

# Women trade unionists in Palestine: A daily struggle

**Despite their high level of education, Palestinian women remain on the margins of the labour market. Against the current background of mass unemployment and the spread of insecure and low paid work, women are the hardest hit by the crisis and play a key role in helping their families and communities “survive against the odds.”**

**Following on from the solidarity mission (\*) carried out on the ground by the ICFTU Women’s Committee, this report, backed up with interviews, sheds light on the everyday struggle of Palestine’s women trade unionists.**



(\*) The ICFTU Women’s Committee mission to Palestine and Israel between 11 and 14 January 2004 forms part of the ICFTU’s continuous endeavour to support the efforts of Palestinian and Israeli trade unions to promote dialogue and cooperation. Bearing a message of solidarity and sisterhood from the ICFTU Women’s Committee, the six-woman delegation headed by Helen Creed (Australia) expressed the fervent desire to see women trade unionists from both sides of the conflict playing a decisive role in the struggle for peace.

# “We’re asking for jobs, not charity!”

**In an economy, suffocated by restrictions on the movement of goods and people, jobs are becoming increasingly rare.**

“**M**any Palestinians have lost their jobs, not only in Israel but also in the Palestinian territories. The supply of raw materials through Israel has been cut off, for example, as have Palestinian exports. Olive oil products from the West Bank cannot even reach Gaza, not to mention foreign markets. Gaza, for its part, cannot export its fruit and vegetables to the West Bank. It’s a disaster!” explains PGFTU General Secretary Shaher Saed, conveying the frustration of Palestinian workers who are “asking for jobs, not charity!” “It is the workers who suffer collective punishments the most. There are perhaps a few hundred Palestinians being pursued by the Israeli army, but why impose ongoing collective punishment on the 3.5 million Palestinians as a whole? The most pressing need for workers is the ability to reach their workplace, so they can bring home the bread and milk to feed their families... The Israeli secret services have themselves admitted that no Palestinian worker has ever been involved in a suicide bombing,” adds Shaher Saed.

As highlighted in a World Bank re-

port, the restrictions on the movement of Palestinians seriously affect their daily life and incomes. Job losses, together with the inability of those still in employment to reach their workplace, is the number one cause of increasing poverty, child labour, and malnutrition among children. With average incomes of \$1.70 a day, living conditions are very difficult in an economy where prices are set at a very high level by the Israeli market. The situation is worse for those who lose their jobs in a society deprived of a social security net.

The crisis in the tourist industry has also had a dramatic impact on employment. In Jerusalem alone, a large majority of hotels and restaurants have had to close down, putting 2,500 workers on the street, together with another 1,560 workers from the tourist transport sector in and around Jerusalem.

## **WORK IN ISRAEL: INCREASINGLY RARE**

Palestinian trade unions blame the humiliating measures imposed by the Israeli authorities on the few thousand Palestinian workers who are still allowed to enter Israel to work. Even those who have a permit to work in Israel are often prevented from reaching their workplace when access is completely sealed off, particularly in Gaza when the Erez checkpoint is closed down.

reach a compromise,” says Palestinian Labour Minister Ghassan al Khateeb. According to World Bank figures, the difficulties in moving goods alone, owing to the military roadblocks, inflate production costs by 33 per cent.

Thanks to pressure exerted by the unions, the new Palestinian Labour Code, which came into force in January 2002, now includes provisions on trade unions, but the Palestinian Labour Minister recognises the limited ability of the Palestinian Authority to ensure the application of this legislation, given the lack of resources, particularly in terms of qualified and experienced staff.

“Whether the employers are Israeli or Palestinian, it amounts to the same thing.... During the Israeli occupation, at least we had an infrastructure. Now they have completely destroyed any infrastructure we had. We now have a court to oversee the application of the Labour Code, but there are no judges and no police to ensure that the rulings are respected,” adds Shaher Saed. ●

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## **Widespread hunger**

Four out of ten Palestinians suffer from hunger as a result of growing poverty and unemployment. These alarming figures were published last year by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), which stated, “The situation in terms of food security has significantly deteriorated over the last three years.”

1.4 million Palestinians (i.e. 40% of the population) suffer from food insecurity, whilst nutrition represents an almost constant preoccupation for another 1.1 million Palestinians (30% of the population). According to FAO, the mobility restrictions on movement of people and goods, together with the damage to personal property, have reduced the population’s access to food-stuffs.

“**T**he most pressing need for workers is the ability to reach their workplace, so they can bring home the bread and milk to feed their families...”

Before the intifada, there were 225,000 Palestinian workers (legal and illegal) in Israel. There are now only 35,000 Palestinians with a permit to work in Israel, and eligibility is limited to men who are married and aged over 35. According to trade union sources, some 10,000 Palestinians are estimated to be working illegally in Israel. In the West Bank, it is still possible to find unofficial ways of working in Israel or the Jewish settlements. But in Gaza, there is no escape: those who try to pass illegally are shot at - no questions asked.

## **LABOUR LAWS FLOUTED**

“The economic difficulties mean that employers are not in a position to comply with the Labour Code. Long and hard negotiations are needed to

- 75% of Palestinians are unemployed or employed but cannot reach their workplace.

- 62% of the Palestinian population lives beneath the poverty line (US\$3.50 a day), that is, 2.4 million people in total. The proportion is as high as 83% in Gaza.

- The average economic dependency ratio is 5.9 (5.3 in West Bank and 7.1 in Gaza).

- The average working week in the West Bank is over 44 hours.

- The average wage earned by Palestinians working in Israel or the Jewish settlements is almost double the average salary in the Palestinian territories.

# A barrier to peace

**Some call it the “security wall”, others the “apartheid wall.” The wall is yet another barrier to Palestinians’ freedom of movement, leading to even greater human and economic suffering.**

The wall, which Israel argues is a legitimate defence against “terrorist infiltrations”, is a combination of electronic fences, usually in farming areas, and concrete blocks in urban areas. Already some seventy-six kilometres long, the barrier, 200 km of which have so far been built, will be some 700 km long on completion at the end of 2005. De facto it will annexe 8% of the total surface area of the West Bank.

Thousands of Palestinians will be cut off from their lands, workplaces, schools, hospitals, businesses and families. According to the European Union, the wall “will add to the human and economic suffering of the Palestinians.” Condemned by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as a breach of international humanitarian law, the wall will, for example, force ambulances to make a detour of almost one hour, rather than ten minutes, to reach a hospital in Jerusalem. Plans to

cut off Bethlehem have been designed in such a way that certain areas of the Palestinian city will be annexed by Israel.

## LAND CONFISCATED

“It’s the fact that the wall is being built inside the Palestinian territories rather than along the frontier that we object to. The part already completed excludes the best Palestinian agricultural land, like in Jenin, and this confiscation of land is having serious repercussions on job opportunities in the farming sector. The wall is also a serious obstacle to the movement of goods and people, creating particularly serious problems for the farmers who have been separated from their lands. In the three regions affected by the construction of the wall, the repercussions in terms of job losses are dramatic”, PGFTU denounced.

## TERRITORIES DIVIDED

Aside from principled opposition to the wall, it is the route traced, and especially the fact that it cuts deeply into the West Bank, that has met with widespread criticism. Particularly contentious are Israel’s plans to build a wall to the west of the Jordan Valley, which would effectively enclose Palestinians into several isolated territories covering less than 50 per cent of the West Bank.

