



WORKING PALESTINE

Covid-19, Labour, and Trade Unions
in the West Bank and Gaza Strip

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INTRODUCTION

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Mask factory, Gaza, 2020. Photo by: Mohammed Zaanoun.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on both workers and labour conditions across the globe. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs were lost worldwide through 2020—more than four times the number of jobs that disappeared during the 2008-2009 global financial crash. Large-scale redundancies and reduced working hours have caused a massive drop in workers' income, estimated at US\$3.7 trillion globally in 2020—around 4.4% of the world's GDP. But as with all crises, the effects of the pandemic have been experienced unevenly across different segments of the global working class. Hardest hit have been young workers, women, refugees and migrants, and those who work in the informal sector.

Globally, the measures taken in response to Covid-19 have illustrated the close relationship between effective public health measures and conditions of work, precarity, and poverty. Calls for people to self-isolate when sick, or the enforcement of longer periods of mandatory lockdowns, have proven extremely difficult for the many people who cannot easily shift their work online, or those in the service sector working with zero-hour contracts and in other kinds of temporary employment. In countries where most of the labour force is engaged in informal work or depends upon intermittent daily wages, as is the case in much of the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Asia—there is no feasible way that people can choose to

stay home or self-isolate for long periods of time. Workers in certain sectors—for example, agriculture, warehousing, food packing, nursing, and care, have carried a disproportionate share of sickness and exposure to the virus.

As with elsewhere around the world, Palestinian workers living in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) have experienced multiple challenges due to the pandemic and its associated mitigation measures. In the oPt, however, the events of the last 18 months have unfolded in the context of a captive, fragmented, and de-developed economy that has endured over five decades of Israeli military occupation. Conditions worsened considerably in January 2020, following US President Donald Trump's declaration of the so-called 'Deal of the Century', when Israel announced major annexation plans in the West Bank that would block Palestinian self-determination on any contiguous territory. The Palestinian Authority (PA) was also facing a major fiscal crisis in the period leading up to the pandemic, precipitated by Israel's withholding of tax payments, as well as dwindling levels of international aid. All this placed substantial constraint on the Palestinian response to the pandemic, particularly in the Gaza Strip where an on-going blockade has impeded the import of medicines, medical equipment, and vaccines.

At the same time, the pandemic emerged at a particularly critical moment in internal Palestinian politics. Over the last few years, growing popular anger has been directed at the open coordination between PA security forces and the Israeli occupation, as well as the PA's prioritisation of security sector spending over other social needs. Institutionally,

the PA was widely seen to be corrupt, nepotistic and increasingly authoritarian in its manner of rule. In the West Bank, this discontent manifested itself through a range of public sector protests and strikes, including teachers and doctors demanding wage increases after long periods of pay reductions due to the fiscal crisis. In Gaza, Hamas rule has also been marked by significant political repression, and very high levels of social and economic inequality. Large-scale protests against tax increases and rising consumer prices organised by the 'We Want to Live' movement across the Gaza Strip were violently repressed by the Hamas government in March 2019. The experience of the last 18 months has further eroded the popular legitimacy of ruling authorities in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip, deepening the overall crisis in Palestinian politics.

Given this political conjuncture, the present study explores the impact of the pandemic on workers across four key sectors of the Palestinian economy: health (West Bank and Gaza); education (West Bank and Gaza); agriculture (Gaza), and construction (West Bank). These sectors employ a large number of Palestinians in a wide variety of jobs, and each has been severely affected by the pandemic, lockdowns, and the ensuing economic slump. Utilising a labour-centred perspective, our research aims to capture what the pandemic has meant for these workers and their families, and to map the varied responses of labour activists and unions to the events of the last 18 months. In this manner, we seek to ask what the impact of the pandemic might be on the future trajectories of the labour movement in Palestine.

A Labour-Centred Perspective: Main Themes and Research Methodologies

Much research and analysis of the situation in the oPt adopts the lens of international law and human rights, emphasising the general impact of Israeli violence and the military occupation on Palestinian society. In contrast, relatively less work has been centred on questions of class, Palestinian labour and labour struggles. A consequence of this is that analyses tend to downplay or overlook the considerable polarisation of both wealth and socio-economic power that has developed in Palestinian society over recent decades. A labour-centred perspective foregrounds these differences in class power, helping to reveal the differential impact of the pandemic on Palestinian workers in comparison to wealthier layers of Palestinian society. Crucially, this raises a series of pressing questions around the current direction of Palestinian politics and the struggle against Israeli settler-colonialism.

The conception of labour used in this report does not simply refer to those individuals who hold jobs or who are formally employed. As we discuss in Section 2, unemployed workers make up a very large (and increasing) proportion of the Palestinian working class, and unemployment levels are particularly high for women and youth (especially in the Gaza Strip). A significant majority of Palestinian work is also informal and precarious, i.e., lacking any formal or permanent contract between the worker and employer. Even for Palestinians holding formal or more secure jobs (including in the public sector), many earn wages that are far below the poverty line and find it difficult to support their

families. Poverty, in other words, is not simply associated with being out of a job—the very high numbers of the ‘working poor’ in Palestine is essential to understanding how the pandemic has impacted labour, especially in a context where Palestinian workers continue to be denied freedom of movement, decent wages, and safe working conditions.

The findings of this report are drawn from six months of intensive field work in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. An interdisciplinary team of researchers carried out over forty semi-structured interviews with individual workers, trade union leaders, labour activists, and civil society organisations. These interviewees were selected to reflect workers of all levels and grades of work, as well as diversity across gender, age, and geographical location. Some of the key themes that these interviews addressed include:

- **The impact of the pandemic on workers and their families.** This includes direct and short-term effects of the pandemic (e.g., immediate job losses, reduction in wages, and the deterioration of work conditions), as well as expected medium and longer-term implications for livelihoods and economic security in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.
- **The intersection between the pandemic and the structural problems facing workers in each of the sectors.** Most importantly, this includes the continuing reality of Israeli occupation, which clearly served to reinforce and exacerbate the effects of the pandemic. Interviews also investigated workers' perceptions of the Palestinian Authority's response to the pandemic, most notably the Waqfet Izz fund.

- **The effectiveness of trade unions and various independent initiatives taken by workers during the pandemic.**

Interviews sought to investigate the responses to the pandemic and structural weaknesses of the Palestinian labour movement, (including the political division of the West Bank and Gaza Strip) and the legacy of earlier struggles and mobilisations by workers.

- **The perception of workers around the possible future paths of union and labour organising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.**

This includes the steps that should be taken to address the fragmented nature of unions, the weakness of union leadership, the undemocratic structures of many official Palestinian unions, and the lack of representation that affects a significant majority of Palestinian workers.

The insights drawn from these interviews are situated in a broader political economy analysis of class structures and Palestinian labour in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (see Section 2 below). This includes the continuing fragmentation of Palestinian territory, which has been a hallmark of Israeli settler-colonialism since 1948 and has produced captive and dependent Palestinian labour markets closely tied to the needs of Israeli capitalism. Since the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords, the Palestinian economy in the oPt has been highly dependent on aid and international transfers, one consequence of this is the PA's endorsement of a development strategy fully aligned with the neoliberal precepts of international financial institutions. All of this has led to extraordinary levels of unemployment, informality and endemic poverty across the West Bank and Gaza

Strip. These pre-existing structural conditions are crucial to understanding the impact of the pandemic on Palestinian workers and conditions of labour.

Labour Movements and Solidarity

An important focus of this report is the effect of the pandemic on Palestinian unions and the ability of workers to organise. In Section 2, we briefly survey some of the earlier history of the Palestinian labour movement—from pre-1948 historic Palestine, through to the 1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the First Intifada (1987-1992), the subsequent Oslo negotiations, and the establishment of the PA. The legacy of this earlier history directly bears on the current state of Palestinian unions and was frequently referenced by many people interviewed for this report.

The role and status of Palestinian unions changed significantly following the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994. Since that time, there have been important shifts in the nature of the Palestinian political economy and the class structures of the oPt, as well as further territorial fragmentation following the division of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 2007. Given this context, workers and activists interviewed for this report often expressed anger and frustration with the official trade unions, pointing to their undemocratic structures and lack of rank-and-file activity. Many argued that unions have become essentially subordinated to the interests of the ruling authorities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and that both Fatah and Hamas use this division as a way of weakening political opposition. Women and youth remain the most marginalised workers, yet union leaderships remain dominated

by elderly men. Unionisation rates are extremely low, estimated at around 17.6% of employed workers in 2019, and a large number of Palestinian workers lack any kind of union representation at all (particularly in the informal sector).

These kinds of problems are not unique to Palestine. The findings of this report highlight the need for a renewal of Palestinian unions and the labour movement, based upon the genuine demands of workers rather than the factional interests of the dominant political parties. This does not mean that union activists should be apolitical. Rather, several interviewees spoke of the importance of a new kind of political unionism that seeks to lead wider community struggles around health, education, and housing, etc., while also playing an important role in revitalising the Palestinian national struggle. Indeed, in recent years, several inspiring examples of labour struggles in Palestine have illustrated the potential for independent, rank-and-file mobilisations that take up wider social demands and can challenge entrenched union leaderships.

All of this carries important implications for global labour solidarity with Palestine and Palestinian workers. Historically, international trade unions have taken courageous stances in support of Palestinian rights, including numerous motions endorsing the international campaign of boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS). Rank and file trade union activists across the world have worked tirelessly to educate and mobilise the wider trade union movement to take effective direct action in solidarity with Palestinian workers. Most recently, during the military assault on Gaza in May 2021, members of the Italian union L'Unione

Sindacale di Base (USB) in the Tuscan city of Livorno refused to load a shipment of weapons onto a vessel bound for Israel. The South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (SATAWU) followed suit and refused to offload a Zim Shanghai ship owned by Israeli company Zim Lines. In light of such actions, we hope that this report will help provide international trade unionists with a better understanding of the contemporary conditions of Palestinian workers, and encourage them to establish direct worker-to-worker solidarity initiatives.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

PALESTINIAN WORKERS AND A CAPTIVE ECONOMY

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

Palestinian Workers and a Captive Economy



Tree uprooting, Nabi Elias, West Bank, 2017. Photo by: Keren Manor.

Following the Israeli occupation in 1967, Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were progressively incorporated into the Israeli economy as a source of cheap and highly exploitable labour. Commuting daily into Israel to work in sectors such as construction, agriculture, and industry, Palestinians filled the lowest rungs of the Israeli labour market and covered some of the labour shortfall caused by prolonged military service for the Jewish citizens of Israel. Through the 1970s, this labour helped underpin an economic expansion in Israel that was dubbed the "Palestinian boom."

By the mid-1980s, Palestinians from the oPt made up around 7% of the Israeli labour force.

Around one-third of the West Bank labour force worked in Israel in 1985, with around half this number working in the construction industry—a vital sector for the large business conglomerates that sat at the heart of the Israeli economy. The integration of Palestinian labour into the Israeli economy not only served Israel's economic needs, but further solidified Israel's control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

For Palestinians living in the oPt, these processes meant that a generation of youth became wage earners with independent sources of income for the first time. In 1970, only 43% of the employed labour force in the West Bank was comprised of wage earners. By 1987 this had increased to 63%. Money from Palestinians employed in Israel represented around one-quarter of

Palestinian GNP in the oPt between 1975 and 1985. Growing levels of urbanisation occurred as Palestinian families were forced off the land by Israel's control of agricultural resources, with many seeking work and residence in towns and cities. Other Palestinians migrated to the Gulf, where they worked as teachers, as engineers and in other skilled positions.

These processes transformed the oPt from a largely rural and agricultural way of life into a much more proletarianised and urban society. Traditional authority structures began to break down.

The political implications of these changes were reinforced by the growth of the Palestinian national movement outside the country—most notably the Palestinian resistance movements that had shaken the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan through the 1970s, and then fought the Israeli occupation and their domestic collaborators in Lebanon. Palestinian political factions brought this politicised atmosphere to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, particularly among the generation of youth attending university for the first time in their families' history.

The Early Palestinian Labour Movement

The emergence of the Palestinian labour movement precedes the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, with Palestinian trade unions and labour organisers playing an important role during the 1936-1939 Arab Revolt and also in the Second World War, when large numbers of Palestinians were employed by the British war industry in Palestine.

These early Palestinian unions were primarily organised by Communist activists. They operated in a fraught relationship with the Histadrut (the General Federation of Jewish Labour), an organisation set up in 1920 and which mostly sought to exclude Palestinian workers as part of its strategic aim of promoting 'Hebrew Labour'.

With the division of Historic Palestine following 1948, the territorial continuity of early Palestinian labour organising was severed, with the West Bank and Gaza Strip coming under different legal jurisdictions and governing regimes.

The legacy of this separation remains an important challenge for the Palestinian labour movement today; many Palestinians from the West Bank, for example, continue to commute on a daily basis to work inside Israel, yet there are no organisations that effectively organise in both the West Bank and Israel that can represent Palestinian workers vis-à-vis their Israeli employers (see Section 7).

After the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, trade union activity was banned in Gaza until 1979.

In the West Bank and Jerusalem, labour activists faced heavy repression by the Israeli military and security forces, including arrest and deportation. There were, however, successful attempts at union organising in these areas, although unions remained relatively small and centred on urban areas such as Jerusalem and the larger West Bank towns until the 1970s.

As part of this resurgence of the national movement, leading Palestinian parties—including Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), and the Palestine Communist Party (PCP), sought to establish their own labour ‘fronts’ and mobilise workers inside Palestine. These activities helped politicise a new generation of young workers and forced activists to confront important and practical questions around how to meaningfully organise workers on day-to-day issues. However, labour movement organising tended to be highly factionalised and driven by differing orientations towards the national struggle and key strategic political debates. An overarching tension that confronted all labour organising through this period was how to think about class and labour mobilisation in the context of the wider Palestinian national struggle. As several activists interviewed for this report noted, through the 1980s the national movement was to become increasingly dominated by a wealthier Palestinian class (both in and outside of Palestine) and dependent upon funding from other Arab states (especially the Gulf countries). As with national liberation movements in other parts of the world, the debate around independent working-class mobilisation versus national unity was ongoing, and often times working class demands could be dismissed or subordinated to the putative needs of the national struggle.

The social changes in the West Bank and Gaza Strip were important factors underlying the onset of the First Intifada in December 1987, a prolonged and large-scale uprising that lasted into the early 1990s and rapidly stamped itself on popular consciousness as a turning point in the Palestinian struggle.

Palestinian workers played a prominent and crucial role in the First Intifada. Palestinian unions mobilised, undertook strike actions, and helped support popular protests and demonstrations against the Israeli military. The number of Palestinians working in Israel dropped significantly, especially on days of general strikes. Trade unions offices were shut down by the Israeli military, and numerous labour activists were deported during the uprising. Nonetheless, while unions played an important role during the Intifada, the labour movement remained divided along factional lines. Three different labour federations existed in the oPt during the early 1990s; a federation controlled by Fatah in the Gaza Strip, and two in the West Bank—one controlled by the DFLP, and another that was an alliance of unions dominated by Fatah; the PFLP and the Palestinian People's Party (a party that evolved out of the PCP). Many of these unions were small and existed primarily for factional reasons; one study estimated that up to 161 of these “factional” unions were operating in the West Bank by 1993, with only 6,000 workers between them.

The Oslo Accords

The First Intifada came to an end with the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Oslo built heavily upon Israel's policy logic of the preceding decades, in which it sought to cultivate a Palestinian leadership that would administer ‘self-rule’ in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Within the Oslo Accords framework, this was to take place under the leadership of the PLO, which had returned from exile proclaiming that a Palestinian state would soon be established in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The returning PLO cadre helped to constitute the Palestinian Authority (PA), a Palestinian government

with limited powers that were elaborated in Oslo and other agreements signed during the 1990s. Most significantly, the Oslo process signified the further fragmentation of the Palestinian people, narrowing the question of Palestine to negotiations around small slithers of land in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Palestinian citizens of Israel and the large Palestinian population living as refugees outside Palestine—who together constitute the majority of the Palestinian people—were progressively excluded from the national struggle.

