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Palestine solidarity

Report on new unions in Palestine

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This is a personal report on my relations with new Independent Democratic trade union movement in Palestine.

I first went to Palestine, in solidarity, in August 2002, just after the Israeli re-invasion of the West Bank.

On that occasion I started a link-up with the Ramallah branch of the PGFTU. They had recently had a huge increase in membership, because food parcels, money, and health coverage, paid for by money from Arab countries, was distributed through the PGFTU. Arafat wanted to use this Fateh controlled organisation.

The Secretary in Ramallah was in favour of membership elections in the union. In 2004 the unions Conference adopted this policy. This has never been carried out, and they have continued with the policy of distributing seats to the political organisations, mainly Fateh.

I held workshops in Ramallah on union democracy. A woman activist from Unison also held a workshop on democracy for women. These were for FIDE (Baathist) Party members of the PGFTU. I dealt with Workers Councils, and other forms of democracy, and the two day school was very successful.

The Ramallah Secretary, and member of the 8 person Executive, continued to argue for the implementation of the election resolution, and to clash with national secretary Shaheer Sahid. He was subsequently sacked from his union job, and expelled from the union.

In the meantime there was the development of the New Unions. These were sponsored by the Democracy and Workers Rights Centre(DWRC).

They had started off helping workers with legal cases against Israeli employers. They then had helped workers, in Palestine, with their employers, and out of that Committees were formed in workplaces.

These committees then started linking together to form industrial unions, in Health, Banks etc.

At this time I met several of these Committees, and talked to many of them over the period of their formation.

There were a small number of independent unions already in existence, for example the University Lecturers and Workers, and the Teachers Union.

The biggest problem for workers in Palestine was that the existing Union Federations, including the PGFTU, did nothing. They were controlled by Fateh and were therefore adjuncts of the Govt.

The new Unions had a short period of strength in Gaza, but with the destruction of the industry there, they were greatly weakened.

The sacked PGFTU Secretary joined the Unemployed Workers Union, which is big, particularly in Hebron.

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Many strikes were organised by the new Independent Democratic Unions, which because they were not controlled by a particular part, could fight against the Govt.

These strikes increased with the election of the Hamas Govt., because the EU boycott meant there was little money for teachers etc.. There was a long Hospital strike, over non-payment of wages.

There were many other problems for the workers, for example Bank workers, as were many others, paid in Jordanian Dinars, which has weakened against the Shekel. But they have to pay their bills in Shekels. The rising cost of living, and other problems, such as periods lost at checkpoints, have all set off struggles.

These new unions came together on 2007, to form a Federation of Independent Democratic Unions. I spoke at the Federations founding conference, in Ramallah.

Even after Hamas was removed from the west bank Govt. the struggles continued. Last year there was a huge teachers strike, I spoke at their main rally, but what was of interest was that so did all the leaders of the political parties in the Palestinian Legislative Council, including Fateh. This despite the fact that Abbas's Minister of education had called the strike illegal.

This tends to show how little support his undemocratic Govt. has.

So we have to decide our attitude to these new unions.

In their favour is that they are the only people leading strikes, they hold elections at least every 2 years, they contain members of all political parties, but are not controlled by one. They are mainly in the professions, but they contain the Unemployed Union, and the lowest paid of the hospital workers etc.

Problems are that they were mainly formed with the help of an NGO. But the main problem for us in relation to linking, plus solidarity work, is that they are not part of an International Federation, so the TUC, CGT etc. will have nothing to do with them.

But the fact that the PGFTU does nothing, gives us no choice.

We should still retain relations with PGFTU, because changed circumstances might create changes in them.

In the international Solidarity movement the election has forced organisations to not just do everything Fateh says, so is the case with the Trade Unions.