The United States, although initially opposed in principle to the wall, vetoed a UN Security Council resolution on the wall. The UN General Assembly then requested that the case be brought before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague. The hearing began in February 2002, and on 9 July 2004 the Court ruled that the wall “contravenes international law” and should be dismantled immediately.

Over recent months the ICFTU has repeatedly stressed its view that the wall is aggravating existing tensions, especially since it intrudes into Palestinian territory, pointing out that, “It can only serve to exacerbate the already intense socio-economic hardships endured daily by Palestinian workers and damaging prospects for future negotiations, particularly those on the creation of a Palestinian state in line with UN resolutions, a key objective of the ‘road map’, which aims to restore lasting peace in the region.”

The wall is obviously a major area of concern for the PGFTU, which organised a massive protest march against the “apartheid wall” on 1 May 2004. ●

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*Helen Creed, Chair of the ICFTU Women’s Committee, and Elsa Ramos, Director of the ICFTU Equality and Youth Department, at the foot of the wall in Abu Dis, at the gates of Jerusalem. (Photo: N.D.)*

## Abu Dis divided

The ICFTU Women’s Committee mission visited Abu Dis on the outskirts of Jerusalem to witness the construction of a wall eight metres high (27 ft) and made up of concrete slabs, which will result in several tens of thousands of Arabs from Jerusalem being cut off from the rest of their city. If all goes to plan, this wall, which will encircle the whole of Jerusalem, except for a few Arab districts annexed in 1967, will be completed by the end of the year.

The night before the mission arrived in Abu Dis, many families, panicked by the arrival of the bulldozers, had rushed in the rain to move out of the area, fearing separation from their close relatives on the other side. Some attempted at any cost to find accommodation on the Israeli side so that they would not be cut off from their jobs in Jerusalem and could escape the heavy constraints of living under military occupation in the West Bank.



**Deprived of union protection**

Israeli labour law governs Palestinians working in Jerusalem. They are free to form their own unions. They may also belong simultaneously to unions affiliated with West Bank federations and to the Israeli Histadrut Labour Federation. Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip who work in Israel are not permitted to join Israeli trade unions or organise their own unions in Israel. Similarly, Palestinian trade unions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are not permitted to carry out trade union activities in Israel.

Extracts from the ICFTU Annual Survey of Violations of Trade Union Rights (2004)

# PGFTU: Priority to solidarity for “Minimising the suffering” of v

The first Palestinian labour organisation to affiliate with the ICFTU was the PGFTU in 2002. The PGFTU groups 11 trade union affiliates from the West bank and eight from Gaza, representing some 279,000 members in the West Bank and 179,000 in Gaza. The figure for Gaza includes the 130,000 members who do not pay their union dues (\$10 a year) but probably came to the PGFTU to benefit from the facilities it offers in terms of financial assistance and food aid.

**UNION OFFICES ATTACKED**

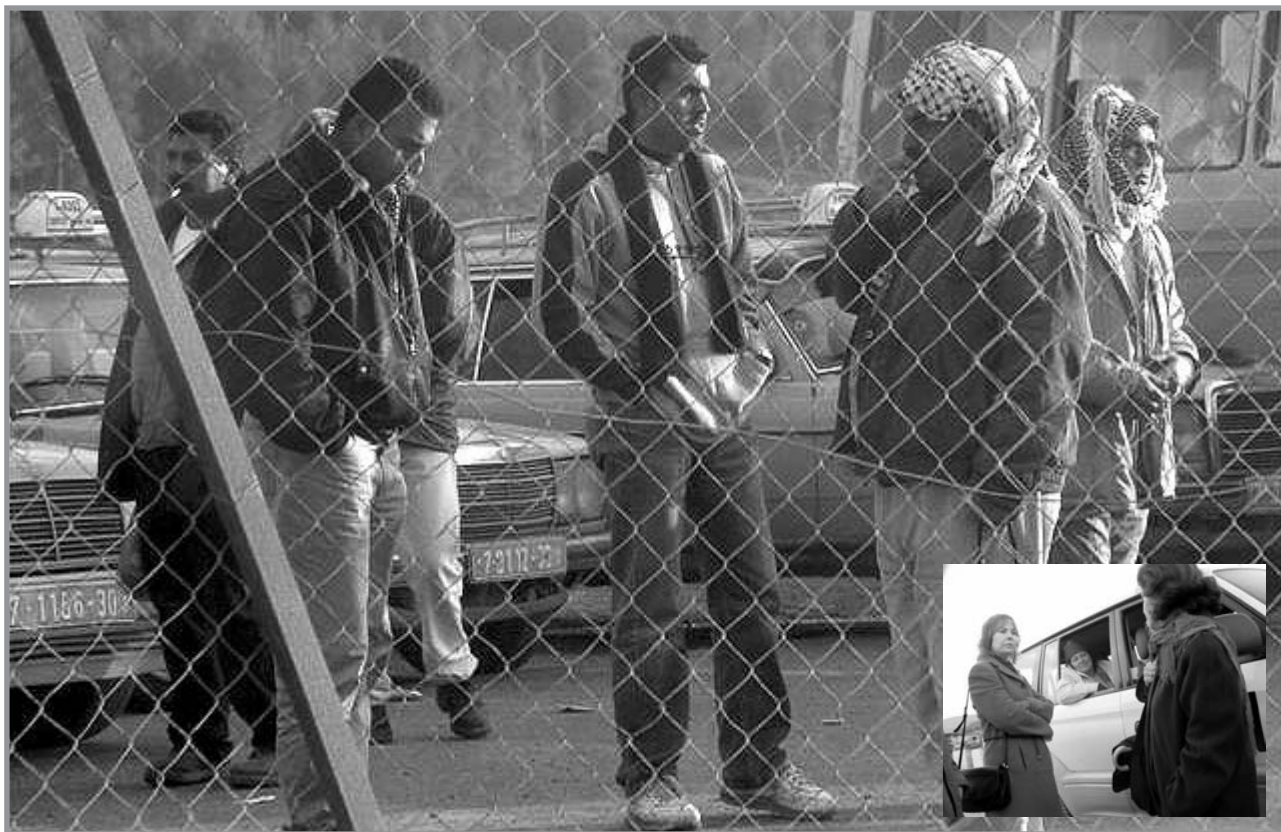
As in Ramallah a year earlier, the PGFTU office in Jenin was attacked in July 2003; its IT equipment and files were the main targets of destruction. A year earlier, the PGFTU office in Nablus had been bombed, destroying over 40

per cent of the property.

The difficulties in movement linked to the occupation are another major obstacle to any normal trade union activity. For example, “How does one go about holding a meeting, a discussion, organising a congress or elections when it is impossible to move around?” asks General Secretary Shaher Saed. In October 2003, the PGFTU was unable to hold its congress for this precise reason.

**FOOD AID**

Since the intifada, the PGFTU has been focusing its efforts on unemployed workers, because of a lack of real organising work (1), and is doing its best to “minimise their suffering”. The Federation has been ensuring the distribution of financial and food aid to the most needy. It has also been working to help



Main photo: the ICFTU Women’s Committee mission blocked on the way from Ramallah to Nablus at the checkpoint controlling entry to the city. The checkpoint was sealed off following a failed suicide bombing on the eve of the delegation’s arrival. On the other side of the fence, Palestinians have a long wait before being allowed through...