Oslo divided the West Bank into Areas A, B and C. The PA was given autonomy in Area A, at that stage constituting around 3% of the West Bank where 20 % of the Palestinian population lived. Another 70% of the Palestinian population lived in Area B comprising 24% of the West Bank, over which the PA and Israel shared joint authority. Israel fully controlled Area C, with more than 70% of the territory. Through this division, the Oslo Accords and subsequent agreements essentially transferred frontline responsibility for Israeli security to a Palestinian face, in this case the PA, while all strategic levers, particularly economic ones, remained in Israeli hands.

The means of this control had been largely set out in the preceding decades. While illegal Israeli settlements were designated a 'final status' issue under the accords, i.e., to be negotiated over a longer period, the Israeli government launched a massive settlement expansion immediately after signing the accords by offering large economic incentives for settlers to relocate to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The number of settlers doubled between 1994 and the beginning of the 2000s. Focusing on strategic locations such as hill-tops and

water aquifers, large settlement blocs cut across the West Bank, preventing the natural growth of Palestinian population centres. The settlements were to be connected by another Oslo-era innovation, the so-called bypass roads, restricted-access highways that connect settlement blocs with one another and with Israeli cities.

The net effect of these measures meant that the 90% of the Palestinian population living in Areas A and B were confined to a patchwork of isolated enclaves, with three main clusters in the northern, central, and southern sections of the West Bank separated from one another by settlement blocs. Travel between these areas could be shut down at any time by the Israeli military. All entry to and from Areas A and B, as well as the determination of residency rights in these areas, was under Israeli authority. Israel also controlled the vast majority of water aquifers, all underground resources, and all air space in the West Bank. Whereas Israel used close to 500 million cubic meters of water annually by the late 1990s, Palestinians in the West Bank used only 105 million. A similar structure existed in the Gaza Strip, with the PA given 'autonomy' and Israel retaining control over settlements and military bases. Permits were even required for Gazan fisherfolk to use the sea. Likewise, the entry and exit of goods and people from the Gaza Strip came under Israeli control. Movement between Gaza and the West Bank was made virtually impossible, with Israel rendering the two areas separate entities.

A Disposable Reserve Army of Labour

As the movement restrictions took hold, the nature of Palestinian labour began to shift in tandem with the evolving system

of control. Seeing the impact of labour organising during the first Intifada, Israel had attempted to replace Palestinian labour from the West Bank and Gaza Strip with foreign migrant workers. Movement restrictions ensured Palestinian labour became a 'tap' that could be turned on and off, depending on the economic and political situation and the needs of the Israeli economy. Between 1992 and 1996, Palestinian employment (from the oPt) in Israel declined from 116,000 workers (33% of the Palestinian labour force) to 28,100 (6% of the Palestinian labour force). Earnings from work in Israel collapsed from 25% of Palestinian GNP in 1992 to 6 % in 1996. Between 1997 and 1999, an upturn in the Israeli economy saw the numbers of Palestinian workers increase to approximately pre-1993 levels, but the proportion of the Palestinian labour force working in Israel had nonetheless been almost halved compared with a decade earlier. These patterns confirm that Palestinian labour had increasingly become a captive and highly flexible, reserve army for Israeli capitalism.

At the same time, many Palestinians were dependent on public sector employment within the PA, or on transfer payments made by the PA to families of prisoners, martyrs or the needy. By 2000, public sector employment made up nearly 25% of total employment in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a level that had almost doubled since the mid-1990s. More than half the PA's expenditure went to salaries of these public sector workers. The other major area of employment was the private sector, particularly in the area of services. This was overwhelmingly dominated by very small, family-owned businesses (over 90% of Palestinian private sector businesses employ fewer than ten people) as a result of decades of

Israeli de-development policies.

The population's heavy dependency on the PA for basic subsistence took place alongside the Palestinian economy's increasing subordination to Israel. Israel's complete control over all external borders—codified in the 1994 Paris Protocol, an economic agreement between the PA and Israel—meant that it was impossible for the Palestinian economy to develop meaningful trade relations with a third country. The Paris Protocol gave Israel the final say on what the PA was allowed to import and export, and further increased the dependency of the Palestinian economy on Israeli services, such as water and electricity. The West Bank and Gaza Strip became highly reliant on imported goods, with total imports ranging between 70 and 80% of GDP. By 2005, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics estimated that 73.9% of all imports to the oPt originated in Israel, while 87.9% of all oPt exports were destined for Israel.

With no economic sovereignty, the PA was heavily dependent on external capital flows, including international aid and loans. Much of the PA's total revenue came from indirect taxes collected by the Israeli government on goods imported from abroad and destined for the occupied territories. This tax was collected by the Israeli government and then transferred to the PA each month according to a process outlined in the Paris Protocol. If the Israeli government chose to withhold payment of this money for political reasons, then the PA would face a major fiscal crisis. Indeed, as of 2020, taxes collected by Israel make up around half of the PA's income, and according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 17.8% of this tax revenue

(equivalent to 3.7% of GDP) actually ends up in the Israeli treasury.

The other primary source of the PA's income came from aid and foreign disbursements by the United States, Europe, and Arab governments. Indeed, figures for aid measured as a percentage of gross national income indicated that the West Bank/ Gaza Strip was among the most 'aid dependent' of all regions in the world.

These flows of external capital not only further cemented the PA's dependence on Israel, but also helped to facilitate the transfer of wealth to Israeli companies. The West Bank was a captive market for many Israeli goods—and because Palestinian consumption was essentially funded through external capital flows it was extremely profitable. Foreign aid, in other words, was as much aid to Israel as it was to Palestinian society. There were additional aspects to Israel's economic control, for example, the fact that there was no Palestinian currency meant that the monetary system was tied to decisions of the Israeli central bank. One consequence was a very high inflation rate in the West Bank, with high prices benefiting Israeli companies that sold to Palestinian consumers.

The West Bank-Gaza Split

The implications of this system of control were to become fully apparent through the first decades of the 21st century. Following a second uprising that began in September 2000 and lasted approximately four years, Israeli control was further developed through the construction of a Wall (approximately two-thirds of which is now complete), and a network of settlements, bypass roads and checkpoints that encircle

Palestinian towns and villages in the West Bank. Palestinian transit between these isolated areas would be regulated by a complicated system of permits and movement restrictions that could be imposed by Israeli military forces whenever needed. These population islands would be given the trappings of autonomy, but effective control would remain in the hands of the Israeli state.

With the death of PLO chairman Yasser Arafat in 2004, control over the PA and PLO passed into the hands of Mahmoud Abbas, otherwise known as Abu Mazen. Abu Mazen's Fatah party was rivalled by a second political faction, the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas). Hamas sought to convert its political gains made during the Intifada into its own political power—and came out strongly against the path of Oslo-type negotiations with which Abu Mazen was so closely associated. The organisation chose not to contest the presidential elections for the PA in 2005 and, as a result, Abu Mazen won these comfortably. But Hamas did decide to contest the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), which were eventually held in January 2006 after being initially postponed by Abu Mazen. Election results confirmed a massive swing toward Hamas. Hamas won 74 of 132 seats, compared to 45 for Fatah.

In the months after Hamas won the election, a national unity government was set up between Hamas and Fatah. However, Abu Mazen dissolved this apparatus for joint rule, shortly after Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip on June 14, 2007. Separate authorities formed in Gaza (Hamas-controlled) and the West Bank (PA-controlled). The complete separation of the two territories was sealed by an unprecedented Israeli blockade of Gaza, controlling

all movement, entry of goods, and fuel supplies to the more than 1.4 million inhabitants living in this area.

Following the split between Fatah and Hamas in 2006–2007, Israel and other foreign states moved quickly to shore up their support for the PA in the West Bank, which was initially headed by Abu Mazen as president and a former IMF official, Salam Fayyad, as prime minister. Two central preconditions underpinned this foreign support:

(1) the PA's agreement to fully engage with Israel in security coordination and to oversee control over the Palestinian population in the West Bank with the support of foreign security training.

(2) To implement a set of neoliberal economic measures that prioritised market-led, private-sector growth.

The Hamas-led government in the Gaza Strip, where around 40% of the Palestinian population in the oPt live, did not receive direct support from Western states or Israel, but was instead funded by other Arab states, notably Qatar. Five major wars waged by Israel against the Gaza Strip (2008; 2012; 2014; 2018, and 2021)—and a 14-year land, sea, and air blockade of the tiny territory by Israel and Egypt—have caused a massive deterioration in living standards and thousands of casualties. Hamas rule changed the economic dynamics in the Gaza Strip, with a new political and economic elite emerging around the limited opportunities connected to foreign aid and goods moving through underground tunnels between Gaza and Egypt. For workers in the Gaza Strip, the division between Fatah and Hamas has been particularly harsh. Two authorities operate in one location, and different

labour laws may be applied within the same sector. Wage cuts are used by factions against each other, and as we detail in following sections of this report, the division has had a severe impact on the Palestinian trade union movement.

Palestinian Workers on the Eve of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Further territorial fragmentation of Palestinian society—the separation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and Israel's on-going control over movement between isolated enclaves in the West Bank — has been paralleled by the increasingly fragmented structure of Palestinian labour. Palestinian workers are enmeshed in numerous kinds of employment relations that are governed by a variety of different laws, institutional settings, and border regimes. These relationships can be highly localised on one hand, or more akin to short-term migrant labour flows on the other. A multiplicity of different actors: labour brokers; employers; the Israeli military; the PA; trade unions; lawyers; security forces, and so forth — control and facilitate flows of Palestinian labour. Palestinian labour markets are also sharply hierarchical; divided by gender, age, educational background, and geography.

Broadly speaking, the demand for Palestinian labour comes from three main sectors. First, in line with the historical patterns discussed above, Palestinian workers remain a significant source of cheap labour for the Israeli economy, with around 1 in 8 Palestinian workers (13.2% in 2019) employed in Israel, or in Israeli settlements in the West Bank. These workers are overwhelmingly male and are concentrated in the construction industry (64%), manufacturing and quarries (13%), or hotels and restaurants (11%).

According to official Palestinian statistics, all these workers are from the West Bank, although interviews conducted for this research have indicated that numerous Gazans actually work in Israel through applying for 'trader visas'. Due to the different border regimes in place throughout the oPt—including the Wall and military checkpoints—Palestinian workers employed in Israel or the settlements must navigate a complex bureaucratic system where the line between 'legal' and 'illegal' work is often fuzzy.

Over the last decade, a layer of middle-men or permit 'brokers' have developed to connect Palestinian workers with Israeli employers.⁴⁷ Workers are forced to pay up to one-third of their wages to these brokers. However, despite these deductions and exploitative working conditions, the availability of jobs and relatively higher wages for work in Israel and the illegal settlements push workers to take these jobs. The average wage for workers in Israel and the settlements was NIS 254.4 per day in 2019—more than double that in the West Bank and four times that in Gaza.⁴⁸

Brokers and Permits

Only Palestinian workers who obtain a work permit can legally work for employers in Israel and the settlements. Permits regulate Palestinian workers integration into the Israeli job market, and in theory are meant to guarantee better working conditions and access to social benefits. However, according to the ILO, in 2019 only 15.8% of Palestinian workers with permits were paid sick leave and around 21.34% received paid annual leave.⁴⁹

Permits are only granted after a security check, and at the request of an Israeli-registered employer. In a position of power, Israeli employers often force workers to buy permits in exchange of access to work.

Around 45% of Palestinians with permits obtain them through brokers and, in 2018 alone, brokers earned NIS 427 million (US\$ 132.56 million) from these sales. Most of these permits (75.7%) were sold to construction sector workers. On average, a permit costs NIS 2,370 a month, meaning that average monthly salary for these workers amounts to a little over NIS 2,000 (after social benefit deductions). Many Palestinians working in Israel do so without permits.

Furthermore, despite imposing a heavy financial burden on workers, permits are no guarantee of employment. 72% of workers who purchase their permits are either traded off between employers (leaving them with no clear sense of their employer's identity or proof of employment) or must find work independently—often on an irregular basis.

It has long been argued that this illicit market served to bind Palestinian workers to a specific Israeli employer. In December 2020, reforms were introduced to curb permit trading, including enabling workers to move between employers in the same sector. However, permit brokering is a symptom of a much deeper form of structural exploitation. Indeed, months after the introduction of these reforms, 34% of workers in the construction sector were still buying their way into work.

The second major employer of Palestinian labour is the public sector in the oPt. Across the West Bank and Gaza Strip, around 21% of all workers were employed in the public sector in 2019 (15% of the labour force in the West Bank and 36% in the Gaza Strip). As a result of the economic restructuring of the PA since 2008, the proportion of workers in the public sector has fallen slightly, although this remains an important area of work for many Palestinian households, particularly for Palestinian women who are disproportionally employed by the PA. As a number of interviewees for this report noted, the heavy reliance on the PA for employment—ultimately funded through donor aid and Israeli transfer payments—has been a major factor in discouraging political mobilisation against the PA. At the same time, unionisation rates are much higher in the public sector, and there have been several important strikes by public sector employees such as teachers and doctors. Public sector wages are generally very low, averaging NIS 110.8 per day in 2019 (NIS 120.6 in the West Bank and NIS 93.4 in Gaza), and certainly much lower than those in Israel or the settlements. Indeed, more than one in four households that depend upon public sector wages were living in poverty according to the last national census in 2017.

The final major employer in the oPt is the private sector. Around two-thirds (66.1%) of Palestinian workers are employed in the private sector (67% in the West Bank and 64% in the Gaza Strip). While most of these workers are employed full-time, only 32% have a contract (34.8% in the West Bank and 24.6% in the Gaza Strip), indicative of the very high prevalence of informal sector work throughout the oPt's private sector. The vast majority of private sector workers lack any kind

of benefits provided by their employer—including pensions (71% with no pension), sick leave (68%), or health insurance (84%). In conjunction with these poor employment conditions, private sector workers have the lowest wage levels in the oPt (NIS 96.6 per day on average). Strikingly, a little less than one-third (30.2%) of all private sector workers in the oPt received less than the minimum wage (NIS 1,450 per month) in 2019. This figure includes 9.5% of private sector employees in the West Bank and 80.4% of those in the Gaza Strip.

Unemployment and Household Poverty

Alongside these broad employment patterns, the oPt is also marked by very high levels of unemployment—an essential factor to the wider conditions of Palestinian work and household fragility just prior to the pandemic.

Between 2010 and 2019, overall unemployment in the oPt increased from 21.4% to 25.3%. By 2019, Palestinian unemployment rates ranked as the second highest in the world, just behind South Africa. As bad as these aggregate figures are, they also hide significant geographical disparities. Unemployment in the Gaza Strip stood at 45.1% in 2019—by far the worst in the world—compared to 14.6% in the West Bank. Within the West Bank, labour market opportunities were much more limited in Jenin (21.3% unemployment in 2019) and Bethlehem (22.9%) compared to Ramallah/Al-Bireh (9.5%), or Jerusalem (6.8%). Unemployment levels also tended to be much higher among refugee populations, especially those living in refugee camps.

Together with the massive disparities between the West Bank and Gaza Strip,

unemployment in the oPt is characterised by sharp inequalities based on gender and age. Between 2010 and 2019, the female unemployment rate in the oPt almost doubled, reaching 41.1% of Palestinian women over 15 years of age—the highest level in the world. As expected, conditions are much worse in the Gaza Strip, where female unemployment reached 63.7% in 2019 (up from 51.1% in 2015). Strikingly, only 17.6% of paid jobs in the non-agricultural sector in Palestine were held by women in 2019.

Similar patterns can be seen for youth. In 2019, 40.2% of youth aged 15-24 years were out of work. Youth unemployment is particularly prevalent among women, with 67% of young Palestinian women unemployed in 2019. Unlike many other parts of the world, unemployment is higher for young people with a tertiary education—in 2019, over half (52%) of Palestinian youth holding a university degree were unemployed (68% of female graduates and 35% of male graduates).

