

REPORT OF PSI DELEGATION TO PALESTINE AND ISRAEL

FEBRUARY 2005

The delegation was led by PSI Secretary General Hans Englebarts and included representatives from Canada, Chad, Malta and Netherlands. Nick Sigler, Head of International Relations of UNISON was a member of the delegation which was also accompanied by the Regional Secretary of PSI's Africa and Arab region.

The sending of a delegation had been called for in a resolution passed by the PSI's Africa and Arab Region Executive and reinforced by decisions of the PSI Executive Committee. It had taken quite some time to organise due to the political, logistical and security complexities. Although the final date was fixed at the end of 2004 – prior to the death of Yasser Arafat - the timing of the delegation was extremely opportune given the recent election of Abu Mazen and the political developments that were taking place.

The delegation started its work in Nablus and visited Qalqilya and Gaza before moving to Tel Aviv from where a visit to Jerusalem took place. As well as meeting with the Secretaries General of the PGFTU and the Histadrut and the leaders and senior officers of the public service sectors of the two organisations, the delegation also met with the Palestinian Minister of Labour, the Governor of Nablus and a range of local union officials and members throughout the region. The PSI Secretariat will be producing a detailed report of the mission – and we were supplied with copious factual material which is available from the International office. This report is therefore not intended as a complete record of events and meetings, rather as an overview with a number of specific points of recommendation for action by UNISON.

The delegation arrived in the Middle East shortly after the summit in Egypt and the declaration of a 'truce' in the region. That, together with the changed political order that had resulted from the election of Abu Mazen as President of the Palestine National Authority, gave the visit a certain air of optimism. People, on both sides, were clearly more hopeful than they had been only a few months previously but that hope and optimism appeared to be extremely fragile, very superficial and certainly nothing like the optimism that existed in the post-Oslo Accords period. It also appeared to be a different type of optimism. Before the Intafada people spoke of co-operation, the need to work together, of co-existence. Now it was much more about the two sides getting on with their own lives and simply tolerating one another. It was also an optimism that was suffused with wariness, a wariness born out of four years of Intafada and suicide bombs, four years of closure and humiliation, four years of increasing poverty and economic

decline. It is, of course, still early days for this new situation and things may well change, but the initial signs were qualitatively different from those witnessed post-Oslo and thus, while promising, not necessarily confidence inspiring.

Throughout the visit we were told about, and saw for ourselves graphic illustrations of, both the economic and the security situation. In Nablus, the Governor described the situation in the following way:

- The city had been under siege for four years with regular military invasions. There had been high human and economic losses;
- Workers are unable to reach their work places;
- Local factories are unable to obtain raw materials or to market their goods, and are working at minimum capacity;
- Farmers can't reach their land and are unable to bring their produce to the cities to market;
- Sick people die and pregnant women give birth at army checkpoints;
- Teachers and students have difficulties getting to the classes at the University in Nablus because of the restrictions;

Throughout the visit to Palestine further facts were added:

- Unemployment was at 65 per cent (although higher in Gaza at about 72 per cent) when before the Intafada it had been between 8 and 12 per cent. (Public service workers had been the worst hit by the rise in unemployment);
- Per capita income had fallen by 36 per cent and, in Gaza, 80 per cent of the population were believed to be living below the poverty line;
- The minimum wage which was between \$5 and \$6 was often ignored by employers;
- There had been a massive increase in child labour – there were some 40000 children in the labour market in Gaza;
- The economic and service infrastructure of Palestine had been very badly affected.

However, despite the obviously dire situation the PNA had been active in trying to overcome the difficulties. In Nablus, for example, they had developed a plan to deal with the crisis which included a job creation programme, the building of new roads to avoid the checkpoints and the building of health centres in outlying villages to overcome the difficulties of traveling to the cities for treatment.