Small photo: on the left, Penny Schantz (AFL-CIO), member of the PGFTU mission; in the UN vehicle, Helen Creed (ACTU), Chair of the ICFTU Women’s Committee; on the right, Abla Masrujeh (PGFTU), who got up at 4am so that she could be among the first in line and increase her chance of crossing the roadblocks in time to join the ICFTU mission). (Photo: N.D.)

# Or workers

its members keep or find jobs and has set up occupational training activities as part of this drive. It provides members with legal assistance when claiming compensation for separation or other damages.

The PGFTU does everything possible to promote solidarity among members and assists them in maintaining their health insurance coverage. To benefit from health insurance for care in public hospitals, Palestinians have to pay an annual fee of 965 shekels. According to the terms of the agreement, signed on 1 July 2003 and revised on 31 March 2004, PGFTU members enjoy more favourable terms, paying a discounted fee of 200 shekels per year. But even this reduced rate is still beyond the means of most unemployed workers. So, since 1 April 2004, the PGFTU has been operating a system whereby its unemployed

members contribute 5 shekels a month and the union matches that contribution with another 5 shekels. "In spite of everything, huge numbers of Palestinians are still left without any form of social protection," explains Abla Masrujeh, Coordinator of the PGFTU Women's Affairs Department. Affiliation to the Palestinian health insurance scheme guarantees care in public hospitals, whilst in private establishments the patients have to cover 65 per cent of the costs. ●

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(1) "Given the dramatic situation in the occupied territories, it is almost impossible to carry out any real trade union activity. Furthermore, Yasser Arafat's political apparatus strictly controls trade union activity in the occupied territories", ICFTU Survey on Trade Union Rights Violations, 2004.

## Commitment to peace

"I have always clearly stated at all levels and in all international forums that the PGFTU's stance on peace is based on the UN resolutions and peaceful coexistence between the two States," says PGFTU General Secretary Shaher Saed, who personally signed an appeal in the press for an end to the suicide bombings and the killing of civilians on both sides. He has also called on Israeli trade unionists to fight the ban on Palestinians returning to work in Israel and to help press employers to pay compensation to the Palestinians who are dismissed.

# Gaza: opening the gates of this 'imprisoned' territory

## Ways of re-regenerating employment.

"Rather than setting up an unemployment insurance system that I would doubt the Authority has the means to finance, what I am hoping for is negotiations with Israel", states Aaysh Ebaed, President of the construction workers union and Vice-President of the PGFTU in the Gaza Strip. "These negotiations should cover three areas", he goes on. "Firstly, removing the barriers preventing the movement of persons and goods in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. There are 600 temporary or permanent checkpoints across the territories. Gaza, a thin strip of land 45 kilometres long is regularly divided into three closed zones. As things are, how can we be expected to secure jobs and development? Free movement of people and goods is the priority. Secondly, we need Israel to re-open its borders to Palestinian workers. 40,000 Palestinians had a work permit before the Intifada started. In Gaza, from where 24,000 workers used to go to Israel every day, the closure of the road to Erez has had a catastrophic impact on our economy. Israel must assume its international responsibilities

and allow the workers to go back to their jobs.

And thirdly, we want the creation of new industrial zones. These should be financed by mixed capital and covered by a specific social law that provides the workers employed there with some basic protection of their working conditions. At the moment we are in a complete legal vacuum. No laws are applied in these zones, neither Israeli nor Palestinian labour legislation. The situation is unsustainable", he concludes.

These are the key issues on which the union leader is looking for speedy measures, though he also proposes opening negotiations with Arab countries to allow those Palestinian workers wishing to do so to go and work abroad.

"Apart from that, we are clearly hoping for the rapid adoption of the Law on Social Protection, which is pending in the Parliament; the text aims to improve the protection provided to workers who have suffered occupational accidents and to provide a pension scheme for private sector employees. But once again, what we want above all is the loosening of the vice that is pressing down on us".

As far as the issue of Israeli withdrawal is concerned (\*), the union

leader's position is the same: it's all a question of allowing development. "What prospects do we have if we are not able to control and open up our borders and to move freely? If we do not get those guarantees, the withdrawal will simply have the effect of closing the gates of Gaza, making it into one of the biggest prisons in the world. Since the start of the Intifada we have suffered huge losses. Dozens of industrial sites and thousands of hectares of land have been destroyed. In 1992, Gaza produced more tomatoes than Israel. Nowadays we are importing them and unable to supply our own needs. We will only be able to recover if we are given a chance to develop". ●

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(\*) The Israeli authorities have decided to dismantle their settlements in Gaza and withdraw the armed forces deployed to protect them. That withdrawal would enable the Palestinians to recover 20% more land. According to the World Bank, the withdrawal will have no impact on the Palestinian economy unless it is accompanied by the removal of the barriers, which is not included in the current Israeli plan. That plan has already led to the closure of a mixed industrial zone, near the crossing point at Erez, in the north of Gaza, which meant the loss of 7,000 Palestinian jobs.

# “The gulf between men and women is growing wider”

**Palestinian women, the main victims of unemployment, and the economic crisis spawned by occupation, now come head to head with retrograde trends in society.**

“It’s no secret that women are the hardest hit by the growing rate of unemployment. Mounting poverty is leading to a rise in early marriages as families rush to be freed of mouths to feed. The growth in poverty and early marriages is in turn leading to an increase in school drop out rates among girls, whose education is often the first to be sacrificed in families hit by financial troubles, particularly in the poorest refugee camps and isolated villages,” explains Ghassan al Khateeb, Labour Minister of the Palestinian Authority.

Zahira Kamal, who took office in October 2003 as the Palestinian Authority’s first Minister of Women’s Affairs, says she is “proud to be the first to take on this challenge” even though “the challenge and task of making improvements are immense, given the huge gender divide in Palestinian society.”

## SEGREGATION OF LABOUR

Women workers in Palestine are concentrated within a limited number of traditionally “female” sectors (education, health, agriculture, textiles), a situ-



Zahira Kamal, the Palestinian Authority’s first Minister of Women’s Affairs (in the centre) surrounded by members of the PGFTU Women’s Committee and the ICFTU Women’s Committee delegation. (Photo: N.D.)

ation arising out of the traditional gender division of labour within the Palestinian community and reinforced by the general economic climate.

Only 12 per cent of Palestinian women form part of the labour market, one of the lowest rates in the world. Zahira Kamal calls into question the real motives of the remaining 86 per cent who are said to be out of the labour market because they are not actively seeking work, despite “having an aver-

age of 13 years’ schooling, so it’s not for lack of education that they are not working, it’s a question of mentalities and attitudes,” she points out. At the end of secondary school, 80 per cent of the best pupils are girls. “But many young women don’t even apply for a job when they finish their studies. In such a context, there are no development returns on the investment in education,” regrets the Minister.