Unemployment rates are calculated in relation to those who are actively looking for work, not the entire population. For this reason, another important factor to consider is the Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR)—the proportion of the working age population who are either employed or who are seeking employment. In 2019, the LFPR in the oPt was 44%, meaning that less than half of the working age population were counted as part of the labour market. This figure ranked as the tenth lowest LFPR in the world. Once again there are sharp gender inequalities in the LFPR: only 18.1% of Palestinian women were participating in the labour force in 2019 (the fourth lowest level in the world).

Such high levels of unemployment and low LFPR are indicative of heightened competition for jobs and place downward pressures on wages and working conditions. This is one reason for the significant levels of poverty found among Palestinians who actually hold a job—the so-called 'working poor'. Indeed, the last Palestinian census in 2017 found that around one-in-four households headed by someone with a job were under the poverty line, and just over 12% were living in what is called 'deep poverty'—i.e., unable to afford basic household needs of food, clothing, and shelter. As expected, the numbers of working poor are much higher in the Gaza Strip, where one in every three households headed by someone with a job were living in deep poverty in 2017. Crucially, these figures are now quite dated, and do not capture the impact of Israel's routine bombing of the Gaza Strip or the on-going blockade since 2017, and thus do not fully convey the depth of the social crisis in the area just prior to the pandemic itself.

These large numbers of working poor are particularly important to highlight because of the very high dependency ratio in the oPt—the proportion of the elderly and child populations relative to those aged between 15-64. Because each person who works is responsible for supporting a significant number of dependents—the average household size is 5.2 persons in the West Bank and 6.1 in the Gaza Strip—low wages are not just an individual matter, but a major cause of wider household poverty. Moreover, any increase in the numbers of those unable to find work puts significant stress on family budgets and accentuates the vulnerability of households at moments of crisis.

TIMELINE AND IMPACT OF COVID -19 IN PALESTINE

TIMELINE AND IMPACT OF COVID-19 in Palestine



Gaza, 2020. Photo by: Mohammed Zaanoun.

The foregoing discussion confirms that Palestinian workers entered 2020 in an environment structured by decades of de-development and a weakened capacity to deal with the multiple crises emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic. This was not simply a public health emergency. Faced with very high levels of unemployment, precarious working conditions and endemic poverty, the necessary measures taken to mitigate the pandemic served to worsen the pre-existing problems faced by workers across the oPt. As has been observed in other contexts, the most vulnerable sections of Palestinian workers were hardest hit by the pandemic and associated public health measures, such as lockdown and workplace closures.

The first Palestinian Covid-19 cases were discovered in Bethlehem on 5 March 2020, among Greek tourists visiting the area. In response, a state of emergency was declared by Presidential Decree which shut schools, universities, mosques, and churches, and led to extended closures until 25 May 2020. A second wave of the pandemic began at the end of June, and new restrictions on movement and workplace closures were introduced in early July 2020. However, cases continued to grow, eventually peaking in mid-October. In the West Bank, a third wave began in mid-November 2020 and continued through to late April 2021, while the Gaza Strip entered its third wave late August 2021. As of 15 September 2021, a total of 397,575 cases had been recorded in the oPt (211,973 in the WB, 40,415 in Jerusalem and 145,187 in the GS), with a total of 4,067 deaths.

Covid-19 Cases

Overall, Covid-19 case data for the oPt significantly understates the number of actual cases, due to the lack of testing capacity. Indeed, during the second half of 2020, the positivity rate in the oPt was running at around 20%, meaning that one in five tests were recording a positive result. This was one of the highest positivity rates in the world, far exceeding WHO guidelines which stated that any positivity rate over 5% indicated the uncontrolled spread of the infection.

In December 2020, testing capacity in the Gaza Strip capped at around 3,000 tests per day because of the limited number of PCR machines. The Ministry of Health (MoH) central laboratory in Gaza was forced to suspend testing for the virus, as testing kits were fully depleted. At the time, positivity rates in Gaza were running at 30%, and around 20% of those who tested positive were being hospitalised.

The closures implemented through March-May 2020 had a very serious impact on the Palestinian economy. The World Bank notes that the contraction in economic activity during the second quarter of 2020 (April-June) was one of the largest on record, dropping by 19.5% in comparison to the same period in 2019. Private consumption shrunk by almost 20% year-on-year, and more than two-thirds of firms surveyed in April 2020 by the Palestinian Monetary Authority for its monthly Business Cycle Index report were shut as a result of the closures.

According to the Palestinian Federation of Industries, by July 2020 only 2,440 of the West Bank's 7,262 factories were in partial or full operation, with production capacity decreasing from 91% to 25% and the workforce reduced from 68,690 to 12,483. In Gaza, of 1,865 operational factories pre-Covid-19, only 1,224 remained in partial operation with the number of workers decreasing from 21,610 to 9,655.

The tourism and hospitality sector was also struck hard with an estimated 10,000 workers losing their jobs.⁷⁶ In 2018, some 37,700 workers were employed in this sector, constituting 4% of the total workforce: 29,000 workers in the WB (4%) and 8,700 in Gaza (3%).⁷⁷ According to the Gaza Hotels and Tourist Restaurants Commission chairman Salah Abu Hasira; "about 5,000 workers in tourist establishments in the Gaza Strip – who support about 25,000 people – are now unemployed without any other source of income." These losses reduced the purchasing power of households in Gaza and indirectly affected other economic sectors dependent on the circulation of these earnings.

Household Impact in Gaza

The impact of the 2020 economic downturn in the context of an already stagnating economy was devastating to households in Gaza. A November 2020 report by Islamic Relief found:

- The monthly income of Gazan workers had decreased by almost 90% (from US\$224 to US\$29) since the beginning of the pandemic.
- 60% of Gazan residents were unable to afford basic food and medicine.
- 82% of those surveyed were facing mental health issues such as anxiety and stress.

- 80% of small-scale agricultural workers had lost their jobs.

- 74% of residents surveyed didn't have consistent access to places selling fruit and vegetables.

- 92% of people surveyed stated they had not received any governmental or non-governmental cash assistance since the beginning of the pandemic, and only 42% could access or afford protective material such as facemasks.⁷⁹

Economic activity picked up following the end of the closure in May 2020. Nonetheless, the overall impact of the pandemic through 2020 was very severe, with per capita gross domestic product (GDP) falling by just under 14% —the largest annual drop since 2002, when a series of prolonged curfews and closures were imposed on Palestinian towns and villages during the Second Intifada.

For Palestinian workers, the measures taken in response to the pandemic had a devastating effect on conditions of labour, significantly exacerbating pre-existing inequality and marginalisation. During the second quarter of 2020, an estimated 121,000 Palestinians lost their jobs, of this number, 96,000 were working in the oPt and 25,000 were working in Israel.⁸⁰ A survey conducted by humanitarian agencies and the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics in June and August 2020 found that 61% of main income earners in the West Bank and 31% in Gaza Strip did not receive any wages during the period of the lockdown.⁸¹

Overall:

- Unemployment increased to 27.4% in 2020, while unemployment among youth aged 15-24 years jumped to 42.1% (36.6% for males and 70.0% for females).
- In Gaza 71.6% of 15-24 youth were unemployed in 2020 (66.2% for males and 92.0% of females).
- The labour force participation rate dropped to 41.3%, the lowest level in a decade. The decline in labour force participation was particularly sharp in Gaza, where only 35.3% of the working age population were counted as part of the labour market (a 5.6%-point decline from 2019).
- The oPt's employment-to-population ratio, an indicator that measures what proportion of the working age population is employed, fell to 31.1% in 2020—the second lowest level in the world.

The ILO has pointed out that standard measures of labour market conditions do not fully convey the impact of the pandemic on labour. Unemployment figures, for example, do not include workers who remain at home during workplace closures, despite the fact these workers may not have worked for months at a time. For this reason, the ILO has suggested that a better indicator of the pandemic's impact on labour is the total number of working-hours that have been lost, a measure that reflects both employment losses as well as any drop in the hours worked by those who are employed. Total losses in working-hours can also be converted into full-time equivalent (FTE) of jobs lost, which, as the ILO notes, "provides a more accurate picture of the extent of damage to the labour market caused by the pandemic than changes in the traditional employment and unemployment indicators."

According to these alternative measures, the ILO estimates that total working-hours in the oPt fell by 15.8% in 2020. This was one of the worst percentage declines anywhere in the world, and nearly double the global average loss of 8.8%. In the Gaza Strip, there was a 23.3% decline in working hours; the equivalent figure in the West Bank was 13.9%. Working hour losses were much larger for Palestinian women, who suffered a 21.1% decline (compared to 15.1% for men). Worst hit were women workers in Gaza, who lost more than one-third of their working hours (36.5%) in 2020.⁸⁷ Based on these figures, the ILO calculates that the equivalent of 161,000 full-time jobs were lost in the oPt during 2020.⁸⁸ The enormity of these job losses is made evident when placed alongside total employment in the oPt: in 2019, just over 1 million Palestinians were considered as employed.

Response of the Palestinian Authority

Facing a fiscal crisis and declining donor aid well before the Covid-19 pandemic, the PA's response on the economic level was widely seen as chaotic and haphazard.⁸⁹ While the focus was on health measures, there was no overall national emergency plan to deal with the economic impact of the pandemic, nor a national furlough plan to directly support workers impacted by lockdowns.

Instead, PA economic policies largely focused on supporting large private businesses, such as exempting investors from new company registration fees for 2020 and providing transport companies with a one-time 25% reduction in licensing fees. Despite announcement of support to small businesses, protests by merchants and shop owners took place against what were seen as the arbitrary nature of measures taken by the PA.

The PA's Ongoing Fiscal Crisis

For the PA, the pandemic highlighted the fiscal restraints that had been imposed by Israel since the signing of the Oslo Accords. In March 2019, Israel had begun reducing the clearance revenue it transferred to the PA by US\$12 million per month, claiming that this amount was spent on the families of political prisoners and martyrs. The PA initially responded to this by halting security co-ordination, but this was later resumed and Israel transferred just over US\$1.08 billion that it owed (a figure 7% lower than the 2019 clearance revenue due to a drop in imports and VAT). At the same time, donor support to the PA budget has declined significantly over recent years, falling from 27% of GDP in 2008 to 3.5% in 2019.

All of this severely constrained the PA's fiscal capacity during the pandemic. One consequence was a large increase in domestic borrowing during 2020. By the end of 2020, domestic bank debt reached US\$2.3 billion, up from US\$1.6 billion at the end of 2019. By December 2020, borrowing by the PA and its employees accounted for 40% of total banking credits. Total public debt reached US\$3.5 billion by the third quarter 2020, a 24% increase compared to end-2019.⁹⁴

The major initiative taken by the PA was the Waqfet Izz [Stand in Dignity] scheme, launched on 2 April 2020, which appealed to the private sector to collect donations for families affected by the deteriorating economic situation. The fund set a target of 20 million Jordanian Dinars (JD). As several interviewees for this research pointed out, Waqfet Izz was largely framed as signalling the 'good will' of Palestinian big business, and the amount raised paled in comparison to overall private sector profits during the pandemic. The PA assigned responsibility for the fund to a board of directors formed of thirty Palestinian business leaders and major corporations. However, after two months the fund had only collected 12.5 million JD, approximately 62% of the target.⁹⁵

Unable to raise funds from the private sector, Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh announced that two days of salary would be deducted from PA employees. After protest he suggested this would be voluntary, but insisted that those who did not want to

donate should inform their managers, thus putting the onus on workers. Similarly, employees in a number of banks were pushed to donate a percentage of their wages or savings to the fund. In this way, the burden of fund collection for Waqfet Izz was placed on workers themselves.

The Waqfet Izz fund stipulated that households affected by Covid-19 were to receive between NIS 500-800, prioritising those in most need, especially workers whose jobs had been cut. The collected donations were also to be used to support the Palestinian Ministry of Health confront the pandemic. However, while over 270,000 workers registered online to receive financial assistance, only 40,000 applications were approved. The first payment was disbursed in May with NIS 700 allocated per family, then the second payment, NIS 500, was disbursed in June. Two million NIS was allocated to support Jerusalem, and other sums were allocated to Palestinians in the diaspora refugee camps. Local labour committees criticised the process for lack of oversight in who received payments.

Many individuals in Gaza interviewed for this study also complained of a geographical bias—according to Gaza's Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU), 96% of the money collected was distributed in the West Bank.

Many Palestinians thought that the experience of this fund—as well as the roll-out of the vaccination programmes—

signalled another example of PA nepotism and corruption. According to one national survey, more than half of Palestinians in the oPt (53%)—67% of those living in the West Bank and 33% in Gaza believed that corruption increased during 2020. Indeed, corruption was the second major worry for Palestinians in the oPt after socio-economic conditions.⁹⁹

Vaccine Apartheid and Vaccine Scandals

Israel was hailed globally for its rapid and comprehensive vaccination effort, which included illegal settlers living in the West Bank. However, in violation of its obligations under international human rights law, Israel has refused to supply the necessary vaccines for Palestinians under its military occupation. An exception to this was made for Palestinian workers who cross from the West Bank to Israel, whom Israel vaccinated in March 2021 to ensure their continued ability to work (numbering 105,000 people).¹⁰⁰ By early June 2021, around 59% of Israel's population was fully vaccinated. In contrast, less than 8% of the oPt's population had received a single dose (including less than 5% with two doses).¹⁰¹ Israel has also pursued a policy of 'vaccine diplomacy', sending vaccines to countries such as the Czech Republic, Guatemala, and Honduras as a reward for strengthening their relationship with Israel (including their diplomatic presence in Jerusalem).

In the oPt, vaccination programmes were also marked by scandals and mismanagement. A key issue of contention was the vaccination schedule, with the Palestinian football team, PA ministers, Presidential Guards, and PLO members vaccinated before the most vulnerable sections of society. An estimated 200 of the 12,000 doses received in March 2021 were sent to the Jordanian Royal Court. In June 2021, the PA was embroiled in another vaccine scandal when it bought 1.4 million Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine doses from Israel, in exchange for promising Israel a reciprocal number of doses later the same year. It soon emerged that the vaccines received had a short expiry date, and the deal was cancelled after public pressure and mounting anger with the PA's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic and vaccination drive.

HEALTH SECTOR WORKERS AND COVID-19

HEALTH SECTOR WORKERS AND COVID-19



Doctor at Al- Ahli Arab Hospital, Gaza, 2020. Photo by: Mohamed Reefi

The pandemic has highlighted many of the structural weaknesses of the health sector in the oPt. At an overarching level, continuing Israeli military attacks have severely damaged essential health infrastructure and caused the injuries and deaths of doctors, nurses, paramedics, and other workers in the sector (particularly in the Gaza Strip). Israel's restrictions on Palestinian movement prevent health workers, patients, and carers from reaching medical centres, and has hampered the import of medicines, vaccines, medical equipment, PPE, and Covid-19 testing kits. Palestinians are also forced to pay much higher prices for imported essential medicines (because of the customs union with Israel and various restrictions on imports).

The PA took over direct responsibility for healthcare in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as part of the Oslo Accords. In the West Bank, the Ministry of Health (MoH) provides medical services through government-run hospitals and primary health clinics, regulates medical training and licensing, and sets overall policy in the sector. Since 2007, a parallel health ministry has existed in the Gaza Strip, overseen by the Hamas government. In addition, some 323,700 Palestinians living in East Jerusalem can access Israeli health insurance, although the residency rights of this population are under continuous threat of revocation (since 1967, more than 14,500 Palestinians have lost residency rights in the city). Across all these areas, health services are offered by a mix of

government, NGO, UNRWA, and private providers (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: Provision of Health Care in the oPt

Sector	Hospitals	Beds	Primary Health Care Centers
MoH	27	3462	468
UNRWA	1	63	65
NGOs	35	2141	182
Military Health Service	2	143	17
Private Sector	17	631	-

Source: Health Workforce and Labor Market Dynamics in Palestine, September 2020, p.11.