While the economic situation in Israel is plainly very different, our sister unions are also facing considerable difficulties:

- Salaries in some parts of the public sector had been delayed or not paid;
- Their pension funds had been nationalized with a lowering of conditions;
- Wages in the public sector had been cut with a large number of redundancies;
- The government had been pursuing a privatisation and anti-employee policy;

- The unions had been involved in a number of disputes which had culminated in a one and a half day general strike in September 2004 – which had been solid and successful and had indicated powerful support for local government and the health services throughout the country.

Nothing can ever quite prepare you for the security situation in the region. However much you read, however much you see on television, however many times you visit, the confrontation with the realities on the ground are always shocking. The realities are sometimes petty, sometimes shattering. A few examples:

- The crossing in and out of Nablus made the notion of a town under siege a reality, with virtually no vehicles able to cross and local people subjected to constant checks. We were dealt with with some amazement – what on earth could someone from Britain want to go to Nablus for? – and then wished ‘Happy Valentines Day’ and asked if I support Manchester United!
- The security wall, the watchtowers and the security road, seen up close, create the impression of what one thinks it might be to live in a prison camp – albeit a camp the size of Wales. The wall is an obscene structure – not just because it encroaches on Palestinian land, divides villages, separates farmers from their fields and the rest, but because it is a symbol of human failure.
- The entry into Gaza can only be described as horrific. First an hour and a half of inefficient bureaucracy – which resulted in scrap of paper which was the permission to go through the security gate. Waiting at the gate we witnessed the humiliation and denigration which Palestinians are subjected to by the border guards (almost all kids about 18-25 years old – including the officers). Screamed at, made to partially undress (men in front of women, women in front of men, children not excused) and then forced to pat themselves down, all in the public gaze. At the end of a long and very unwelcoming and unsanitary, concrete, corridor we were through to the other side - where we saw a man, as close to death as it is surely possible to be, lying on a stretcher having waited to cross into Israel for treatment for over six hours, in the open air with no obvious medical support. On the way back we ourselves were subjected to the same humiliation although perhaps not as severely. And we witnessed an incident which offered another insight into the situation. Someone who was crossing into Israel with us at the same time was carrying a briefcase. The soldier thought that he had not put the briefcase through the metal scanner (although we saw that he had) and began to panic (this was exactly the spot where a suicide bomber had blown herself up killing a number of soldiers). One did not have to understand Hebrew to hear and feel the panic in her voice. She screamed and shouted and only calmed down after the briefcase had been through the scanner again. Finally she emerged from her sand-bagged post – a kid of little more than 18 years carrying a rifle almost as big as herself.

Our visit was one of sometimes extreme contrasts. The contrast of normality and abnormality in the West Bank – children on the way to school buying sweets, students

smoking and laughing in an internet café, the bustling market, people driving (badly) through the towns with mobiles stuck to their ears; as contrasted with the abnormality of the streets emptying, almost from one minute to the next, as the sun went down, the ritual of the checkpoints, the incongruity of modern Israeli settlements and new well paved roads in the midst of rundown Palestinian villages. And the contrast of the ease with which the leadership of the Histadrut could meet with each other while the Secretary General of the PGFTU (based in Nablus) had not met with his deputy (based in Gaza) for over three years as a result of the Israeli closure policy. And the contrast between the West Bank and Gaza, where the level of destruction and obvious poverty is far greater, and the level of optimism far lower, than in places like Nablus and Qalqilya. But in some ways the biggest contrast was the way in which the Palestinian and Israeli unions dealt with the delegation.

The Palestinian unions, despite the horrendous circumstances and conditions they were living under were keen to discuss with us issues of common trade union interest – breaches of labour law, violations of ILO conventions, non-payment of wages, difficulties of recruitment of members – despite the fact that to deal with some of these basic trade union issues was for them well nigh impossible. But the Israeli unions, despite the relative ease of their own circumstances, were far more eager to talk about the ‘national’ situation. Four of the meetings they had arranged for us were with workplaces where the Jewish and Palestinian Israeli communities were working together in apparent harmony (the Jerusalem municipality, a state run forestry project, the Israel-Arab Bank and in the Palestinian village of Abu Ghosh). While this is encouraging, and maybe an example, for future co-operation with the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza, it was in no way a reflection of the general situation in Israel or of the issues they currently face – and are able to deal with - as a union, either in the economic or the social arenas.

