ties with the Histadrut and expelling it from all international fora.**”

Labour For Palestine - Canada calls on all our supporters to respond to this appeal with immediate action.

⁴³ This statement was republished in Canada on May 1, 2025, here: <https://socialistproject.ca/2025/05/no-labour-for-genocide/>

APPENDIX – A SELECT LIST OF UNION BODIES THAT HAVE CALLED FOR OR ANNOUNCED A REVIEW OF RELATIONS OR FULLY SEVERED TIES WITH HISTADRUT

Name of organization	Country	For date and further details
Ontario Federation of Labour	Canada	(November 2025) http://rabble.ca/labour/the-ontario-federation-of-labour-adopts-a-hot-cargo-resolution-against-israel/ Convention resolution calls on Canadian Labour Congress to “cut ties with the Histadrut”. (Resolution submitted by CUPW 126 and 039)
Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour	Canada	(November 2025) https://www.instagram.com/p/DRScAT-EnR1/ Convention resolution calls on Canadian Labour Congress to “cut ties with the Histadrut”. (Resolution submitted by CUPW 126 and 039)
Nova Scotia Federation of Labour	Canada	(October 2025) https://www.facebook.com/Labour4Palestine/posts/victory-this-week-delegates-at-the-nova-scotia-federation-of-labour-have-voted-o/1631329027923815/ Motion calls on Federation to “cut ties with the Histadrut”; passed overwhelmingly.
CUPE 3902	Canada	(May 2015) https://laborforpalestine.net/2015/05/01/the-canadian-union-of-public-employees-cupe-3902-endorses-boycott-divestment-and-sanctions-against-israel/
COSATU	South Africa	(April 2011) https://bdsmovement.net/news/palestinian-trade-union-movement-applauds-scottish-congress-trade-unions-stu-hecking COSATU has “taken steps to sever ties with Histadrut”
UNISON	UK	(June 2010) https://bdsmovement.net/news/major-uk-trade-union-backs-boycott-histadrut
Unite	UK	(July 2014) https://palestinecampaign.org/britains-largest-union-unite-votes-strengthen-work-boycott-divestment-sanctions/ Motion to develop the union’s BDS strategy was approved. Motion calling for “engaging with the Israeli Histadrut” was defeated.

UCU	UK	(June 2010) https://www.bdsmovement.net/news/britain%25E2%2580%2599s-largest-academic-union-cuts-ties-histadrut Motion that passed argued that Histadrut “did not deserve the name of a trade union organization”
STUC (Scotland)	UK	(April 2010) Composite motion “condemned” Histadrut and called for “review” of STUC relations with Histadrut https://www.scottishpsc.org.uk/2010-april-22-stuc-reaffirms-israel-boycott-a-condemns-the-histadrut/
Dundee TUC	Scotland (UK)	(April 2010) Motion 106 called for STUC to “isolate” the Histadrut (see link above)
EL and IT union (affiliate of LO Norway)	Norway	(March 2011) Motion passed calling on LO Norway to “abolish its connections with Histadrut” https://laborforpalestine.net/2011/03/17/norwegian-electricians-call-for-boycott-arms-trade-ban-palestinian-grassroots-anti-apartheid-wall-campaign/
ICTU	Ireland	(April 2011) https://bdsmovement.net/news/palestinian-trade-union-movement-applauds-scottish-congress-trade-unions-stuc-heeding ICTU has “taken steps to sever ties with Histadrut”.

CUT TIES WITH THE HISTADRUT!

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