Although the MoH is the largest provider of hospitals, hospital beds and primary health care centres in the oPt, the health system relies significantly on private and foreign hospitals. Around one-third of the MoH budget is spent annually on purchasing healthcare services from non-government providers.

This includes referrals to hospitals in Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey which made up one-quarter of the MoH budget in 2018.¹⁰⁵ If arrears are added to this figure, such referrals are equivalent to half of the MoH budget.¹⁰⁶ A significant proportion of these referrals are to Israeli hospitals, costing the PA just under NIS 1 billion in total since 2014.¹⁰⁷

The Covid-19 crisis in the oPt highlights the ongoing, chronic de-development and fragmentation of the Palestinian healthcare sector under Israeli occupation and control. According to the Geneva Conventions, as the occupying power Israel is responsible for the health of the Palestinian population. Article 55(1) of the Fourth Geneva Convention establishes Israel's duty as occupying power to ensure the provision of medical supplies. Yet, Israel persistently acts to weaken the Palestinian healthcare sector. For example:

- Under stipulations of the Paris Protocol, the Israeli Ministry of Health controls the import of pharmaceuticals to the oPt. Only products registered in Israel are allowed entry, effectively cutting off the Palestinian market from other, possibly cheaper, options coming from other locations.
- There are restrictions on what products the Palestinian health care sector may import, with a long list of products categorised by Israel as "dual use," including medical equipment such as radiation machines for cancer treatment.
- Repeated military attacks, and fuel and cement shortages due to the siege have left Gaza's hospitals in a dire situation, unable to rebuild or import equipment and having to ration fuel to continue operation.
- Restrictions on movements between areas make it difficult for Palestinians to access hospitals, and for ambulances to move between checkpoints. Palestinians

in the oPt are required to attain medical permits to receive medical care in Israel. A fraction of such permits are accepted.¹⁰⁸

- Israel's closure and permit regime has severely curtailed Palestinian ability to access hospitals in East Jerusalem. The six non-government hospitals in East Jerusalem are key healthcare providers for the West Bank and Gaza Strip, yet a permit is necessary to access them.
- At the same time, Palestinians referred from Gaza to health care providers in the West Bank require Israeli-issued permits to pass the Israeli checkpoint at Beit Hanoun.
- In Area C, which constitutes 60% of the West Bank and where Israel maintains full military and civil control, Palestinians are prohibited from building permanent infrastructure. As such, there are no permanent healthcare facilities for residents in this area.
- The pandemic made it more difficult for Palestinian hospitals to supply necessary treatments and medical services.¹⁰⁹ The blockade of the Gaza Strip resulted in a severe depletion of medicines, with the MoH reporting in February 2021 that 45% of medicines listed as 'essential drugs' and 33% of medical disposables were at 'zero stock' levels across the Gaza Strip (meaning that less than one month worth of supplies were available).¹¹⁰

There has been a steady fall in PA spending on health (as a proportion of GDP) since 2011. Indeed, in 2019 health expenditure made up only 9.2% of GDP,¹¹¹ a level that had dropped from 11.7% in 2011 and was even lower than the years of the Second Intifada.¹¹² This lack of government funding means that much of the burden of healthcare expenditure is carried by Palestinian households.

Between 2011 and 2018, household spending averaged 43% of total healthcare expenditure, up from 37% between 2004 and 2010. This is significantly higher than the global average of 35%.¹¹³ Such high levels of spending puts considerable pressures on low and middle-income families.

The other major sources of health funding come from insurance. In 1994, the Government Health Insurance (GHI) scheme was set up to provide health coverage to the population. This scheme is administered by the MoH and is compulsory for all public sector employees and Palestinian workers from the oPt in Israel, who have a monthly deduction taken from their salary for the scheme. Additionally, private sector workers and households may voluntarily join the scheme, and the government covers the health care costs of eligible political prisoners (through the Ministry of Prisoners Affairs) and other marginalised social groups.¹¹⁴ Health insurance contributions made up around 27% of the MoH's revenues in 2018.¹¹⁵ Alongside the GHI, UNRWA, and other private sector companies offer health insurance in the oPt. The pandemic

exposed the fragility of this funding structure. According to MoH statistics, revenues from household payments and insurance collapsed by over 40% during the second quarter of 2020 compared to the same period in the previous year.¹¹⁶ This was due to a variety of factors, including the precipitous drop in income levels due to workplace closures (impacting household payments, for health services), as well as a large reduction in the insurance contribution paid by workers crossing into Israel (who make up one-third of all GHI payments).¹¹⁷

Workers and Working Conditions in the Health Sector

Over 36,000 people work in the health sector across the West Bank and Gaza Strip, including doctors, nurses, and other professional staff, as well as support workers (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Health Care Workers in the oPt

HC Workers	West Bank	Gaza Strip	Total
Doctors	2,831	2,466	5,297
Nurses	4,842	3,444	8,286
Midwives	632	392	1,024
Dentists	1,114	433	1,547
Pharmacists	1,479	984	2,463
Other health professionals	3,367	2,764	6,131

Source: Table adapted from the National Human Health Resources Observatory, September 2020.

In interviews for this research, respondents highlighted eleven major problems facing workers in the health sector that have been significantly exacerbated by the pandemic:

- **Inadequate Staffing.** Overall, the health sector in Palestine is marked by a shortfall in nurses and midwives (compared to WHO recommendations), and a lack of doctors in several key specialisations (such as oncology, haematology, and neurology). A hiring freeze by the PA since early 2019 due to the fiscal crisis has exacerbated these labour shortages, and individuals who leave the health sector are not being replaced in adequate numbers. In 2019, it was estimated that 1,450 health workers were needed for public sector positions, but only 250 were approved.¹¹⁸ Similarly, the number of health care workers needed in the Gaza Strip between 2017-2019 was estimated at 2,800 yet only 746 were recruited (many of these on short-term and temporary contracts).¹¹⁹ The impact of these staffing shortfalls was sharply felt during the pandemic, placing considerable pressure on all workers in the sector.

- **High unemployment.** These staffing shortfalls exist despite the large availability of trained graduates (especially in nursing).¹²⁰ Officially, the level of unemployment among health workers stood at 29.6% in 2019¹²¹, although the head of the General Union of Health Service Workers, Salam Abu Zeiter, estimated the true figure to be around 64% among youth and recent graduates.¹²²

- **Salary Underpayment.** A longstanding issue reported by many interviewees is the chronic underpayment of salaries, which has worsened since the Covid-19 pandemic. This issue is most directly felt in the government sector, where the PA regularly delays salary payments, or only provides partial payment. Due to the high levels of debt owed by the PA to private and NGO-run hospitals, health care workers in these establishments also often do not receive their salaries on time. The wages situation is worse in the Gaza Strip, where the PA has been imposing punitive sanctions on government employees since March 2017, including salary reductions of between 50% to 60% and a denial of promotions.¹²³

- **Automatic Salary Deductions.** A common grievance by workers in the MoH (and government employees in other sectors) are the automatic deductions taken from workers' salaries for loans and obligations to banks and commercial companies (such as mobile phone bills). This system emerged after the Second Intifada, in line with the recommendations by international financial institutions, and has been an important driver of increasing financial indebtedness within Palestinian society over the last decade. The system has continued throughout the pandemic, despite reductions and delays to government salaries. Doctors in the West Bank raised this issue in a statement released in October 2020, noting that large private businesses had seen their profits double during the pandemic, yet were not being asked to take any responsibility for mitigating the economic impact of the crisis on the wider population.

“ The Palestinian Nursing Association was established in Gaza in 1994. Our union represents around 12,000 members in both the government and private sectors, evenly split between men and women. We also represent the 30-40% of nurses in Gaza who are unemployed, although we exempt them from paying union membership.

Salaries for nurses in the government sector are between NIS 1,600-1,800 per month in addition to family allowances, risk allowances and other benefits. Because

of the financial crisis in Gaza, nurses in government hospitals are currently receiving 50% of their salaries. In private hospitals, a nurse's salary is less than that of the Ministry of Health, at a maximum of NIS 800-1,000 per month. In general, a nurse's salary is very low compared with the cost of the living in Gaza, and many nurses are forced to work another job in order to make ends meet.

Our union is separate from the Nurses Union in the West Bank, although there is indirect contact and we hope for more communication. Union work should be above the political division.”

A. Muhammad Daoud, Head of the Medical Technology and Laboratory Workers Union Syndicate in Gaza

“ Our union represents analysts who work in both government and private laboratories. In the past we were unionised with the Medical Professions Union, but an increase in the number of medical analysts meant we needed a separate union, which we formed in 2019. We currently have more than 5,000 members, most of whom work in private labs. The majority of our members are women.

Major issues facing our members include being paid salaries below the minimum wage, working more than the legal hours permitted,

and being assigned tasks outside the job description (such as cleaning and administration). There are also a high number of unemployed lab workers in the Gaza Strip. Through our mobilisations, laboratory owners are now required to sign a contract guaranteeing workers the minimum wage, legal working hours, and other rights set in the Palestinian Labour Law of 2000. There is a serious problem with compliance though, and we have set up a committee to follow up and monitor this.”

● **‘Financial Retirement’.** Many of those interviewed for this study highlighted the disparity in working conditions for government health sector workers between the West Bank and Gaza Strip. One clear sign of deliberate discrimination is the so-called ‘financial retirement’ scheme, imposed by the PA in 2017 on Gazan employees working mostly in the health care and education sectors. This scheme forced up to 6,000 workers into retirement, but nonetheless required them to

continue working at 70% of their salary (and in many cases much less than this amount). Those targeted had not reached retirement age and do not accrue any pension benefits for the time they continue working.¹²⁴

● **Promotions and Bonuses.** The MoH has frozen promotions and bonuses for health care workers, citing the impact of the financial crisis on the PA. However, several interviewees noted that at least two promotions

for high-ranking positions in the West Bank MoH had gone ahead during the pandemic, and that the appointees were family members of prominent Fatah leaders. Issues of clientelism, favouritism and double-standards are widely seen to impact the efficient management of the health care system and impede the ability to respond to public health emergencies such as the pandemic. This issue was highlighted by the Palestinian Doctors Association in October 2020 during a dispute with the PA over working conditions in the sector [see Box: Statement by PDA].

- **Working Conditions.** Interviewees also pointed to the dangerous working conditions in hospitals during the first period of the pandemic, including the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). According to one hospital worker in Gaza, workers in MoH hospitals received only one or two surgical masks every 7 hours and were not provided with other necessary forms of PPE, such as face masks. In response, health unions (including the union covering UNWRA health care workers) demanded greater quantities of PPE and an increase in the risk allowance paid to workers during the pandemic.¹²⁵ Workers in the Palestinian Red Crescent have not received their risk allowance since early 2020, according to an organiser at the PRC in Khan Younis, Gaza.

- **Gender Exploitation.** Women health care workers make up an estimated 70% of frontline health workers and have thus seen their workloads increase significantly because of the pandemic.¹²⁶ Many of the issues mentioned above (e.g., salary reductions, dangerous

working conditions, lack of PPE, and non-payment of risk allowance) disproportionately impact women in the sector. In addition, women workers have been forced to take on extra burdens in the home due to social expectations around gender roles. These tasks include caring for family members and children during periods of lockdown, as well as providing psychosocial support.¹²⁷

- **Precarious Work.** The health sector is marked by a high prevalence of precarious and temporary work contracts, particularly in areas such as cleaning, catering, security, and maintenance. Hundreds of workers are employed in the health sector under these conditions. They may have been working for many years with very low wages, a lack of benefits and any kind of long-term employment security [See Box: Interview with Rami and Alaa]. Despite dangerous working conditions during the pandemic, these workers were not provided with adequate PPE or financial support for their daily commute to work. Their lack of permanency also has major ramifications for their ability to access other services. Interviewees in Gaza also noted that many private sector pharmacists and medical labs are similarly characterised by a lack of work contracts (illegal under Palestinian law) with salaries significantly less than the minimum wage.

- **Cleaners and Sanitation Workers.** Hospital cleaners face some of the most exploitative working conditions in the sector. In 2005, the MoH privatised cleaning services and outsourced this work to private contractors. In Gaza, one recent study documented

900 cleaners working for private contractors in health care settings across the Gaza Strip, almost all of whom are paid less than half the minimum wage (which is NIS 1,450 per month).¹²⁸ Many of those interviewed stated that they were not provided with safety equipment such as gloves, protective shoes, or masks. There are, however, important unionisation attempts in this sector. In the West Bank, a union was formed but employers provided the original leadership with longer term contracts in an attempt to weaken the organisation. Despite this, branches in Hebron, Tubas, Nablus, Jenin, and Ramallah continue to operate and managed to coordinate

a strike action. Yet, the union faces an uphill battle in securing basic rights for outsourced and temporary workers. In general, many cleaners in the health sector lack effective union representation.

- **Violence.** One of the by-products of the general social crisis and the high levels of desperation in the oPt, are increasing levels of violence directed against health workers by patients and their families. This has worsened during the pandemic, and workers at several hospitals have undertaken strike action in protest against the lack of adequate workplace security.¹²⁹

Rami and Alaa, workers on temporary contracts who are paid on a daily basis at a public hospital in Ramallah

“ We both started on temporary contracts [Rami since 2015 and Alaa since 2010], working in the cleaning department and kitchen. After this long service we still don't have permanent contracts. We do shift work; each shift is 6 hours long and the night shift is even longer (8 hours). Our pay is currently NIS 1,800 per month although we actually receive NIS 1,725 after insurance is deducted from our wage. For comparison, the official minimum wage is NIS 1,750. So our take home pay is less than minimum wage. We generally do three double shifts each week (around 14 hours a day) and we need to have second jobs since our pay is so low.

As workers on a daily wage we don't get paid overtime, so when we do the night shift we are not paid for those extra morning hours. But permanent staff, working alongside us do. It's exhausting to do double shifts and also hold a second job, but we must. You can't raise a family and pay your bills on our salary. In our workplace there are 45 individuals in our circumstances, we work in the kitchen, security, warehousing, and do cleaning. We help keep the hospital

running and we have done so for years.

Rami: I started at this hospital when I was 25. I have spent 11 years of my life in this centre. I got married and have a family now with three children. My eldest is 12. I am also responsible for my parents and I supply their medication. I can't even afford to take my kids out, even though I work hard at two jobs. In addition, I barely see my family because I must work double shifts in two places. I only have one day off a week and I'm usually exhausted by then. I don't feel I have any protection or job security. If I get sick for any reason and don't show up, they will fire me. This happened with workers in our situation in Hebron and in Nablus.

I work at the hospital three days from 5am to 8pm and I have another job with the security services as a cook from 7am to 10pm the rest of the week. This is simply to make ends meet, not to have a luxurious life or anything. I have developed health issues from my jobs, from standing for such long hours as a cook—so I worry about my future with no pension, and they can let me go at any moment if I get ill.

Alaa: We feel like machines, easily replaceable with no job security to speak of. During the Covid pandemic for example, the majority were under lockdown and not working, but we in the healthcare sector kept performing our jobs. We were dealing with doctors and patients. Despite this important role we knew we had no permanent contracts. If we faced difficulties getting to work, which we did, we could simply be replaced.

Rami: Our villages are far from Ramallah, and we had to cross all this distance on dangerous roads with Israeli military roadblocks, as there was no transportation running during the strict lockdowns. There is a curfew from 7pm until 6am. Well my shift starts at 5am—how should I get to work in the morning? Our employers and the health ministry didn't arrange transportation for us even though we were essential staff. Even before Covid, I slept in the hospital sometimes.

I normally wake up at 3am and leave the house by 3:15am. I look for a taxi so I can make my shift by 5am. There are many dangers. Of course, we live in an occupied country, so we are at risk from the Israeli military at this time of the morning. More than once I was travelling to Ramallah and saw the Israeli army conducting raids. There were many times that I thought I would be killed.

It is easier to sleep at the hospital than risk going home. The hospital tries to give us space to sleep, but this means even more time away from home. And all this for NIS 1,800 a month. Honestly, if you ask any official can they say that NIS 1,800 is enough? It wouldn't pay for their phone bills or gas for their cars, but we have to survive on this salary.