“Disapproval of women’s work, even in the absence of a male breadwinner, is a major obstacle in the way of women seeking salaried employment,” confirms the ILO in its report on workers from the Arab occupied territories. (1) “Employment of Palestinian women is essentially in agriculture, industrial zones and domestic work,” it adds. Many women are employed in the agricultural sector, where the majority are not even paid for their work. Zahira Kamal believes the failure to “take into account the work of women who are not employed in the formal economy is a major problem.”

Those who do have formal employment are most often concentrated in female-stereotyped occupations, such as sewing or secretarial work. “Only a minute proportion of women (1.8 per cent) have access to vocational training,” adds the Minister, “even though we created new courses in electrical maintenance and agricultural mechanics three years ago.”

## MATERNITY AND PART-TIME WORK

- The fertility rate for Palestinian women is 6.1 births per woman.
- Women constitute less than 12% of the Palestinian labour force. This means one working woman for every four men in the West Bank and one for every six men in Gaza.
- 84.6% are considered to be outside the labour market in the West Bank, compared to 90% in Gaza.
- 66% of Palestinian women workers are employed in the informal economy.
- The percentage of women who are the heads of family rose from 7% in 1997 to 11% in 2003.
- The average salary of women in the textile industry is 500 shekels a month (about 100 euros) in the West Bank, and under 300 shekels (60 euros) in Gaza.
- Women occupy only 12% of senior posts, compared to 35% of junior posts in the administration of the Palestinian Authority.
- The poverty rate of households in which the woman is the breadwinner is 1.3 times higher than that of households where the man is the head of the family.



With an average of six children per woman (the rate is considerably higher in Gaza than in the West Bank), Palestine has one of the highest fertility rates in the world. "This presents a dual challenge: the training of young mothers and the training or retraining of women seeking to return to the labour market after raising their children," explains Zahira Kamal.

The few companies still in operation prefer to employ young and/or single women, so as to avoid any obligations related to maternity protection. "For many women, marriage signals the end of their careers," remarks Amneh Reemawy (PGFTU-Ramallah).

There is a blatant lack of crèches and childcare facilities, and most schools close their gates at 1pm. "Part-time work is therefore very common among women, but doesn't afford them the same rights as full-timers. The crèches and childcare facilities are private and very expensive," regrets the Minister, who would like to benefit from the experience of other countries in this area, to improve the protection of women in part-time work, which is a major problem throughout the region.

"Many job opportunities were created with the foundation of the Palestinian Authority, but very few have bene-

fited women, unfortunately," points out Amneh Reemawy (PGFTU-Ramallah). Only 12 per cent of the women employed in the Palestinian Authority presently occupy senior positions, compared to the 35 per cent in junior positions. Minister Kamal is personally involved in a committee to reform recruitment practices and has stressed the need for staff qualified in gender auditing. Although she believes that Yasser Arafat is playing an important role in the promotion of women, "it is still a very problematic issue at the lower echelons of the administration", she confides.

Education and vocational training, health, birth spacing, job opportunities, a greater representation of women in politics, later marriages (which would undoubtedly impact positively on women's education, economic power and fertility rate), all rank high on Zahira Kamal's list of priorities. It is a vast programme for a minister whose mobility is affected by the same restrictions as the rest of the Palestinian population. "Every day, to get from where I live in Jerusalem to Ramallah where I work, I have to ask the Israeli military authorities for permission. Last week I had a series of meetings planned with women from Gaza, everything had been organised but I was not able to get there.

Within the context of occupation, our work programmes are always uncertain."

### RETROGRADE TRENDS

The serious economic difficulties affecting Palestinian women on a daily basis are accompanied by retrograde trends, a rise in Islamic extremism and conservative ideas, attempting to place even greater restrictions on the role and place of women in Palestinian society.

"The economic lever is the most important in countering this trend," explains Zahira Kamal. "For example, if a traditional family is presented with the opportunity of work for their daughter, the question of principle would not be raised." The Islamic movement supports schools, various financial aid services, and alternative social security systems. "If the government did the same, the population would give more support to our policies on equality," concluded Minister Kamal, in all frankness. ●

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(1) ILO Report on the Situation of Workers of the Arab Occupied Territories, International Labour Conference, 92nd Session, 2004.



*The delegation of the ICFTU Women's Committee visited several demolished houses in the old city of Nablus, the West Bank's economic capital and largest city, which had been under Israeli military siege for over 20 days. Here in the Al Qaryoun area, Israeli forces had just destroyed several houses with bulldozers and explosives, forcing 35 families to leave the neighbourhood. The unemployment rate in Nablus is as high as 70 per cent and the poverty rate 65 per cent. Since the onset of the second intifada in September 2000 until the end of July 2004, 462 Palestinians from Nablus have been killed, over 6,000 have been injured and 893 houses have been completely destroyed. (Photo: N.D.)*

### UN appeal

On 8 March 2004, International Women's Day, seven UN bodies (UNRWA, UNICEF, UNFPA, OCHA, WHO, WFP, UNDP) launched an appeal for the improvement of Palestinian women's living conditions, particularly in the areas of access to health, education, nutrition and employment. Given the significant deterioration in their living conditions, "the restrictions on movement, the military incursions, and the demolition of houses, particularly in Rafah where close to 10,000 Palestinians, including many women, have been left homeless", the seven UN bodies urged the Israeli authorities to "provide secure and unconditional access to health services, education, employment, food and other basic necessities." They also urged the Palestinian Authority to "improve the quality of its basic services." The international community was called on to "ensure that all parties comply with international law concerning the protection of civilians, including women."

# Making more room for women in trade unions

**Women trade unionists are tackling resistance from men, a lack of information on women workers and a shortage of resources...**

**T**he Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, PGFTU, has a very low level of female membership: eight per cent in the West Bank and only five per cent in Gaza. These figures should, however, be seen in relation to the poor representation of women in the formal labour market (14 per cent).

"Prior to 1994, trade union work was clandestine, as all trade union activity was prohibited," recalls Abla Masrujeh, PGFTU Women's Coordinator. The "women's" activities within the PGFTU were launched in 1996, with the creation of a women's forum. Then in 1997, in line with the PGFTU's new constitution, the women's department was founded. "In 1998, we drew up our strategy, which was aimed at increasing female membership figures, educating women in women's rights and in human and workers' rights in general, improving women's working conditions, and educating men in the importance of improving women's rights," explains Abla Masrujeh, underlining the importance given to communication through publications or face-to-face dealings.

## MALE RESISTANCE

"We haven't had any problems in terms of policies. But we have met with a lot of resistance on the part of men when it comes to the practical application of these policies in the various regions," confides Abla Masrujeh.

During the last PGFTU congress in May, a resolution was passed on gender equality, setting the target of 20 per cent female representation on the decision-making bodies of the union. The PGFTU Women's Affairs Department had asked for 30 per cent, but this was clearly perceived as an over-ambitious goal, given that in Gaza there is currently only one woman on the union's 17-member Executive, and that the PGFTU's overall proportion of women members is no higher than 12 per cent - a very low percentage that should, of course, be seen in relation to the proportion of women employed in the formal labour market: 14 per cent.

Another hindrance is women's lack of availability, which also complicates the task of recruiting female members.



