

UNISON National Social Care Forum

Statement on Gaza

March 2024



As the Forum for UNISON's social work members, we are appalled at the loss of civilian life in Gaza and Israel and call for an immediate ceasefire. We condemn Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October which resulted in the deaths of over 1,200 people and the taking of over 250 hostages, 130 of whom are still unaccounted for and are presumed to still being held captive by Hamas or feared dead. We also condemn Israel's indiscriminate bombardment of the people of Gaza which has resulted to date in the deaths of over 30,000 civilians, including more than 11,000 children (2 March 2024).

We also condemn the withholding by Israel, of food, water, fuel and medicines from a population that has been dependent on humanitarian aid since Israel's blockade of the Gaza Strip 16 years ago. This is creating further untold suffering amongst the civilian population and particularly amongst the most vulnerable, including children, pregnant women, older people and those with physical or learning disabilities. That there is a mental health epidemic amongst those living in Gaza goes without saying, but we recognise that the blockade and the current conflict has had a particular impact on the children.

As social workers we have a key role to promote social justice and human rights and to speak out against injustice wherever we see it. We add our voice to UNISON's condemnation of the Hamas attack on 7 October. However, we are clear that this does not justify the atrocities subsequently committed by the state of Israel against innocent civilians in Gaza.

We recognise that in considering South Africa's submission, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has determined that there is a plausible case to consider whether Israel is committing genocide in Gaza. We also recognise that the conditions the ICJ placed on Israel have not been met, and the killing of civilians and withholding of aid continues.

Five months into the war in Gaza, with the loss of so many civilian lives, the displacement of almost three quarters of the population, the destruction of homes and infrastructure including schools, places of worship and medical facilities; and with the famine and disease which is unfolding as a result of the withholding of sufficient humanitarian aid, we call on the Israeli government to respect international law.

As social work members, we demand an end to the targeting of civilians, refugee camps and critical public services, including healthcare. We assert the right of Gazan civilians to public services, including clean water and sanitation. We also call on Israel to respect the rights of Gazan children under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which it is a signatory.

We demand that the UK government stops providing arms to Israel and call on the UK government and the Opposition to join calls for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. We call on our social work members to join protests and demonstrations in support of a ceasefire and to act to pressure politicians and decision makers to demand a ceasefire and an end to the killings of civilians and children in Gaza.

We further call for a renewed impetus from world leaders for an immediate ceasefire, peace and a political solution to the crisis, resulting in an end to the occupation and a contiguous Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel. To that end, we add our voice to calls for the UK government to recognise Palestine as an independent state.

We recognise that as this war comes to an end there will be a need for an enhanced social work and psychology services for all those traumatised by their experiences of powerlessness and insecurity, especially those already vulnerable through age or disability. We call for the reinstatement of social work and psychology services as quickly as possible and call on the UK and other western governments to provide sufficient aid to enable this to happen.