Alaa: All we want is job security. In our contracts we have 14 days of sick leave, anything past the 14 days is deducted from us, while permanent staff can show documents to say that they are still sick and get their sick leave extended. There are also elderly people on these temporary contracts, they have no pension at the end of this service. They can work in one place for years and have nothing to show for it in the end. How will they survive after they can no longer work?

Rami: I was a prisoner in the early years of the Second Intifada for four and a half years. After I got out I couldn't find a job—not a permanent one with a pension. All employers told me I was too old. My main issue is not pay, although that's a problem, but permanency, so I can feel more secure and be able to do simple things. For example, right now I can't get a bank loan. Banks need papers that you have regular employment. I can't get a car on instalments because I can't prove I have permanent employment. So these contracts even block us from doing basic transactions that may help us financially.

During May 2020, as a result of the PA's financial crisis, we missed a full month of our wages like other PA employees. This impacts us a lot because we live hand to mouth every month. We are on minimum wage anyway, so cutting that wage puts us into greater debt. We couldn't even pay our transportation costs to get to work. They talked about Waqfet Izz giving some payments to families that needed it, but we didn't get anything. Many people talk about the corrupt way in which the Waqfet Izz funds were distributed. It has even gotten to the point that we must buy our own work clothes. Every few years we used to struggle with the hospital management to give us new work clothes, but lately they say we have no funds. This is a serious issue when you work in the health care sector.

Unfortunately, due to the state of emergency during Covid we couldn't organise to demand our rights. The health conditions took precedence. Prior to Covid, when we did organise, a few individuals who were the figureheads for the union got permanent contracts, but not the rest of us. This was used to defuse our activism, just to ensure a few people were appeased. But we try to organise to meet the ministry and every time we go they tell us the officials are not there. Or we send statements and declarations and we get no responses. At the same time it is difficult to organise strikes under Covid conditions—so our options seem bleak and limited at the moment. We just hope if people don't know about the plight of daily labourers, that they hear about it and help us. We urgently need a change in our conditions. ”

Health Unions and Labour Mobilisation During the Pandemic

A range of unions are active in the Palestinian health sector, including professional unions or syndicates covering occupations such as doctors, nurses, pharmacists, dentists, technicians etc., and the General Union of Health Service Workers, which is affiliated to the PGFTU, and represents all workers in the health sector, including administrative and service workers. There are very high levels of unionisation among professional employees because a pre-requisite for occupational licensing is membership of a union. This system, however, creates a barrier to professional registration for the large number of unemployed health workers who cannot afford union fees. Unions in the Gaza Strip have reduced or waived these fees for unemployed members, which lowers their overall income. Outside of professional staff, many interviewees stressed that a significant proportion of lower paid workers, particularly those on temporary or fixed-term work contracts, are not adequately represented by unions and are disengaged from labour mobilisation. This latter category of workers is frequently left out of discussions about the health sector in Palestine.

The most influential union in the health sector is the Palestinian Doctors Association (PDA), which exists as two separate unions in the West Bank (with a membership of around 9,000 doctors) and in the Gaza Strip (membership of 2,500 doctors). The PDA in the West Bank is formally a branch of the Jordanian Doctors Association.¹³⁰

On 25 February 2020, the West Bank

PDA launched a campaign of industrial action that involved halting most work in hospitals and outpatient clinics, including non-emergency operations. The doctors were seeking higher bonuses promised to them in 2013, as well as an increase in the numbers of doctors, and an improvement to hospital infrastructure (including more hospital beds).¹³¹ The action was initially very successful, drawing participation from a large number of doctors. Nonetheless, in the wake of rising Covid-19 case numbers across the West Bank, the industrial action was halted on 5 March 2020 following an agreement signed between the PDA and the PA.

Nonetheless, the PA did not comply with this agreement, leading the PDA to threaten further industrial action if the agreement was not implemented by the beginning of November 2020. The statement issued by the PDA to its membership on this occasion referenced many of the issues discussed above [see Box PDA Statement]. However, with escalating Covid numbers at the end of 2020, and a sustained campaign by the PA against the PDA, including legal action, no further action was taken at the time. However, the structural issues in the sector remained unaddressed and the union again called for industrial action in March 2021. The PA took the matter to court which ruled that the strike was illegal, forcing doctors back to work. However, the union remained defiant, and its members continued with various protests and actions. In May 2021, the PA arrested the head of the PDA and two PDA council members, although these individuals were quickly released.

“ The Palestinian Doctors Association was established in 1954 in Jerusalem as a branch of the Jordanian Doctors Association. After the 1967 occupation, the PDA maintained its main headquarters in Jerusalem and has thus played an important role in sustaining our national identity and presence in the city.

Elections happen at the same time as the Jordanian Doctors Association. Sixteen delegates are elected in each governorate for the central committee. The president of the union is elected by all members through a direct vote. The general assembly consists of all doctors affiliated with the union (about 8,000 members, both active and passive). Around 4-5,000 doctors participate in our union elections.

Membership in the union is mandatory. Every year, doctors must renew their professional licence by paying 50 dinars to the union. These funds allow us to be self-reliant and to build our resources.

The biggest problems faced by doctors before the epidemic were the long shift hours, low wage levels, and a lack of clarity around grades and promotions. We also need

to tackle discrepancies between doctors working in the government sector and those who work in the private sector. Another major issue is the lack of insurance for doctors. In case of a medical error, the doctor must carry the full financial costs which can be very large. We are calling for a government-backed insurance scheme—ironically, this used to exist under the occupation authorities prior to Oslo!

Because of these and other issues, an open-ended strike was announced a month before the spread of the Covid-19 virus in Palestine. A court decision was issued to prevent the strike. Although we lost this case we refused to comply and decided to strike, mobilising 4,000 doctors. PA President Abu Mazen called us to a meeting to resolve the issue and assured us that if we returned to work they would return to negotiations around wages. We agreed to this at the time.

At the beginning of the pandemic we mobilised around the provision of PPE for medical staff in the public, private and NGO sectors. We also intervened to ensure that doctors in private clinics were protected. We were also part of the Supreme National Committee, which was formed by the PA to confront the pandemic.”

Shawqi Al-Sabha, General Secretary of the Palestinian Doctors Association (PDA)

“ After Oslo we had hoped—and I was one of many who worked towards this—to establish a single union for all doctors in the oPt that includes both West Bank and Gazan doctors. But unfortunately, for various reasons, both political and technical, this didn't take place. So currently we do not have a single union representing all doctors in the oPt.

Most of the issues we face as a union are because of the military occupation. We have a serious shortage in certain specialisations, especially sub-specialties, and in our overall infrastructure and types of equipment. There is a serious shortage of hospital

beds compared to other parts of the world. According to the World Health Organization, we have half the number of bed necessary for our population size.

In addition, there is tremendous pressure on the health sector due to the lack of sufficient staff, especially in government hospitals. Every doctor does the work of five, particularly during the pandemic. During the pandemic many doctors were absent and the workload increased significantly. Some of our members lost loved ones and could not attend their funerals or mourn them because they were working overtime due to Covid.

Just before the pandemic we launched a strike demanding that the PA fulfil an agreement we had around our pay and allowances for general practitioners. To this day, the most important provisions of the agreement have not been implemented. The PA said this was to do with the financial crisis, but all other ministries have given their staff yearly bonuses, except for the Health Ministry. Even though we were working overtime while most other staff were under lockdown. We told the government that we are not even asking for these bonuses like others—we just want our basic rights and to implement the raise that was already agreed upon. Health workers didn't receive overtime pay throughout the time of the pandemic,

although they all worked many extra shifts. They said it was a fiscal problem but promised once they got the monies owed from Israel that they would compensate doctors. The money has been received and nothing has changed. We even agreed to take it in instalments and that has not worked either. While we negotiate with the PA they are very resistant to our demands—in the last strike they took us to court for undertaking action.

We have a reputation for being an active, fighting, and successful union. Even members of other unions ask us for support. The key reason for this is that we don't work according to factional or party allegiances, we work according to the demands of our members.



PDA Statement, October 2020

Your union council salutes your patience [...] we know the extent of your suffering and the pressures of work. From the beginning you stood your ground despite casualties, panic, and fear [...]

We know that some of you do not have the money to pay to get to work, or the ability to pay your bills and obligations [...]

We are aware of the seriousness and difficulty of the situation, and we haven't made any demands on the PA leadership despite their great failure towards you. However, we cannot accept double standards and the arbitrary distribution of bonuses, rewards, and promotions by the government. We want fairness and dignity.

We want what was agreed upon and which is now six months overdue [...]

We also warn the government about the automatic deductions they take from our salaries to pay commercial loans [...] we are not beholden to the wishes of big business—financial firms, telecommunications companies and unjust banks who have doubled their profits during this national economic crisis. It would have been better for the PA to invite big business to take their national responsibility by postponing loan repayments without penalty and urging telecommunications companies to reduce their prices and not insisting on payment of bills during this crisis.¹³²

Obstacles to Labour Mobilisation in the Health Sector

Alongside this campaign by the West Bank PDA, several smaller-scale initiatives were taken by other health sector unions during the pandemic.¹³³

Most of these actions involved demands around better provision of PPE, risk allowances and workplace violence. In general, however, interviewees have

stressed the lack of labour mobilisation since March 2020, pointing instead to the long-standing problems with levels of union activity and engagement in the health sector.

A major barrier to labour mobilisation is the political and territorial division of the oPt between Fatah and Hamas, which means that health sector unions effectively operate as separate bodies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with different leaderships, administrative structures, and campaign priorities. This division was repeatedly highlighted by interviewees as a key obstacle to trade union organising, particularly in the Gaza Strip. As one researcher noted:

The fragmentation of Palestinian territory and the centralisation of all the PA/PLO union headquarters in Ramallah insulated them from any real

pressure from health workers in the Gaza Strip. Public health workers in the Gaza Strip are mostly employed by PA, and have been severely impacted by PA sanctions against the Gaza Strip since 2017 (such as slashing salaries by 40% and imposing so-called “financial retirement” on the sector). Israel’s colonial fragmentation of Palestinian society compounded by the political split between the PA and Hamas, makes it almost impossible to exert any pressure from Gaza on the Ramallah-based PA government. Moreover, the unions in West Bank haven’t shown any public outcry against the PA over its sanctions against workers in the Gaza Strip.¹³⁴

A doctor and member of the Doctors Union in the Gaza Strip

“About 90% of the doctors working in the government sector in Gaza receive their salaries from the PA, and since 2017, they have been subjected to penalties of dismissal, financial retirement, and clear discrimination between them and doctors in the West Bank. A doctor’s salary in Gaza is around one-third, or one-quarter of a doctor in the West Bank. So our problem is that even if a union in the Gaza Strip wanted to protest and go on strike, there is no government to pressure because they are in the West Bank. On the contrary, it will serve the interests of the PA against the Hamas government, and cause chaos. At the same time, the union does not make any effective opposition to the Hamas government— just some very minor achievements that are exaggerated to show effectiveness.

Even before the split between Fatah and Hamas, there was no unified doctors’ union across the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The union in the West Bank operates from the Jerusalem office and is affiliated with the Jordanian Doctors Association. Palestinian doctors (who hold an identity card whose address is Gaza) and who do not have Jordanian passports cannot join its membership, even if they work and live in the West Bank. But the union there does defend the interests of its members very effectively. It is shameful that after nearly 25 years since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority there is no union registered according to Palestinian law and representing doctors in all areas of the oPt.”

Dr. Salama Abu Zuaier, President of the General Union of Health Services Workers in the Gaza Strip, and member of the General Secretariat of the General Federation of Palestinian Trade Unions

“ We represent health workers in the government, private and NGO sectors, and have been greatly impacted by the division between the West Bank and Gaza Strip. When Hamas took control in Gaza, we had our office confiscated and faced other harassment by the security forces.

Although the PA adopted legislation for a minimum wage in 2012, this was not implemented in Gaza. So we have

many members who are paid below minimum wage—particularly cleaners and laboratory workers working for outsourced companies.

More than 2,500 of our members have also been placed on financial retirement by the PA, meaning they are forced to retire and yet continue working at 70% of their salary. This issue only affects workers in Gaza. ”

Reinforcing this territorial division of the oPt is the close connection between trade union leaderships and the ruling political parties in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In the West Bank, some of the trade unions in the health sector are tightly linked to the PA and Fatah (with the partial exception of the PDA). Similarly, in the Gaza Strip, the leadership of the majority of professional health unions (e.g., for doctors, nurses, and dentists) are dominated by activists close to the Hamas government.¹³⁵ As one interviewee in the Gaza Strip noted:

Overall, what unions can achieve depends upon what the ruling authority will allow according to its own interests—it is not the outcome of a real struggle aimed at achieving beneficial change for workers. For instance, health workers hired by the Gaza government receive 40-50% of their salaries, but unions could not make the government pay salaries in full, or even get transparency around the budgets used to justify the cuts. Security forces make it impossible for unions or workers to challenge the government. Organisers are arrested even if they are from the same political

party—as happened with two public sector labour organisers in the Gaza Strip on different occasions.¹³⁶

Or, according to Nidal Ghaben, Executive Director of the Workers' Development Association in Gaza:

We do not have an independent trade union—the official unions work alongside, or under the umbrella of the ruling authority, whether in Gaza or the West Bank. They are to a large extent, loyal to their own parties and factions within the Palestinian Authority. For example, most union employees or leaders are employees of the Palestinian Authority, meaning they work according to the dictates of the Ministry of Labour or even security services. So, how can you ask a union leader to defend workers' rights from the authority while he is essentially an employee of that same authority?”

The subordination of union priorities to the interests of the ruling parties in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is partially enabled by undemocratic union structures that deny a real voice to members. Elections for union

leaderships are frequently delayed, with outcomes determined in advance through negotiations between the different political factions.¹³⁷ Lower paid

workers, and those who lack permanent contracts, are particularly alienated from union structures and often lack any union representation at all.

Salam Al-Ratrout, member of the secretariat and Head of Midwifery in the Nursing and Midwifery Union

“ The problems that arose during the pandemic are a direct result of those that preceded the pandemic. The most important of these are the PA's control over freedom of expression, and the decline of the labour movement due to the inability to mobilise among the rank-and-file. We lost our representation in the Palestinian Legislative Council when it was dissolved. This was a space where we could raise our issues and concerns through elected representatives. The PA holds a great deal of responsibility for this situation due to its political arrests and threats against union activists. There are signs of a shift though—we can see this in the recent wave of strikes of professional and medical unions.

Although we don't find direct interference by the government in our day-to-day union matters, there is interference in major decisions. For example, we may be moving towards a strike that the government does not approve of, so a certain faction will block the strike. This is because their priority is the party and not the union or its members. This is why a trade unionist must be independent—serving only the union members who elect them and not those outside.

Despite these considerable problems, long term structural issues in the sector—alongside the PA's consistent vilification of trade union action—have pushed union members to take stronger stances, including strike action. The Covid-19

pandemic has highlighted the importance of the sector and the widespread public sympathy for health workers. There is also an important wave of unionisation among workers that were previously non-unionised, or reliant upon temporary contacts.

EDUCATION SECTOR WORKERS AND COVID-19

EDUCATION SECTOR WORKERS AND COVID-19



School at Tira Village, West Bank, 2008. Photo by: Anne Paq.