*Abla Masrujeh (on the right), PGFTU Women's Coordinator, "For all women, it is a daily battle to meet the basic needs of the family, usually through work in the informal economy. Getting to work, to school with the children, to the market, the hospital or to the houses of friends and relatives ... is like trying to get round an assault course, with all the roadblocks and military operations. Women trade unionists are faced with the same day-to-day battle... on top of their struggle to carry out their 'normal' trade union activities, such as visiting workers, holding meetings, negotiating with employers, lobbying the authorities or fighting for gender equality both within society and the labour movement itself." (Photo: N.D.)*

"This is why we try to organise events on a weekend, which generally suits women better," explains Abla Masrujeh. "In the past, female trade union members were concentrated in the textile industry. But this sector has almost completely disappeared. There are now increasing numbers of women working as seasonal labourers in agriculture, and we are constantly running after them to try to make contact," she adds.

## HOME VISITS

"In Hebron and Jenin, we have given priority to visiting women in their neighbourhoods rather than in the workplace," explains Abla Masrujeh. "Given the high level of unemployment among women, we have changed our way of working. Rather than visiting their workplaces, we go to the places where they live, their neighbourhoods," adds Amneh Reemawy. "In the Ramallah region, for example, we have tried new working methods. We have set up women's committees for the women workers in the 14 villages around the

city and identified educational projects that would benefit them," she continues.

## NETWORKING

Based on the conviction that improved trade union rights lead to improved women's rights, women from the PGFTU have been working in collaboration with the Federation of Palestinian Women to campaign for women's rights and improvements in the labour laws. "After the Oslo Agreements, we started to reconstruct the labour movement, crushed by the occupation and the ban that had been in place until then on any form of trade union activity. We put a good deal of work into the comparative analysis of the draft labour law and international labour standards. We set up a lobbying committee of women from the women's and labour movements together with other organisations involved in the campaign for human and workers' rights," explains Amneh Reemawy.

The campaign secured a number of



positive results, such as the extension of maternity leave from six to ten weeks and the allocation of one hour a day in breast-feeding breaks for a one-year period. "We are now focusing on the issue of participation in the payment of maternity leave within the framework of the social security system," says Amneh Reemawy.

**INFORMING WOMEN OF THEIR RIGHTS**

"The law provides for equality in the area of job opportunities and pay. But the situation in practice is quite different. We need a campaign to raise women's awareness about their rights, as well as a campaign to educate men about women's rights at work and within society in general. We want all women to be in a position where they know what their rights are and can also defend them!" insists Reemawy. "In 2000 we published a book on the rights of women workers, and we were also able to organise a week of paid trade union education sessions. But we have a serious shortfall in the resources needed to implement our other education projects for women," she regrets.

Another obstacle is the lack of information on the evolution of women's role in the labour market. "If we want to help women workers, we have to know where they are, where they are working, and under what conditions. It's essential for identifying the future strategy of the women's department."

**PRACTICAL HELP**

"Over the last three years, many women have shown great interest in the services offered by the PGFTU to help them survive this severe crisis (particularly food aid) - services which are even offered to women who are not members of the union. The mentality of the women here is such that they believe it should be the men or their sons who gain from the services or benefits such as financial or food aid," explains Abla Masrujeh.

At the end of 2003, following negotiations with President Arafat led by the PGFTU, it was agreed that 5,000 individual financial aid contributions of \$100 would be awarded to unemployed women, so that they could also directly benefit from government assistance.

"We also give women training to help them to deal with the conflict's impact on their children. This is something we learnt from the first intifada... At that time the attitude was that we had to show that we were strong at all costs, never show our weaknesses, our pain, our fears... Now we are trying to help children to express their feelings about the situation," continues Abla Masrujeh. "We also give training to help women to handle emergency situations: first aid to be given to injured persons,



*A trade union activist for over 30 years, Amneh Reemawy, the only woman on the PGFTU's 31-member Executive, is in charge of complaints in the Ramallah area.*

*(Photo: N.D.)*

how to contact the emergency services etc.," she adds.

**MICRO PROJECTS**

Most Palestinian women now carry out economic activities in their homes in an attempt to overcome the poverty generated by the mechanisms of Israeli occupation, such as the curfews and the sealing-off of areas which have led to the insolvency of many sectors. The textile sector, which traditionally employed a high proportion of women, has been particularly hard hit. But the work done in the home is not consid-

ered official, is not protected by any laws, and does not provide the women with a proper salary. As Abla Masrujeh confirms, "Because they are the first to lose their jobs, women accept deplorable working conditions, making pickles, for example, or other food products in their homes. But how can we defend them when they are not considered as genuine workers by the law?"

In June, the PGFTU Women's Affairs Department held two seminars for women members in Nablus and Bethlehem with the support of the ICFTU and in collaboration with other women's organisations. The seminar held in Bethlehem was originally planned to take place in Jenin, but had to be moved owing to Israeli military operations in the area. The aim of the seminars was twofold: to educate women about their legal rights and to identify micro projects, considered useful to Palestinian society, that could be carried out by women working in the informal economy. Various projects are being examined in a wide range of areas such as food and textile production, hairdressing, sport, education and leisure activities for children. In the long term, it is hoped that they will form part of the ICFTU's support programme for projects to organise the informal economy ●.

**N.D. WITH M.H.**

"Some 56,000 wage employment positions were lost and replaced by over 47,500 self-employment positions ... mostly in subsistence agriculture, petty trade and personal services," observes the ILO Report on the Situation of Workers of the Arab Occupied Territories, International Labour Conference, 92nd Session, 2004.



*"How can we defend women who the law does not consider to be workers?" (Photo: N.D.)*

# Informal means of survival

**From secretary to home worker ... the everyday story of Ibtisam Sayeg.**

**A**t the age of 40, Ibtisam Sayeg hopes for just one thing: one day to have enough money to open her own little shop and sell her needlework so that she can contribute as much as she can to her family's survival. "A long, long time ago, I worked as a secretary with one of the largest NGOs in Palestine," recounts the young woman. "It was before the second intifada - a completely different era." Her post was in keeping with her qualifications, and, even better, she had a bone fide employment contract. Naturally, she would have liked to earn a better salary - 1500 shekels or 300 dollars is not much, especially when one lives in Ramallah. But she didn't complain. She would probably have never left this job if it had not been for her father's illness, which meant she had to resign so she could look after him full time. This marked the beginning of her long descent into the underworld.

When she returned to the labour market in 2000, the situation had already seriously deteriorated. She worked for just a few months with an audiovisual company before being laid off for economic reasons, along with most of the other employees, "without proper notice or redundancy pay", she tells us. This job was her last post in the formal economy. She appealed to the PGFTU, which found her a small job to help her survive, but only for a few weeks. "I



Photo: M.H.

then found a job as a receptionist in one of the city's hotels. But I didn't have a contract, just a verbal agreement. I didn't hold on to this job. I was asked to do the cleaning and all manner of tasks other than the work I had actually been employed to do. But how can one defend one's rights without an employment contract?" she asks.

She left the job in the end. "I would rather live with dignity, be able to hold my head high, than accept just anything."

When asked how she sees the future

now, Ibtisam Sayeg smiles. "I would, of course, like to find a job. I read the ads and send my CV out at every opportunity. But the labour market doesn't work like that here. Most jobs go to people with contacts, and unemployment is so high that I don't hold out much hope. What do I hope for? Peace. Peace and a job for me and my husband, who is an engineer but is working on a day-to-day basis on construction sites at the moment."