This contrast was made even starker as the situation of the PGFTU was described to us. The circumstances have increasingly turned the PGFTU into a ‘social’ organisation. It is increasingly involved with providing food and education for its members, in providing social security (it has set up a major scheme in Gaza), in channelling financial support from the PNA to its members. People come to the union hoping that it will be able to find them work (some 20 unemployed and poor people a day in one office in Jenin we were told). The PGFTU’s role in civil society is ever more significant. The leadership is aware and concerned that this is confusing the role of the union but recognises that in the situation it is inevitable. Their negotiating position – and their activities as a union - were also being undermined by the fact that people’s primary concern was to get employment – almost at any price. No one was too interested in health and safety issues or in implementing the minimum wage – press too hard and the workers would be made redundant as the business would go bankrupt, they were told by employers. The PGFTU leadership are, nevertheless, keen to develop the union and to further democratise the organisation. A particular current priority for the union is to carry out internal elections as agreed by their Congress in May 2004.

The situation of women was also highlighted. Their position because of the Intafada had become more difficult as they had had to take on an increased economic role so many

men had lost their jobs. But their key role in the struggle had helped them to become more involved in society and politics.

In the midst of this we took part in a fascinating meeting with the PNA Minister of Labour. Although this was in some way a ‘courtesy’ meeting we were accompanied by the Secretary General of the PGFTU and the Palestinian member of the PSI Executive who is a prominent member of the Health Workers section of the PGFTU. The meeting turned into something akin to a negotiating session. The minister, as a result of requests from the union, agreed to hold a workshop to resolve some of the difficulties that were being faced by workers in the health sector in joining the PGFTU because of the labour law – as well as promising to look into a number of other issues raised by the union. In response to questioning from the delegation about violations of a number of ILO conventions (which had been raised with us by a number of union members we had met) the Minister argued that the Palestinian Labour Code, which had been worked on with the unions, was in ‘total harmony with labour standards’ and far better than those in other Arab countries. But he accepted that it still needed further work. He denied that trade unions had to register with the Ministry, they simply had to notify. He also recognised that the labour law was not always properly implemented. He saw this as a failure of the PNA and a reflection of their lack of authority in certain situations. And while he accepted that in some circumstances the failure to implement the law was due to the economic situation – and a stringent implementation could result in further bankruptcies – he also accepted that businesses were using the economic situation as an excuse to not implement the law.

The Minister did however give us a relatively upbeat view of the economic future. He referred to the new social insurance programme and the possibility of introducing a ‘citizen’s pension’; the success of tripartite co-operation; and the way in which the Palestinian economy had absorbed some of those who had previously worked in Israel. He spoke about a job creation programme, strengthening and empowering the private sector and seeking new sources of investment. But he also quoted a World Bank report which had stated that ‘The precondition for economic improvement was the total dismantlement of the closure regime’. In that context he suggested that there was almost no point in increasing economic aid while the Israelis were still enforcing the closure.

On a number of instances the notion of direct support for the PGFTU and its constituent parts was raised with us. It was made clear by a number of people that what they were looking for was a strategic approach, they were not interested in ‘relief’ projects. While a number of proposed projects (job creation programmes, schooling for union member’s children, health support for marginal regions, etc.) would not be appropriate – or possible – for a union to carry out, there were others which should certainly be given consideration. Given that these ideas were raised during the course of relatively short meetings they are mentioned here in only very brief form and would need to be worked on in far greater detail before they could be implemented. But they give a picture of what might be needed:

- The PGFTU would like to set up twinning arrangements with other unions, either on a sectoral or a regional basis;
- They would like help to establish an effective internal election system so that they can carry out the elections called for by the Congress;
- They would like support to employ a lawyer in Israel to pursue, in the Israeli Labour Courts, a number of cases in which Israeli employers have not paid wages due to Palestinian workers – or where there are other legal claims;
- They would appreciate a suite of training for members in normal trade union skills – negotiating, recruitment, communications, democratic and labour rights, etc;
- They want help in developing their youth section; and
- They need support to obtain and equip separate offices for the constituent unions in some of the major Palestinian towns.