Decades of Israeli occupation have severely undermined Palestinian access to education and the quality of educational infrastructure in the oPt. Schools and universities are frequently targeted in Israeli military attacks, while teachers and students are subject to arrest and detention. Movement restrictions impede travel to school, with many children forced to cross military checkpoints daily. In Area C, which covers 60% of the West Bank, more than one-third (36%) of residential areas lack primary schools due to Israeli restrictions on planning and construction. In East Jerusalem, which is also under Israeli control, municipal schools require more than 2,000 extra classrooms.¹³⁸ Fifty-two Palestinian schools were under formal threat of demolition in December 2020 (44 in Area C and 8 in East Jerusalem).¹³⁹ In the Gaza Strip, successive Israeli military bombardments and a 14-year blockade have hindered the building of new schools and classrooms— overcrowding has forced two-thirds of Gazan schools to operate double or triple shifts, with learning hours reduced by 4.5 hours a day.¹⁴⁰

In the context of these on-going Israeli attacks and restrictions, the current Palestinian educational system is marked by inadequate infrastructure, insufficient staffing levels, and a high degree of inequality in educational opportunities. Such pre-existing problems amplified the impact of the pandemic on the most marginalised students and families. Indeed, according to the UN organisation OHCA, more than half a million

Palestinians will need humanitarian assistance in accessing education in 2021 (489,009 children and 14,917 teachers)¹⁴¹ – a figure that has risen by over 20% since 2020.¹⁴²

On 7 March 2020, during the initial phase of the pandemic, the PA took the decision to close all educational institutions in the West Bank. This closure lasted until September 2020,¹⁴³ and was a necessary step given the heightened danger of viral transmission and the poor sanitation infrastructure in many schools.¹⁴⁴ Learning was moved online, with the Palestinian Ministry of Education (MoE) launching an e-learning portal and universities developing their own resources for e-learning. The shift to online learning starkly illustrated the uneven impact of the pandemic on Palestinian society:

- According to the PCBS, around half of all Palestinian households with school age children did not participate in online or remote education during the initial lockdown period (47% of households in the West Bank and 51% in the Gaza Strip).¹⁴⁵
- For 48.5% of these households, the main reason for this was the absence of an internet connection (35% of non-participating households in West Bank and 61.7% in Gaza).¹⁴⁶
- Alongside the lack of internet, a majority of Palestinian households with school children (56%) did not have the necessary equipment (computers or tablets) to access online materials.¹⁴⁷
- Households headed by women have significantly fewer electronic devices and poorer internet connectivity than those headed by males.¹⁴⁸

- These disparities were widened by the lack of support for the large number of Palestinian school children with disabilities and those who needed psychosocial support because of the pandemic.

With the re-opening of schools in September 2020, an estimated 1.3 million Palestinian children had lost at least three months of schooling.¹⁴⁹ Israeli attacks on educational institutions have nonetheless continued since that time. Throughout 2020 and 2021, for example, 81 Birzeit University students were arrested, and at least one student was killed.¹⁵⁰

Teachers and Education Workers through the Pandemic

The PA took control over all levels of education in 1994, and educational institutions (kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, and higher education facilities) are now run by a mix of different operators. The pre-school sector is dominated by privately-operated kindergartens, while the majority of primary and secondary schools are government run and financed. Higher education institutions (universities and community colleges) are broadly distributed between government, the public and private sectors, and UNRWA (see Table 3 next page).

Table 1: The Educational Sector in the oPt

	Kindergartens	Primary School	Secondary School	Universities & Colleges
West Bank	1,332 (1111 government) (221 private)	1,296 (949 government) (253 private) (94 UNRWA)	1,004 (876 government) (126 private) (2 UNRWA)	33 (13 government) (7 public) (2 private) (11 UNRWA)
Gaza Strip	685 (672 government) (13 private)	524 (217 government) (217 private) (33 UNRWA)	213 (192 government) (21 private) (0 UNRWA)	17 (3 government) (5 public) (2 private) (7 UNRWA)
oPt	2,017 (1782 government) (234 private)	1,820 (1,166 government) (368 private) (286 UNRWA)	1,217 (1,068 government) (147 private) (2 UNRWA)	50 (16 government) (12 public) (4 private) (18 UNRWA)

Source: Statistical Guide 2019, Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education; Educational Statistical Yearbook, 2019-2018, Palestinian Ministry of Education. *Public Universities are those that were set up as non-profit organisations run by NGOs or local charities prior to the establishment of the PA. Today, they receive partial government funding.

A large proportion of workers in the education sector are women, particularly in kindergartens and in schools. As with other sectors examined for this study, work in the education sector encompasses a range of non-teaching

occupations (see Tables 2 and 3 on page 57), including administrative and support staff, cleaning, and maintenance. Many non-teaching staff are on temporary, non-permanent contracts and are employed by private firms through outsourcing arrangements.

Table 2: Education Workers in Palestine Schools (oPt)

		Lab & Technical	Teachers	Cleaning & Maintenance	Adminstartion	Total
Government	Male	1,635	16,521	2,525	2,465	23,146
	Female	1,962	23,482	1,754 ²⁰⁰	3,012	30,211
UNRWA	Male	160	3,320	452	360	4,292
	Female	279	6,684	176	385	7,523
Private	Male	120	1,526	664	352	2,662
	Female	369	5,924	604	856	7,753
Total		4,525	57,438	6,175	4,252	75,587

Source: Table 33: Distribution of Position of Teaching and Non-teaching Staff by Location, Supervising Authority, Gender and Type of Work, 2018/2019.¹⁵¹

Table 3: Higher Education Staff in Palestinian Universities and Colleges (2019)

	All Staff	Academic	Non-Academic
Male	11,847	5,271	6,576
Femal	4,569	1,647	2,922
Total	16,416	6,918	9,498

Source: Distribution of Staff by Institution, Job Classification, and Gender 2018-2019, p.222.¹⁵²

Munif Al-Khatib, Member of the General Secretariat of the General Union of Palestinian Teachers

“ Education in Jerusalem is complicated by the multiple authorities that supervise schools. Schools in the city are divided into municipal schools, private sector schools, a few schools affiliated with UNRWA, and a few schools affiliated with the PA Ministry of Education. And here we are only talking about Arab schools. Schools affiliated with the PA constitute 13% of the schools in the city of Jerusalem, and the remainder are affiliated in one way or another to the occupation authorities.

The struggle over education in Jerusalem is multi-faceted. In addition to the curriculum, the occupation authorities prevent the construction of new schools in Jerusalem, simply adding new classrooms to existing schools or renovating them. This has led to huge levels of overcrowding in schools affiliated with the PA Ministry of Education, and there is much difficulty accommodating more students.

In the past, schools affiliated with the PA Ministry of Education were among the best schools in Jerusalem. But due to the policies and practices of the occupation,

the condition of schools has become much worse, and there is a big difference in terms of infrastructure between the schools affiliated with the Palestinian Authority and the schools affiliated with the Jerusalem municipality. The occupation authorities provide large amount of financial support to private and municipal schools, and pressure them to use the Israeli curriculum. Currently, approximately 6% of the schools in Jerusalem have fully adopted the Israeli curriculum. The budget of these schools is 50% of the budget of all Arab schools in Jerusalem.

In addition, the occupation authorities restrict the ability of teachers who do not hold a Jerusalem identity card to enter the city. Because of this policy, the number of teachers from outside the city has gradually decreased, and schools in the city have become dependent on Jerusalemite teachers. However, the large difference in wages between municipal schools or private schools, and schools affiliated with the PA makes it difficult for the latter to attract qualified teachers. ”

Interviews conducted for this research revealed the following key issues facing workers across the sector:

- Low pay is an endemic feature of the educational sector, particularly for teachers in government-run schools and nurseries. Many teachers are forced to take on second jobs to make ends meet. Government teachers receive an average of NIS 2,500 per month in the West Bank and NIS 1,590–2,500 per month in the Gaza Strip; thus many are living under the poverty line. Teachers were owed many months of unpaid salaries prior to the outbreak of the pandemic and received only half their salaries between June and November 2020. Teachers in many private schools also suffered a 50% loss of pay, and there were job losses in the private school system due to a reduction in school income. Fieldwork

interviews indicated that most nursery workers in the West Bank receive less than US\$200 per month, which can fall to only US\$100 per month for those from refugee camps and villages; wages are even lower in the Gaza Strip.

- Cleaning and maintenance workers in schools (both government and private) are mostly outsourced and suffered a complete loss of work and income during the periods of school closure.
- With the closure of primary and secondary schools in March 2020, learning was moved online without adequate training or preparation for teachers. Many teachers with young families were required to simultaneously take care of their own children, a burden which fell disproportionately on women (just under two-thirds of all schoolteachers in the oPt are women).

Iyad who lives in Dar Salah, a teacher working in a government school

“During the first closure, many of us teachers had difficulties with online education because we lacked equipment such as laptops and internet, and we weren't properly trained in this style of teaching. When we returned to in-person teaching they split classes into two, which meant we had to present the curriculum twice for each class. This placed a very heavy workload on teachers.

In early May 2020, the PA cut our salary by 50%, with a NIS 1,700 minimum disbursement. Then in August 2020, our

salaries were delayed for two months. Several local strikes took place, which spread from one school to another in the south, and in Hebron in particular. The strikes demanded a fair distribution of the burden—instead of cutting all salaries by half, the burden should have been placed more heavily on those who could afford a reduction in salaries, not the poorest workers who can't even manage on their full salary. Many teachers were summoned by the security forces during those strikes, especially those who expressed anger on social media towards the PA policies in the education sector.”

- With the return of face-to-face teaching in September 2020, teachers were placed on the frontline of exposure to the virus. Poor sanitation infrastructure in many schools made it difficult to take proper

hygiene precautions. This was a particular issue in government and UNRWA schools, where the number of students per toilet (37.6 in government schools and 44.8 in UNRWA schools), and the number of students per washbasin (62.9 in government

schools and 51.9 in UNRWA schools), are around double that found across private schools.¹⁵³

- From September 2020, schools implemented a shift system with students attending school for two days a week to minimise overcrowding. This placed an extra burden on teachers, who were required to deliver multiple sessions of the same material.
- Most kindergarten workers suffered from partial or complete loss of work and income throughout periods of closure (particularly in the urban centres of Area A). However, union mobilisation forced the PA to order kindergartens to pay partial salaries during lockdown (see Box Interview with Mais Jomla and Nidaa Al-Shami).
- University lecturers were also required to provide online instruction without adequate training. Most permanent university staff (academic and non-academic) continued to receive their salaries, albeit with a delay.
- At all levels, there are significant discrepancies between education conditions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Territorial division and factionalism hampered the ability of unions to effectively address the multiple crises in education (see Box interview: Dr. Ashraf Muslim).

Dr. Ashraf Muslim, President of the General Union for Educational Services, Al-Bureij camp in the Gaza Strip

“ There are many issues that we try to raise on behalf of our members, but we are restricted in what we can do and say by Hamas. The shut-down of the educational sector during the pandemic impacted 20,000 people in Gaza, and we could do little except raise awareness about this disease.

Unions are very fragmented—there is a gap between the union leadership and the membership. A major reason for this is the division between Hamas and Fatah, which

results in a lack of legislation around labour rights. We can see the impact of this in the pandemic. There has been no clear law demanding compensation for workers and we, as unions, lack a way forward to address the crisis.

We also have a major problem with factionalism. It would be much better if there was a trade union representative in the Legislative Council who was truly independent and with a voice—not unions who act on behalf of different factions.”

Education Unions and Worker Mobilisation

Workers in the education sector are highly organised and have undertaken several important strikes over recent years. Alongside the General Union of Palestinian Teachers (GUPT, an affiliate of the PGFTU), teachers have organised through independent, local committees that have been a leading source of militancy in the sector.

In universities, local staff unions are well-established and have successfully improved conditions in different workplaces. These local university unions are organised collectively within the Federation of Unions of Palestinian Universities Professors and Employees (PFUPE).

A major turning point for workers in the education sector occurred in 2016, with a strike of 35,000 government teachers in the West Bank. Initially, the major demand of the strike was for the PA to respect an agreement made with the GUPT in 2013, which had promised a gradual 10% pay rise over three years. When teachers received less than the agreed pay rise, the union called for a short-term strike. However, upon seeing that the union was giving into PA demands, local strike committees pressed on with a strike organised through grassroots representatives elected by individual workplaces. As the strike developed, the teachers' demands grew to encompass the right to elect their own union representatives, against the norm of an appointed union leadership split between various PLO factions. In this manner, the strike highlighted the issue of trade union democracy. The PA refused to deal with the independent strike committees that emerged out of this rank-and-file action, insisting that it would only deal with the GUPT. Simultaneously, the PA placed the blame for low teacher salaries on the reduction in foreign aid and the resultant financial crisis. It also began a smear campaign and repression against the striking teachers. The 2016 strike lasted for over one month but was eventually halted after PA President Mahmoud Abbas promised to gradually implement the 2013 agreement. However, this promise was never fulfilled.

Many teachers interviewed for this study referred to the experience of the 2016 strike. They felt that although their demands had not been met at that time, the independent mobilisation of teachers outside the structures of the GUPT had effectively challenged the PA and put the issue of teachers in the

public sector on the table. They also saw the democratically organised strike committees as a crucial vehicle for future mobilisations [see Box Interview with 2016 Strike Participant].

During the pandemic, the experience of the 2016 strikes proved important as several wildcat strikes occurred in the south of the West Bank in September 2020 (largely concentrated in the Hebron and Bethlehem governorates). These strikes sought to address the continued issues of low and irregular pay [see Box – Interview with Iyad]. They were not supported by the GUPT, which instead organised a meeting with the government to discuss overdue salaries. While the government promised to pay all overdue salaries in November 2020, teachers in Bethlehem and Hebron continued to organise protests and strikes against retaliatory measures that were taken against some organisers (such as being transferred to remote schools). In November 2020, the PA failed to fulfil its promise to pay overdue salaries and in response the GUPT called a one-day strike. The PA eventually paid the overdue salaries in mid-December 2020. Nonetheless, teachers remain angry with the PA and the role of the GUPT.

“ In 2016 I participated in the teachers' strike, which lasted for more than a month. In the period leading up to the strike, teachers mobilised independently outside the structures of the General Union of Palestine Teachers. This helped increase rank-and-file participation and raised the ceiling of our demands. We escalated the protests by organising in front of the education directorates in individual governorates. The demands of the strike were numerous, mostly related to low salaries and the high cost of living.

During the first week of the strike, our local committees called for a central sit-in in front of the Prime Minister's headquarters in Ramallah. Despite a ban on such gatherings, I participated in this sit-in, travelling there on a bus provided by the GUPT. However, one week later, the union stopped providing buses because the PA wanted to halt the protests. We tried to book private buses, but the transportation companies refused.

On the day of the scheduled sit-in, I went to Ramallah with other teachers in a private car. The car was stopped by PA security forces at a checkpoint, which had been set up at the entrances of all cities to stop people attending the protest. The numbers were less than the sit-in of the previous week, but thousands of female teachers and teachers

in the Ramallah area participated, as well as teachers from outside the governorate.

From the very beginning of the strike, our actions were talked about everywhere. As the strike continued, we were subject to insults and accused of treason. The PA security services harassed teachers who were participating in the strike, and false rumours were spread that the strike was instigated by Hamas or Mohammed Dahlan. All of this reinforced our steadfastness and drove us to continue. We also received strong public support and solidarity, despite the burden the strike placed on children and families.

The strike ended after the PA promised to gradually fulfil our demands. They refused to let us pass despite all our efforts, so we went back to the empty schools. However, the sit-in went ahead—the checkpoints were unable to prevent thousands of teachers from gathering in Ramallah and heading in large numbers towards the Prime Minister's headquarters. However, this never happened. While we did partially realise some gains, we failed to achieve our main goals. There was some dissatisfaction regarding this outcome, but we nonetheless achieved a lot. We managed to hold a one-month strike—a record length of time—despite attacks from all sides, and the harsh repression and intimidation of the PA. This was a strike for the dignity of 40,000 teachers.”