Because family solidarity is not enough to make ends meet, she now does needlework at home, selling her produce to whoever is willing to buy it "for no more than 200 shekels (45 dollars) a piece, for items that can take up to two months to make," she explains. One day she may open a little shop in Ramallah, like so many others have done in and around the main street. "But people would need to have enough money to buy my products," she sighs. "At the moment, everyone is living in poverty." ●

M.H.

# A woman's resolve

**The career path of Amneh Quadi, Regional Coordinator of the PGFTU Women's Affairs Department.**

**"Y**ou must write that it took us three attempts before we were able to meet up. Say that Nablus has become a prison to which outsiders no longer come." Amneh Quadi's face is drawn, reflecting her frustration over the three hours it has taken to reach Ramallah. But her face lights up when she starts to recount the path that took her from being a very young wife - "at age 15, because it was wartime and our parents wanted to protect us from the soldiers" - to Regional Coordinator of the PGFTU Women's Affairs Department. It was a journey



Photo: M.H.

marked by determination, every step of the way: the determination to study, despite having five children at a very young age, the determination to succeed professionally, and, finally, the determination to work untiringly to improve the working conditions of women. "My husband was very supportive of my desire to learn. I will never forget the day when we were all sat around the table studying, my children and I, whilst he prepared the sandwiches," she recollects with fondness.

"As a young girl, I wanted to become a paediatrician." Despite the support of those around her, her family duties made it impossible. But she went to university, where she was the only young woman with children, and passed her accountancy diploma without difficulty. She then worked for several years at



the regional department of the Health Ministry, then at the Ministry itself, before becoming an accountant at the public hospital in Nablus. She did not become active in the trade union immediately. But she was soon convinced of the need for active involvement during a meeting in 1998, where she met Abla Masrujeh, Coordinator of the PGFTU Women's Affairs Department. "The honesty of the discourse and the conviction that working together would be possible persuaded me to get involved."

Since then, Amneh Quadi's fight has been relentless, not so much in the area of equal pay for men and women, as "in the public sector we don't have this kind of problem; men and women's

salaries are the same", but more in the area of equal career opportunities and to improve the position of women in the Palestinian labour market in general. Discrimination is something she cannot tolerate. "Why should one use the argument of family duties to refuse us a post? It's up to each of us, as individuals, to assess what we are capable or not capable of doing." She regularly organises workshops and seminars on the situation of women, which she hopes will at least give women the confidence to exercise their own free will and freedom of choice, and to learn about their rights and to change the way men see them. "Even within the trade union movement!" she insists. "How can we accept the conditions imposed on

women in the labour market: the fact that they are always the first to be dismissed, or that some employers make women's wages conditional on the company's results, paying the men before they'll pay the women?"

"Palestine's future is not rosy, but that's no excuse for sacrificing women," she explains. Does she think her children will follow in her footsteps? "To each their own. I just know one thing: my husband and I have shown them the path to a society where each partner within the couple respects the other, where the Koran is compatible with development. It is then up to each one of us to build our own life." ●

M.H.

## Health care taken hostage

Infant mortality, epidemics, maternity problems, chronic diseases, invalidity... every single health indicator in the Palestinian territories is deteriorating. The everyday obstacles presented by roadblocks, curfews, military operations, and now the separation wall add to the already difficult access to care at the ten hospitals and 120 small clinics in the West Bank. Forced self-sufficiency extends not only to the economies but also to the health services of the various Palestinian territories divided into separate enclaves.

At the end of April, the main international aid organisations in the Palestinian territories condemned the Israeli authorities for hindering their work. The director of the UN Relief Agency (UNWRA) spoke of a "serious humanitarian situation", reiterating condemnation of restrictions on movement imposed by the Israeli authorities.

In Nablus, Rafidia Hospital has just



*Palestinian hospitals are overflowing... yet restrictions on movement prevent medical staff from reaching work and hinder access to emergency medical supplies. (Photo: N.D.)*

- 38% of women of childbearing age suffer from anaemia.
- The proportion of home births has almost doubled since the beginning of the second intifada.
- The proportion of women with access to postnatal care has fallen from 95.6% to 82.4%.
- Since 2002, over 60 women have given birth at the military checkpoints.
- 19 women and 29 newborn babies died at the military checkpoints between September 2000 and December 2002. 24 women

and 27 newborns died between June 2003 and March 2004.

- Over the last three years, the infant mortality rate has reached 20%.
- According to UNICEF, 38% of Palestinian women indicated that they were experiencing greater difficulties in accessing health care services and 65% stated that the quality of their diet had deteriorated.

Sources: United Nations Information Services (08/03/2004) and the Ministry for Women's Affairs of the Palestinian Authority.

100 beds (out of the 500 hospital beds in total for the whole of Nablus) and deals with some 700 births a month. "The hospital usually has a staff of 339 employees, but because of the checkpoints only about 50 are working at the moment," explains Dr Husam W. Jawhari, heart specialist and Director of the hospital. Despite the difficulties in receiving emergency medical supplies, the hospital has been working with a grade A emergency situation since September 2000. "We are taking in people with injuries day and night, including many head injuries; there have been over 5,500 since September 2000. April 2002 was the most difficult period. I

➔ CONTINUED ON PAGE 12



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spent three weeks day and night at the hospital, with 93 injured people and 55 corpses of martyrs left outside without even a refrigerator to store the bodies," he recounts. "Until recently we also had a problem with the supply of oxygen and occasionally had to cut surgery short because of the lack of oxygen,"

adds Dr Jawhari. "We are also short of medicines for a number of specialisms, particularly vascular surgery. We try to transfer patients to Ramallah or Jerusalem, at least when access is not sealed off..."

#### TRAINING MIDWIVES

Rafidia hospital is trying to alleviate

the dramatic situation of women about to go into childbirth, who find themselves blocked at the checkpoints - often a life-threatening situation for the mother and the child - by providing courses in midwifery to women living in the local villages. ●

M.H.

## Education under siege

**As the deterioration in education reaches alarming proportions, home schooling is organised to counter the effects of long curfews and restrictions on movement. An alternative teaching strategy for the "sacrificed" younger generations.**

"Given the frequent closure of schools or their inaccessibility, we have organised schooling in every neighbourhood, so that our children's education is not entirely disrupted. In this way, both teachers and pupils are able to overcome the restrictions on movement and continue with schooling close to their homes," Abla Masroujeh explains

When Nablus was placed under a strict curfew from 30 April to 30 May 2002, and the army occupied the schools, the local population reverted to the practices deployed during the first intifada, organising a parallel school, building by building, for each and every child. Something had to be done so that they would not fall idle, so that they could continue to learn, and so we could "show them that we can organise, even under the most difficult circumstances.

It may be possible to imprison people, but no one can take away their freedom of thought or their intelligence," Abla Masroujeh continues. The unused rooms of every building were thus converted into classrooms, and the adults were called on to contribute in whatever way they could, helping with lessons in Arabic, mathematics, history, art and even information technology. Everyone passes on to the children whatever knowledge they are capable of sharing.