The Public Service sector of the PGFTU saw their relationship with the PSI as extremely important, not just because of the solidarity but because of the important joint training projects that they had been able to carry out (which had benefited many and had been good for the wider labour movement), the opportunities it provided for a view of the international labour movement and the chance to learn about the impact of public services in the rest of the world.

The perspective from the Israeli side was naturally very different. The switch from Palestinian poverty to Israeli prosperity is almost instant, just a short drive down a potholed, then tarmaced, road. The shift in attitude and approach is no less severe. Despite the fact that the Histadrut is in deep conflict with the government – both on economic and security issues - one constantly got the impression that our union partners in Israel were almost acting as spokespeople for the state, if not the government. True, there were those that were at times severely critical – especially about what happens at the border crossings and checkpoints, the use, and consequent ‘dehumanisation and brutalisation’ of ‘children’ at these extremely sensitive points and the way in which this treatment of the Palestinians was creating enemies for the future – but there was little indication that there was any pressure from the union to change the situation. We were asked by the Israelis not to take sides between the Israelis and the Palestinians, rather to use our good offices to act as an honest broker and to put whatever pressure we could exert on our governments to support the recent political developments. But it is not a question of taking sides between Israel and Palestine but a question of taking sides between right and wrong, between justice and injustice, between prosperity and poverty – all the while recognising that there is justice and injustice on both sides of the argument, although by no means in equal proportions.

Ironically the one exception to this approach was the Secretary General of the Histadrut, Amir Peretz, who is also a member of Parliament. Spoken of as a possible candidate for prime minister and hailing from a town on the Israeli/Gaza border which has come under constant mortar attack from the Palestinians, he presented a very different attitude. He spoke in some detail about the industrial issues that face workers in Israel and of his determination to confront the government in order to protect employment rights. But he

also gave a much more positive analysis of how the political situation might develop, the need for concessions and understanding on both sides and the prospect of building a long term, solid, relationship between the Histadrut and the PGFTU.

The issue of this relationship – and the role that the PSI and its affiliates might play in fostering it – was the subject of a number of discussions. The formal agreement that was signed some time ago between the two bodies had lain dormant during the Intafada. But there was a clear willingness – especially from the Palestinians – to revive the co-operation and to begin to work together again. This could be a contribution to the sort of bridge building and confidence building measures that are needed (not just in the trade union movement but throughout both societies) in order to get the peace process back on track. This willingness – but also the wariness – is perhaps best summed up in a request made by one member of the PGFTU to us to take back to the Histadrut. He said:

We are looking to the Histadrut to achieve people to people peace along side the political peace. We need to talk more with the Histadrut, we call on them to defend all workers rights – we don't want or need to talk to them about politics (we have our leaders, they have theirs) but we should talk about labour rights. Please tell the Histadrut that the PGFTU is ready for dialogue.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee has already agreed to send a UNISON delegation to the region in the next few months. In planning that visit a number of lessons will be learnt from the experience of the PSI delegation. And the UNISON delegation will also want to make their own judgements about the situation and how the union might assist our sister unions. Specifically therefore the following points are made at this juncture:

- A key focus of the UNISON delegation should be the initial development of a number of specific projects which can be carried out with our partners in the region;
- The International Unit should be asked to contact sister unions to get a clearer picture of the type of projects that are being proposed. If possible preliminary work should be begun on these projects;
- In addition to the obvious need for capacity building emphasis should be placed on bridge building exercises;
- The Committee should ask the General Secretary to write to the Foreign Secretary urging continued support for the current political developments in the region and the need to take account of labour issues in the process of resolving the conflict.