In the kindergarten sector, there are significant disparities between the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In Gaza, a large proportion of kindergarten work is informal, unregulated, and home-based. Wages are extremely low (interviewees reported NIS 150-300 per month for four children or more), and most of these workers did not get paid during the pandemic. In the West Bank, conditions are better than in Gaza, although still difficult. West Bank kindergarten teachers mobilised throughout the pandemic,

utilising committees that had been set up outside of established unions and political parties. In 2013, these workers negotiated a minimum wage for the sector and continued to fight for employers to respect this. During the pandemic many employers in this sector stopped paying their staff. This relatively young union mobilised again and entered negotiations with the Association of Nursery Owners brokered by the PGFTU, to demand that educators are paid, even if only partially. Initially nursery owners refused, arguing that their own incomes had been impacted by fee cuts. In

reality, however, many private nurseries continued to receive fee payments on a quarterly basis during lockdown. A negotiated settlement was reached that split nurseries into brackets and determined a percentage of the salaries they could be paid. The union accepted this only to ensure some form of payment for its members, but even this minimal agreement has not been fully respected, and many nursery teachers continued to survive with a lack of pay. As a young,

mostly female union, the Kindergartens and Nursery Workers Union is seeking to gather momentum among workers in the sector. Interviews for this project revealed the barriers to unionisation, including a lack of protection against employers that fire workers who unionise. In many cases, these women are the sole income earners in their families and rely on the little pay from these posts—so the employers, with lack of governmental protections for these workers, tend to take advantage of the situation.

Mais Jomla (President) and Nidaa Al-Shami, Union of Workers in Kindergartens, Private Schools and Nurseries

“ We began union organising in 2009 around the rights of women workers, particularly for the minimum wage, the provision of formal contracts, legal adherence to working hours, the size of classrooms, and other health and safety measures. These rights are widely violated and lack oversight. The basis of our work is to monitor working conditions through field visits, raising awareness of female workers, and supporting them in whatever way we can. In the future we hope to establish a special academy to train female workers, but the tools available for union work in this sector are very limited.

Many women fear joining unions because there is no legal protection from employers who may target or fire them for union activity. Workers are easily replaced. Even when we visit a site we must get approval from the employer. In addition, women workers in the sector often have their salaries and work activities controlled by parents or spouses.

Wages in the kindergarten sector are very low, and some female workers earn only NIS 400–600 per month. Many kindergartens do not apply the minimum wage. In general, the lowest paid are those in villages and camps, rather than urban areas. I was recently contacted by a worker who earns only

NIS 300 per month in one of the villages. In our society, a woman's work outside the home does not relieve her of the burdens of domestic work. At the same time, men do not contribute to domestic tasks.

A large number of women have lost their jobs throughout the pandemic. Many were laid off under the pretext of restructuring, in contravention of Palestinian Labour Law, and are still waiting to receive their overdue wages. In addition, many returned to work after the closures without receiving all their previous wages and entitlements, with employers delaying payment for months at a time. This was even the case in kindergartens that had collected full instalments from parents, and thus did not suffer any loss of income.

When the closures were in place, we took the initiative to hold a meeting with the employers' Association. During the meeting, I explained that our goal was to ensure a decent life for male and female workers, and that we represented a very deprived category of workers. The head of the employers' Association asked us to be patient and suggested that they distribute food parcels to workers instead of wages. We refused and negotiated a form of payment instead, but that has not been fully implemented.

In universities, local staff unions and the PFUUE were able to organise several strikes around contractual issues and unfair dismissals during the pandemic. This included a sector-wide strike in November 2020. In early April 2021, the

professor's union at Al Quds University launched a strike following the dismissal of three professors because of their union activism. The strike successfully halted the redundancies, although the university has not formally revoked the decision.¹⁵⁴

Sami Shaath, former President of the Birzeit University Workers Union

“ I served as president of the Birzeit University Workers Union for eight years, and also represented Birzeit University in the Federation of Unions of Palestinian Universities Professors and Employees (PFUUE). More than 10,000 full-time employees work in Palestinian universities, including administrators and academics.

The PFUUE is managed by a Federation Council, made up of the heads of the unions working in different universities. The council agrees internally on a president from among its members, which is supposed to rotate among all universities. In addition to the PFUUE's work on labour issues, the federation also takes an international role around the academic boycott of Israel through a specialised committee.

In 1999 we won a unified salary scale for all Palestinian university workers. Most universities pay their employees' wages in Jordanian dinars, which makes us susceptible to the low value of the dinar against the Israeli shekel. While Birzeit University has committed to making up the loss in salaries due to deterioration in the exchange rate, some universities have refused to do this. For this reason, one of the key causes of university labour disputes is the exchange rate of the dinar and the cost of living. In addition, some universities have increasingly relied upon short-term contracts rather than permanent employment, this is another major industrial issue in the sector.

I joined Birzeit University as a student after the PA was established in 1994 and have sensed a significant shift in the priorities of union work in Palestinian universities. Over the years, union work has come to focus more on workplace issues and less on public affairs and national and political

issues, unlike before. I think this shift is part of the change taking place in the rest of the country. A simple illustration of this is the lack of a union stance on the division between Hamas and Fatah, despite our ability to maintain unity and represent the interests of universities in both the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The unionisation rate in Palestinian universities is very high, at around 80-90% of workers. There is also a high level of participation in the union, including elections. Elections are carried out by votes for individuals rather than a slate system, which means you can choose candidates from different lists.

The union at Birzeit University is very pluralistic. Our meetings are interspersed with lengthy discussions about workers' conditions and problems, and colleagues from all levels can share their opinions and criticisms of the university management without worrying about consequences. Elections are held regularly and on time. Unfortunately, in some other universities elections are frequently delayed. Factions do participate in the elections, but candidates are judged on their credibility as a union activist, not their factional membership. Women are represented at a much higher proportion in university unions than in other sectors (except for kindergarten workers). However, the proportion of female professors at the university is still low (not more than 10%).

The pandemic has exacerbated the financial crisis for many universities, with many disbursing only 50-70% of salaries for several months. The greatest economic impact fell on outsourced workers in cleaning and catering jobs, and other services. At Birzeit University, for example, 70 out of 92 cleaning

workers lost their job due to the closure of the campus. Some other universities reduced their administrative staff during the pandemic.

The impact of the pandemic on universities will be long-term. The tough economic situation will make it more difficult for students to pay their fees and this will cause a financial crisis for universities. The accentuate educational inequalities. Very few

education a student receives, and this will home for distance learning. Although our students have suitable conditions at economic impact also affects the quality of union is strong at Birzeit, I fear the university administration will seek to use the pandemic to reduce the number of administrative and support staff. This has been a long-term goal of the university, and the pandemic provides them with an excuse to accelerate this change. ”

AGRICULTURAL SECTOR WORKERS AND COVID-19

AGRICULTURAL SECTOR WORKERS AND COVID-19



Agricultural workers, Deir al Balah, Gaza, 2020. Photo by: Mohammed Zaanoun.

Almost six decades of Israeli military occupation have led to the de-development of the Palestinian agricultural sector. One indication of this is the sector's decreasing share of overall GDP in the oPt—in 1982 the agricultural sector contributed 30% to GDP, but by the beginning of 2020 it contributed a mere 7.3%.¹⁵⁵ This decline was exacerbated by the pandemic, which caused an 11% drop in agricultural productivity.¹⁵⁶

Palestinians in the oPt have restricted access to most fertile and grazing land, as well as water resources in the area. In the West Bank, Israel has total control over Area C which holds 63% of the area's agricultural resources.¹⁵⁷

In the Jordan Valley, the most fertile land in the eastern part of the West Bank, farmers have lost 50% of their cultivated land and are forced into exploitative work on agricultural settlements. Ongoing settlement expansion and accompanying infrastructure have reduced access further.

Gaza has only 10% of the oPt's agrarian land, and 40% of this is located in the Israeli-imposed "buffer or border areas" along the entire length of its border. The buffer area ranges from 150 to 1000 meters wide.¹⁵⁸ Access to these lands is restricted and dangerous. Farmers who take the risk are regularly attacked by Israeli forces and find their land in need of major rehabilitation.¹⁵⁹ In addition, farms and agricultural infrastructure are routinely destroyed as part of successive Israeli incursions. According to Gaza's Ministry of Agriculture, the agricultural sector lost over US\$204 million during

Israel's 11-day bombardment of Gaza in May 2021.¹⁶⁰

The productivity of the oPt's agricultural sector is further impeded by Israel's control over borders, and restriction of movement between the oPt's fragmented

geographies as well as on imports and exports. Just the ban on the import of fertilisers, chemicals and agricultural machinery listed on a 'dual-purpose list', costs the Palestinian economy over US\$142 million annually, reducing agricultural productivity by 20-33%.¹⁶¹

Dual-Purpose List

Israel's 'dual-purpose list' includes products and produce which the Israeli government refuses Palestinians access to, under the pretext that they may have military applications. This is not a set list, but rather one that is constantly evolving.

The list of banned products is extensive and has a devastating implication on Palestinians' everyday life and economy. In 2018, it included 56 items restricted from entering into the oPt, and an

additional 62 items that only apply to Gaza. Banned items include: hydrogen peroxide used by the food industry, leather tanning and textile production; metal pipes; drilling equipment; and even medical equipment such as X-ray machines. According to the World Bank, removing dual-use restrictions would bring about additional cumulative growth of 6% to the WB and 11% in Gaza by 2025.¹⁶²

Israel's systematic de-development of the agricultural sector has transformed Palestinian society from a well-supplied agrarian society to one that is dependent on food imports from Israel. According to the Israeli Ministry of Agriculture, in 2019 Israel exported 151,556 tons of produce to the oPt and imported a mere 34,924 tons.¹⁶³ The flooding of the oPt with Israeli agricultural products generates enormous profits for Israeli companies, while severely weakening the position of Palestinian farmers who cannot compete with mass-produced Israeli goods.

Agriculture Workers in the oPt

The decline of the Palestinian agricultural sector has also been accompanied by a drop in its share of overall employment. In 1974 around 40% of Palestinians worked in agriculture¹⁶⁴ however, by the end of 2020 only 6.5% of workers from the oPt worked in agriculture, ranking second to last after the transport and communication sectors (6.3%).¹⁶⁵

The loss of agricultural jobs is particularly acute in Gaza. According to the ILO, 15% of Gaza's agricultural workers lost their jobs in 2019 alone.¹⁶⁶

A large number of agricultural workers in the oPt are working on land owned by a member of their immediate or extended family, usually as sharecroppers. Indeed, according to the last census carried out by the PCBS, there are 111,310 agricultural holdings in the oPt (81.7% in the West Bank and 19.3% in Gaza); 71.1% of which are crop-based, with the large majority (88%) relatively small-scale family-owned and operated farms.¹⁶⁷

- 33.6% less than 2.99 dunams¹⁶⁸
- 36.4% between 3-9.99 dunams
- 23.4% between 10-39.99 dunams
- 6.6% over 40 dunams.

Other workers in the sector are hired on a seasonal basis as daily waged workers (in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and on settlement farms).

Table 1: Palestinian Agricultural Workers as percentage of all those in work, location of employment and wages (2020).

	Gaza Strip	West Bank	Israel & the settlements	oPt
As % of employed persons	7.8%	6%	6.8%	6.5%
Male (as % of employed persons in the sector)	8.3%	5.8%	-	6.4%
Female (as % of employed persons in the sector)	3.8%	7%	-	6.4%
Average daily wage	22.6 NIS	95.6 NIS	171.9 NIS	90.2 NIS

Source: PCBS, Labour Force Survey, Q4 2021.¹⁶⁹

Over 80% of agricultural workers are employed in the informal sector and thus have no contracts or access to social benefits.¹⁷⁰ Work in agriculture is labour intensive, with little regulation. Israel's import restrictions and the inability to afford machinery mean that many farmers still rely on animals (donkeys or mules) to plough and cultivate the land. Workers spend hours under the sun in the open fields or greenhouses with minimal protective equipment, often using their hands to apply fertilisers and pesticides which contaminate the air and their skin.

Beyond the physical hardship of the job, agricultural workers are frontline defenders against further land annexation and are routinely attacked while on the job by the Israeli military or military protected Israeli settlers. UNOCHA has documented a steady increase in settler violence against Palestinian farmers and their property. During the 2020 olive harvest season, at least 26 farmers were injured and 1,700 trees destroyed.¹⁷¹

Interviews conducted for this research revealed the following key issues facing workers across the sector, all of which were exacerbated under the pandemic:

- Low Pay.** Agricultural workers are the lowest paid workers in the oPt, the majority of whom earn daily wages amounting to far less than the monthly minimum wage of NIS 1,450.¹⁷² According to the ILO, 42% of agricultural workers in the oPt earn less than the minimum wage—16% of workers in the West Bank and 99% of workers in Gaza.¹⁷³ The majority were already struggling to make ends meet before the pandemic, Covid-19 related closures, movement restriction and social distancing regulations reduced their income even further.
- Knock-on Effect.** Farmers and agricultural workers suffered from the knock-on effect of closure or the restricted operation of other sectors, which further reduced their income. For example, restricted public transport impeded access to what little work was

available and prevented farmers from reaching their land to tend or harvest crops. The closure of markets curbed farmers ability to sell their produce.

- **Less Working Hours.** Adherence to social distancing regulations led to the split of work shifts at greenhouses where many women are employed.

and the exclusion of agricultural workers. Evening and night shifts are not an option for many women whose integration into the job market is shaped by social norms, as well as domestic and social reproductive responsibilities. The changes to the working hours left many women working for fewer hours a day.

Hind Qashtah, a 33-year-old greenhouse worker, Der Al Balah, Besieged Gaza.

“ I work at a greenhouse in Deir Al Balah, Gaza. Before Covid-19, I worked 5 hours a day, 6 days a week and earned NIS 480 a month. During the olive picking season, we work longer hours (7 am to 4 pm), but the pay is almost double—NIS 40 a day.

With the imposition of restrictions in March, to curb the spread of Covid-19, our workday has been split into morning and evening shifts. I've rarely had a full day's work since

then due to movement restrictions and lack of transportation, which makes access to work difficult. My employer has also cut down on the number of workers and has prioritised male employees.

To supplement my income, I tried making yoghurt and cheese at home, but the experiment failed. Electricity cuts and restrictions on movement meant that much of the produce spoiled before I could sell it.

- **No Legal Protection.** Agricultural workers and farmers lack legal protection under the Palestinian Labour Law. The law differentiates between agricultural labourers and those working in the private sector who are entitled to employment contracts, social benefits and a monthly minimum wage, even if loosely enforced. Agricultural workers are deemed to work within communal and family relations. This renders workers extremely vulnerable to exploitation and with little leverage.

Agricultural unions and labour mobilisation during the pandemic

Temporary and seasonal employment, the prevalence of family-based employment,

from the Palestinian Labour Law render them even more susceptible to exploitation. Along with the nature of employment and lack of legal protection, interviewees for this study identified the lack of democracy and independence of the trade union movement as central impediments to labour organising in the sector.

Similar to other sectors, agricultural unions are generally affiliated to, and operate as fronts for political factions. Workers and labour organisers describe a context on the ground where structures nominally exist, however they do little to advance agricultural workers' rights. In most cases, workers received no tangible support. This all leads to workers' mistrust in labour organising.

Said Al Astal, Head of the Khan Yunis branch of the General Union of Agriculture and Food Industries Workers, and PGFTU Executive Committee member

“ The labour movement, as a whole, falls short in protecting workers. This is unfortunately due to the labour movement being riddled with factionalism and political affiliation.

The politicisation [factionalism] of the trade union movement has hollowed it of its responsibility and power. What we have now is merely sloganeering, where trade unions

operate as fronts for the various political parties.

As a union, we lack a rank-and-file base. In 2021, only 100 members renewed their membership. There is a reluctance to join the union, mainly due to mistrust between the base and the leadership. The union leadership is largely absent and has adopted a top-down form of organising, where the relationship with workers is only seasonal.”

The pandemic highlighted agricultural workers acute vulnerability and the weakness of the sector's trade union movement, pushing workers to develop independent structures. A case in point is the Farmers Movement launched in Gaza

in 2019, which held its founding conference in June 2021. At this conference, the organisation was renamed the Union of Agricultural Workers, based on a programme of struggle and as an alternative to the existing unions in the sector.

Akram Muhamad Hussain Dhier, a 50-year-old self-employed farmer and a member of the Farmer's Movement

“ I'm part of the independent farmer's movement, established at the end of 2019. The movement has a strong representation of women who hold 5 out of 9 board seats.