Despite efforts to deploy alternative strategies to counteract the stranglehold on formal education, it has to be recognised that "the circumstances are, nonetheless, leading to a decline in the level of education, and we are well aware that this is a great cause for concern, all the more so given that, in the



Photo: N.D.

past, the high level of education within Palestinian society was one of our main assets," Abla Masroujeh explains with regret. "The situation is also triggering serious psychological problems," she adds. "The children no longer respect their teachers, and are losing their motivation to study. And this is creating discipline problems."

Most of the teachers in the 45 schools of Jerusalem and the surrounding areas are women who live in the West Bank and cannot reach their workplaces because of the checkpoints and the wall. As a result, the classes that remain open are terribly overcrowded, which does little to help the teachers exercise authority over the children.

#### THE FINANCIAL BARRIER

"The problem of alienation and exclusion is particularly worrying in the 14 to 17 age group," explained the head of Nablus Cultural Centre for Child Development (CCCD), an NGO that, together with the PGFTU, is a member of an umbrella organisation of women's NGOs. During the ICFTU Women's Committee's mission, the CCCD were organising a programme for children in

Nablus' old city, to help them release the pent-up frustrations and aggression arising from the conflict.

#### A DISTURBING MARGINALISATION

Against a background of mass poverty, the financial burden of schooling also weighs heavily on the children's education (20 to 120 shekels a semester, depending on the level, except for university which is much more costly). Until now, all PGFTU members who were unemployed, whether male or female, were exempted from paying their children's education fees. This agreement is now being renegotiated, and it seems that under the new system eligibility will be determined on a case-by-case basis, in accordance with the financial situation of each individual household.

As the ILO observed, the restrictions on children's access to education are "increasing the tendency to idleness and the risk of inappropriate and hazardous child labour." (1) ●

N.D. WITH M.H.

(1) ILO Report on the Situation of Workers of the Arab Occupied Territories, International Labour Conference, 92nd Session 2004.

# A female, trade union voice on Gaza's radio station

**In the highly patriarchal society of Gaza, a number of women are gaining a voice: "not because most men want it... but they no longer have the choice".**

**N**areman Ibrahim Farag Allah is 26 years old. She has two university degrees, in plastic arts and audiovisual techniques, and has been directing the PGFTU radio programme "The voice of Palestinian workers" for one year now. Since 2002 this trade union radio station has been broadcasting throughout the Gaza Strip, with programmes on issues as diverse as labour law; the political, economic and social situation; religion; health or changing customs. "The major economic crisis we've faced since September 2000 has, in practice, forced women to contribute to the household finances", she continues. "So there are now more and more women working like me. This revolution is bound to change the way society sees us, I'm sure of that."

Along with her 13 brothers and sisters, with whom she grew up in the El Burej refugee camp in the central part of the Gaza Strip, Nareman has always appreciated the importance of education: "education and getting a job, with or without children", as she puts it. "We are half of society, more than half in fact if you discount all those men - young and not so young - who are now imprisoned, injured or have died in Palestine. Tomorrow's society can't do without us: we have our place in it but need to assert it". When asked about the impact of such social upheavals on gender balance and the sharing of tasks, Nareman, who admits to not being fundamentally opposed to polygamy ("only if I'm sterile"), is cautious: "It will take time. But many serious questions are already being raised and provoking debates in the women's programmes we broadcast, along with many others. Palestinian men are expected to be the breadwinners, for instance. So what will happen when their wives and partners are earning their living? Will the women agree to share their earnings with the household, or what will happen?" She tells us it's too early to know. "One thing is certain though: one wage is no longer enough, since many of those men who are in work are only earning 1500 shekels (1) a month, which is well below what you need to live on in the West Bank or Gaza. So things are going to change. And in my



*Nareman Ibrahim Farag Allah, 26 years old, is in charge of the PGFTU's radio programmes "The voice of Palestinian workers": "Tomorrow's society can't do without us: we have our place in it but need to assert it".*  
(photo M.H.)

generation it is already noticeable that many more men are looking for women who can potentially contribute to the household finances".

## **WOMEN STILL IN A SMALL MINORITY ON THE LABOUR MARKET**

In Gaza, women still occupy a marginal position on the labour market, with barely 20% of them working. And they always find it harder to find a job than men, of course. However, Nareman goes on to say that of the 28 women students she studied with at university, thirteen have jobs, i.e. almost 50%, though only one woman in five has a job in the Palestinian territories. It's not a bad percentage. Is that how Gaza will be tomorrow, with women working in high-skilled jobs and not just in the traditional ones of today - in the public services, textiles and agriculture? "Perhaps", she thinks, "as long as today's economic and political climate changes".

Nareman Ibrahim Farag Allah found her own job after several months on the dole and, it should be said, thanks to an "assisted" job scheme run jointly by the Ministry of Finance and the national trade union confederation. But who cares, she got what she wanted: a skilled job in a field that she loves and a chance to indulge her passion for providing information and education over the airwaves to tens of thousands of

workers. She knew nothing about the unions before she was taken on. But she did already know how important it is to have rights and to improve the employment situation and women's rights. So she is happy to have all these programmes covering such things.

Nevertheless, she admits that her main hope at the moment is to emigrate. She would like to go to Dubai, like one of her sisters, and build a better life than the one she could hope for here, with better prospects in the relative Eldorado of the Gulf than she could expect in the "prison" of the Gaza Strip. "My parents agree. I hope I can leave. But I'll come back: that's for sure". ●

**M.H.**

(1) 263 euros

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## GLOBALISING SOLIDARITY

BUILDING A GLOBAL UNION MOVEMENT FOR THE FUTURE

18th ICFTU WORLD CONGRESS - MIYAZAKI (JAPAN) 5 > 10 DECEMBER 2004

### **INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION ACTION FOR PEACE AND THE ROLE OF THE UNITED NATIONS**

#### **Extract of the Resolution adopted at the 18th World Congress of the ICFTU (Miyazaki, Japan – December 2004)**

The quest for a comprehensive peace between Israel and Palestine, based on the existence of two sovereign, independent and viable states, requires renewed international attention and support as a highest and urgent priority. To that end, Congress calls all governments to give their utmost support to this process.

Recalling the 17th ICFTU World Congress Resolution “International Action for Peace”, Congress reasserts the ICFTU’s support for the full implementation of the UN Resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) as well as the full implementation of the “Road Map” for peace, as key building blocks for peaceful and constructive relations between Israel and Palestine and their neighbours.

While every country has the right to defend itself against terrorism and defend its legitimate and recognized borders, the building by the Israeli government of a separation wall which unfortunately intrudes substantially into Palestinian territory is a violation of international law according to the International Court of Justice and of the rights of Palestinians and can only make peace and mutual coexistence harder to achieve; therefore we call for the full application of all relevant UN Security Council resolutions and that of the International Court of Justice.

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian workers have not been able to get employment and this has created fertile ground for extremism, undermining the efforts of those seeking democratic solutions. These restrictions have also created the conditions for exploitation of the migrant workers who have replaced Palestinian workers in Israel.

Congress calls upon the Israeli government and employers to lift restrictions on employment for Palestinians. Congress urges the international community to contribute to the ILO Palestinian Fund for Employment and Social Protection.

The decision by the Israeli government to end the occupation of Gaza and part of the West Bank should be a first step in the full implementation of the Road Map.

Israeli government and security authorities should provide support and facilities in order to secure adequate conditions for the Palestinian election processes (\*).

In the framework of the Road Map, Congress also urges both Israelis and Palestinians to together renounce violence, commit to immediate ceasefire and immediately engage in direct negotiations, since they are the only viable route to lasting peace.

Congress further calls upon the Israeli government to end the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza without delay, and to remove settlements from these territories, recognising that their continued existence is a major barrier to resolving the conflict.

Congress calls on both Histadrut and PGFTU to continue the implementation of the agreement signed between them and to play an effective role in the peace process, since trade unions embody solidarity, peace and fraternal values.

*(\*) Immediately following the Palestinian elections, ICFTU general secretary, Guy Ryder, wrote to Mahmoud Abbas, the new president of the Palestinian Authority, to congratulate him on his election and urge him to fulfil the pre-electoral promises to reduce poverty and unemployment made to the PGFTU.*



ICFTU OnLine...

## Israel: the social ravages of ultraliberal policies

**Although the negative impact of the intifada coupled with the cost of occupation undoubtedly weigh heavily on the Israeli economy, the prime cause of the growing poverty in Israel lies in the ultraliberal policies of Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu**

**Indeed, Israel's Finance Minister is engaged in a determined mission to dismantle the social security system, leaving increasing numbers of Israeli men and women on the streets, and brutally attacking the rights and benefits secured by the National Federation of Labour, Histadrut, an affiliate of the ICFTU.**

**According to official Israeli statistics published in November 2004, 1,427,000 citizens - almost a quarter of the population - lived below the poverty line in 2003 (based on a threshold of 300 euros per person per month, or 470 per couple), indicating a 10% rise in the same figures for 2002. Children are the hardest hit, with 30% of Israel's child population living beneath the poverty line. The groups most vulnerable to poverty include the Arab minority, Orthodox Jews, the elderly and single parent families. As regards geographic distribution, Jerusalem holds the unenviable title of Israel's poorest city.**

**In October 2004, Noga Butensky, head of the Women's Department at Histadrut, gave the ICFTU an interview to explain why women workers are being particularly hard hit by the Israeli government's savagely antisocial policies.**

## Israeli women are suffering heavily under Sharon's anti-social policy

*Brussels, 12 October 2004, (ICFTU Online):* **Some days after the public sector general strike organised by Histadrut, the powerful Israeli union centre affiliated to the ICFTU, Noga Butensky explains why women workers are being hit hard by the economic crisis and the ultraliberal policies pursued by the Sharon government. Israeli women workers are over-represented in insecure, low-skilled and part-time jobs, and as such are suffering from the discriminatory segregation of the labour market within a society which does not regard the struggle for equality as a priority.**

● On 21 September, Histadrut called out the 400,000 civil servants and public service workers on a general strike for jobs and wages, some of which had not been paid for months. How did Israeli women workers respond to the call?

*Quite spontaneously, in fact, half of the country's civil servants are women. Cuts in public expenditure and the consequences arising from these cutbacks directly affect women, particularly since the current economic climate is tending to hurt them most. Women workers are being hit hard by today's economic crisis. The Employment Service has just issued the latest unemployment figures: there are currently 243,517 job seekers in Israel, which is 9% increase on the figures for August 2003. I don't have any statistics specifically on women as yet, but these latest figures are certainly a bad omen. For several months now the female unemployment rate has been considerably higher than the male rate at 12.8% compared to 10.1%. That is a new phenomenon.*

● What is behind that: women's level of education?

*Israeli women are just as well educated as Israeli men. That is not an argument and nor, indeed, is their investment in their work: nowadays women and men have the same level of absenteeism from work - roughly ten days per year. The reason behind this deterioration is the fact that women have been concentrated for too long in six main sectors including teaching, secretarial work, cleaning and domestic work: all are very sensitive sectors and more vulnerable than others to the impact of public policies. There is no doubt that women would manage better if they had more highly-skilled jobs. Less than one in ten have top management posts in the public sector and just a third are in middle management positions. We are living in what is still an extremely conservative society that fails to recognise women's work as 'normal'. The school system is symptomatic of this problem since schools close in the afternoons. Families therefore have to choose whether to employ nannies, at huge expense, or to decide that the wife will only take a part-time job in order to look after the children. Most Israeli women therefore opt for part-time jobs in order to look after their children.*

● Is the situation any better in the private sector?

*Let's take the high tech sector, which pays its employees very well. There are women in this sector, of course, but it's at a price: you have to be*

young and childless in order to work in such companies. The working conditions in these firms are extremely tough. The working hours, which sometimes require staff to stay till 10pm, are impossible for older women and mothers. I repeat: we are not particularly concerned about the rate of women's employment, which compares well with international levels. The problem is the type of job available to women. In Israel it is women who are in most of the insecure, low-skilled and part-time jobs. And that is reflected in their pay. The average monthly wage of a women worker is 60% lower than that of an average male worker. That is why we regarded the measures taken by the government last year as unacceptable, since they made drastic cuts in financial support for the poorest people, for example benefits for single parents. Any reductions in the welfare budget hit women first and they are already badly treated on the labour market.

● It is claimed, however, that Israel does more than other countries to ensure equality between men and women, not least through women's doing military service. What is your view on that?

In the army young Israeli women have long been stuck in subordinate posts, as assistants to men, who are the ones who bear arms. That attitude permeates the whole of Israeli society. The same principle, whereby men are regarded as able to lead battalions, means they are always chosen in preference to women within companies. Look how many directors, managers and ministers are former army officers! Most ministers are former generals. If fighting units were set up in which women bore arms just like men things might change. But such a change will take a very long time. The army remains an extremely 'macho' institution. And that tradition undoubtedly plays a role in the private, domestic violence that is on the increase in Israeli society. It is still very difficult for women to stand up to men.

● What is the situation faced by women migrants?

I would draw a distinction between Jewish immigrants and the temporary immigration of foreign workers. There is no difference in the treatment of Jewish migrant women, particularly Russians, and that of Israeli women. The former may still suffer from a lack of contacts of course. But they tend to work well and should not have any integration problems. Foreign women workers, including many Filipinos, are mostly employed in cleaning jobs and domestic work.

● Are women's demands understood within the union?

They are understood, yes. When we call for better protection for pregnant women at work, better recognition of their qualifications, the setting of quotas for all leadership posts or better-targeted social benefits, our demands are heard and understood. The unions have managed to obtain some laws in our favour. But the problem is to get them applied. And when we ask for that or for improvements we are always told there are other priorities... other priorities that are much more important than improving the situation of women!

● How is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict affecting women workers, and how are they tackling these issues?

The situation is affecting the whole of society, and clearly working people. When investors turn away from Israel and are reluctant to increase their operations there for fear of negative developments or security reasons, all the workers suffer. On the other hand, it must be said that women are themselves investing more in the organisations working for peace. Indeed there are some women-only associations like "Machsomwatch", which has been visiting checkpoints since 2001 to stop any abuses by soldiers. That is a women-only organisation. Another is "Women in Black", which has been organising demonstrations against the occupation every Saturday since 1988. At trade union level we are trying to do all we can to cooperate with Palestinian women. Last November the women's department of Histadrut organised a meeting on methods for ensuring the peaceful coexistence of our two peoples.

INTERVIEW BY MARTINE HASSOUN.