The movement was set up as an alternative to the unions that have offered us no support. We're well aware that rights are taken and not given. We set up the Farmer's Movement to struggle for our rights. Our most basic aims are to spread awareness, preserve the rights

of farmers and reduce work-related risks. We strive for more, but for now, as a movement with no financial means, this is what we can deliver.

Although Covid-19 impacted our activities, we continued to visit different localities and launched initiatives to raise awareness, particularly on how workers can maintain social distancing whilst they are on the job or selling their produce.”

CONSTRUCTION SECTOR WORKERS AND COVID-19

CONSTRUCTION SECTOR WORKERS AND COVID-19



Construction workers, Qalqilya checkpoint, 2021. Photo by: Keren Manor.

Palestinian workers are the backbone of Israel's construction sector. Before the pandemic, some 95,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel and over 80,000 workers (68,037 with permits and 14,000 without) from the oPt were employed in Israel's construction sector.¹⁷⁴ Palestinian workers from the oPt alone generate 66% of the sector's NIS 80 billion annual contribution to Israel's GDP.¹⁷⁵

The sector is notoriously exploitative and dangerous for Palestinian workers, with minimal regulation or oversight. According to the Israeli Ministry of Labour, in 2019 there were only 50 inspectors to cover 14,000 active construction sites.¹⁷⁶ A 2017 investigation by the same ministry revealed that 70% of scaffolding used on Israeli construction sites does not meet required safety standards.¹⁷⁷

Negligence by contractors and the Israeli government leads directly to the death and injury of Palestinian workers. In 2019, of 40 on-the-job fatalities in the Israeli construction industry, 33 were Palestinian—19 from the oPt and 14 Palestinian citizens of Israel. According to Kav LaOved, more than half of workers injured in the construction industry on an annual basis are Palestinian, reflecting the division of labour within the sector, while Palestinians (and increasingly foreign workers) are employed in the most dangerous labour-intensive jobs, Jewish-Israeli citizens hold managerial, engineering and planning positions.¹⁷⁸

Construction workers generally suffer

from low wages and long working hours. The majority of workers hold daily exit work permits, which necessitates a lengthy daily journey through securitised and overcrowded checkpoints to reach work, and to return at the end of their shift. This extends their working day to up to 16 hours. Israeli employers also systematically avoid contractual agreements to circumvent their obligations towards Palestinian workers from the West Bank, including the provision of healthcare and compensation in case of injuries on the job.¹⁷⁹

Construction workers during Covid-19

In early March, when seven workers in the tourism sector in Bethlehem contracted the Covid-19 virus, Israel swiftly imposed a security lockdown on the city and later extended it to the whole of the occupied West Bank, stopping all non-essential movement from and into the geographical enclave. The PA followed by declaring a state of emergency across the West Bank, limiting internal movement.

Bethlehem's Checkpoint 300 is one of the main checkpoints through which workers exit every morning to work in Israel. With its closure, thousands of workers were prevented from accessing work. Israel's construction sector was particularly affected. According to the Israel's Builder's Association, the sector's monthly loss due to the decline of Palestinian manual labour could reach NIS 4.56 billion and disrupt the employment of over 125,000 Israelis.¹⁸⁰

To circumvent the collapse of Israeli-oPt labour dependent sectors and the shortage of essential sector workers, the Israeli government struck a deal with the

PA on 17 March 2020 to permit the entry of workers in the construction, health, and agricultural sectors, on the condition that they enter Israel before March 22 and not return home for at least a month. The deal included only workers who had a valid work permit and were less than 50 years old.¹⁸¹ These requirements were repeated during every Israeli national lockdown.

A shortage of raw materials compounded with imposed lockdowns and restrictions of movement led to massive job losses for oPt workers in the Israeli economy. It is estimated that around 64% (68,000) workers with permits lost their jobs during Israel's first 9 week-long national lockdown lasting from 22 March 2020 until Eid al-Adha at the end of May. Of those who lost their jobs, the majority (47,000) were construction workers.¹⁸²

Interviews conducted for this study showed that those who remained in employment during successive lockdowns faced highly uncertain work conditions. The structural exploitation in this sector was exacerbated and workers suffered due to their acute dependency on these jobs. Some of the key issues facing workers during the pandemic included:

• Unsafe Working Conditions.

While Palestinian workers were urged to continue working, no clear arrangements were made to guarantee their safety and adequate accommodation. Under the Israeli-PA deal, Israeli contractors were required to provide accommodation, implement on-site social distancing and provide workers with protective gear. For the majority of workers, no such conditions were met.¹⁸³ Workers slept in large groups on construction sites, or in warehouses on factory grounds, with no adequate

facilities for the maintenance of basic hygiene. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, during the first wave of the pandemic, 74% of Covid-19 cases in the oPt came from Palestinian workers employed in the Israeli economy and those in their immediate surroundings.¹⁸⁴

- **Vilification.** It soon became clear that these commitments would not be met and on March 25 a Palestinian worker who had Covid-19 symptoms was dumped by his employer at a checkpoint. The Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh then called on workers to return home.¹⁸⁵ At the time there were high infection rates in Israel in comparison to the West Bank, but no arrangements were made to test workers before they returned to their families. Returning workers were then vilified as key vectors of the virus. In daily press conferences, PA officials dubbed workers as Palestine's 'loose waist' (خاصرتنا الرخوة), accusing them of risking the lives of their family members and the wider community.¹⁸⁶ Workers were depicted as a public health hazard to be controlled through security measures. This discourse reached its peak when a Palestinian security officer shot a labourer on his way to work.¹⁸⁷

- **Permit Brokering.** The prevalence of permit brokering in the construction sector imposes a heavy financial burden on construction workers. At the onset of the pandemic, some 45% (42,501) of workers with permits had bought them through brokers. The majority of these (75.7%) were in the construction sector. A monthly permit costs a construction worker on average of NIS 2,439. Thus,

while construction workers' average monthly salary is NIS 6,336, many take home less than the Israeli construction sector minimum wage of NIS 5,600.¹⁸⁸ Many workers who had bought their way into work were now out of a job.

- **Lower Wages.** For those who remained in work, wages were pushed down even further. Despite high wages in comparison to workers in the oPt, the wages of West Bank construction workers in Israel are at least 2.3% to 2.6% lower than their Israeli counterparts.¹⁸⁹ During the first lockdown working hours were reduced and their monthly wages declined by NIS 900 (13% less than pre-Covid wages).¹⁹⁰ Even when the number of workers returned to pre-Covid levels, wages continued to fall.

- **Denial of Social Benefits.** All Palestinian workers with permits are meant to be in full time employment and are entitled to the same social benefits and rights as their Israeli counterparts.¹⁹¹ Monthly employer contributions and deductions from their wages are made to cover these. Construction workers are also included in the sector's collective bargaining agreements. Under Israeli-PA agreements, collected social benefits should be transferred to workers through the PA every month. For decades, however, contributions have been withheld by Israel and channelled to Israeli government managed funds. It is estimated that the Palestinian workers' sick leave fund alone holds NIS 515 million (US\$159.87 million). Israel's high court refused to release this fund to aid workers in need of assistance due to coronavirus related dismissals or inability to access work.¹⁹²

Thus, while Israeli workers were placed on leave of absence, or those who couldn't access work due to Covid-19 regulations received 75% of their monthly pay in unemployment benefits, tens of thousands of Palestinians spent months with no income.¹⁹³

- **Securitisation and Surveillance.** Israel used Covid-19 to increase surveillance of Palestinian workers. During Israel's first lockdown, employers withheld the IDs of workers who remained at work to monitor and restrict their movement, an act that even the Israeli Ministry of Justice had previously identified as a marker of forced labour.¹⁹⁴ This practice stopped after a court case bought by the Association for Human Rights in Israel, Kav LaOved and Physicians for Human Rights.¹⁹⁵ In addition, Palestinians wishing to apply for permits, check their validity and "security status,"¹⁹⁶ or apply for the removal of an imposed travel ban, were instructed to do so through the mobile application Al Munasseq [the Coordinator]. To complete the

installation of the military-developed app, workers had to permit the Israeli military to access the mobiles' location, all data stored and transmitted through it, and the device's microphone and camera. Thousands of workers had downloaded the app before a court ruling ordered the military to change the terms of installation.¹⁹⁷

With the lifting of the lockdown in late May 2020, workers gradually started going back to work, and by September pre-Covid levels were reached. Job losses in the oPt increased dependency on the Israeli job market. While it is impossible to ascertain the exact number of Palestinian workers without permits who work in Israel and the settlements, conservative estimates indicate that by the end of 2020 their number was significantly higher than in recent years, reaching over 30,000 with many of them in the construction sector.¹⁹⁸

Workers without permits

Workers without permits face even more precarious and exploitative conditions than workers with permits. As 'illegal workers' they have no rights or recognition that workers with permits have and earn on average NIS 150-200 per day.

They endure the uncertainty of selling their labour on a daily basis and are paid in cash on a daily, weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly basis depending on agreements with the employer. This renders them particularly vulnerable to arbitrary deductions or the withholding of wages.

The lack of a permit forces workers to take

even greater risks in their pursuit for work, including travelling to worksites through dangerous and clandestine routes. In the last two months of 2019, twenty construction workers were shot by Israeli soldiers as they were trying to cross the Wall to look for work in Israel.¹⁹⁹ If caught, they can be imprisoned or fined by Israeli military forces. The risks involved in accessing work and making a living forces these workers to live in hiding and often remain away from their families for long periods of time. The psychological toll on workers who live in such precarity and uncertainty is enormous and was worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁰⁰

Abu Khaled (name changed), a 50-year-old construction foreman from Zatarah village in Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank

“ Prior to Covid-19 I had between 5-10 men working for me. We would normally take on big jobs, predominantly condominiums and public buildings.

Workers from the Bethlehem governate were first hit in the West Bank by Covid restrictions. The lack of decent jobs in the area has pushed a large number of workers to seek employment from Israeli businesses or in illegal settlements. In early March, a number of these workers were diagnosed with the virus. The Palestinian Authority and the Israeli occupying power swiftly imposed a 72-day curfew on the area, cutting it from the rest of the West Bank and preventing movement within the governate.

These actions stigmatised workers from the area as 'virus spreaders'. As a result, employers stopped working with us and the new restrictions on movement made it impossible for us to find new work. Employers also seized the opportunity to avoid paying us for work we had already completed.

The loss of jobs and economic hardship created a greater dependency on Israeli employers. Many workers, including those who had been working for me, are now working for Israeli bosses. One of the challenges we now face as foremen is that we can't find any labourers if we get a job.

Trade Union Response

Under the Oslo Accords, Palestinian trade unions are forbidden to unionise Palestinian workers employed within Israel or the settlements. Instead, every month the Histadrut, The General Organisation of Workers in Israel, deducts 0.75% from the wages of every Palestinian worker with a permit employed within Israel. Of this collected fee, 50% is to be transferred to the PGFTU, which would be held responsible for delivering services and social benefits to workers from the oPt.

However, despite the compulsory deduction, the Histadrut offers Palestinian workers no help other than a 'parity committee' for employment disputes and does not engage in collective bargaining on behalf of Palestinian workers.²⁰¹ The Histadrut was silent as the exploitation of Palestinian workers increased during the pandemic. The PGFTU has also been criticised for its lack of concrete

support for workers, with its activities limited to calling on the Histadrut to fulfil their obligations and on the Israeli government to release accumulated social benefits.

The Histadrut's monopoly over the unionisation of Palestinian construction workers, compounded by the inability of Palestinian unions to directly unionise or represent West Bank construction workers in Israel and the settlements, renders workers dependent on support from Israeli organisations such as the Maan - Workers Association and the workers' rights organisation Kav LaOved. These organisations mainly provide training, support in accessing social benefits and the bringing of legal cases to Israeli courts on behalf of workers. Palestinian trade unions who want to unionise Palestinian construction workers in Israel are pushed to do so in conjunction with these organisations.

Such is the case with the New Unions, one of the only Palestinian trade unions that attempts to unionise West Bank workers employed in Israel (see Box interview with Muhammad Bledi). The New Unions held their first founding conference in 2016

and emerged from successful strike waves and organising efforts with workers at the Solar Gas Industries factory in the Nitzani Shalom industrial zone (west of Tulkarem) in 2009-2010.

Muhammad Bledi, Head of the New Unions founded in 2016

“ With regards to workers in the settlements and 1948 Palestine, we cooperate with Maan Trade Union and Kav LaOved. We carry out joint training and awareness raising workshops. We also help workers to collect their dues through the provision of an accountant who takes 20% of the final dues he wins for the workers.

Because many workers do not speak Hebrew, an unfortunate phenomenon has developed whereby labour lawyers and accountants take a greater share by concealing the final amounts that workers are awarded. However, the massive job losses as a result of Covid-19 have opened up new organising opportunities for the union. ”

Walid Khudari, Head of the Construction Workers Union within the New Unions

“ In my opinion, the real work of the Construction Workers Union started on 15 March 2020, with the beginning of the Covid crisis. We held a meeting for unions active in the Tubas area (Jordan Valley) and outlined a plan to protect construction workers and started implementing it. At the end of 2020, we held a conference for construction workers and we now have 250 members, a branch in almost all governorates, and an administrative committee composed of nine members.

In April we conducted a census to assess worker's family's needs and distributed over 250 food parcels to those in need. We also intervened on behalf of workers, with official authorities to remove various obstacles they

face and to ensure they have access to their rights. For example, an agreement was reached with the Ministry of Health to improve workers' access to health insurance. In addition, in the Jordan Valley, we were able to find alternative employment opportunities for workers who lost their jobs.

Our union offers workers legal support by assisting them with legal representation. The majority of cases we handle are for workers employed in 1948 Palestine or the settlements. Indeed, over the past few months, we've supported many construction workers who submitted cases against their employers to the Israeli courts; a large number of which were successful. ”

Despite these attempts, support for construction workers remains minimal, and in general construction workers are left to navigate a complex bureaucratic and legal system that is purposefully

designed to keep the flow of cheap labour into the Israeli economy. The masses of undocumented workers in this sector have virtually no access to rights and no mechanism to attain them.

LOOKIN FORWARD

LOOKING FORWARD



Striking teachers, Ramallah, West Bank, 2016. Photo by: Oren Ziv.

This report has mapped the impact of Covid-19 on Palestinian workers and traced the implications of the pandemic for labour organising and the Palestinian union movement. The pandemic has clearly deepened an already existing crisis for Palestinian labour. Israel's decades-long military occupation and systematic policies of de-development have suffocated the Palestinian economy and left Palestinian workers with little capacity to face the deep challenges of the last 18 months. As a result, many Palestinian workers have been pushed into precarious and unsafe working conditions. Unemployment and poverty levels have increased significantly, with women, youth, and refugees most affected.

At the same time, the development strategy pursued by the PA over the last decade has severely undermined the livelihood and economic security of Palestinian workers. This strategy is marked by spending policies that are heavily skewed towards the security sector, and the implementation of standard neoliberal economic models that have failed elsewhere around the world. Such policies have prioritised private sector growth and allowed the PA to offload its political and fiscal crises onto Palestinian workers. Widening levels of social and economic inequality have left the poorest workers and their families ill-equipped to respond to the pandemic. In this context, Palestinian trade unions lack the ability or will to influence political and economic decision-making.

There is a clear need for more labour-centred research that places Palestinian workers upfront as an independent social force and analytical category. This kind of research must begin with a critical reckoning of the social and economic changes that have taken place in the Palestinian economy since the beginning of the Oslo Accords, including the highly negative impact of the Paris Protocol and the PA's wholesale embrace of neoliberal development strategies. All of this has taken place within a strategic horizon established by Oslo—one that has not only narrowed Palestinian political vision to negotiation around discontinuous slithers of territory in the West Bank and Gaza Strip—but has also fully internalised the fragmentation of the Palestinian people.

Overall, these conditions and the general impact of the pandemic provide an opening to thinking about new ways to revitalise the Palestinian labour movement. Throughout this study, four basic themes have emerged from the various conversations and interviews with trade union leaders, rank-and-file members and organisers, unorganised and informal workers:

1. Trade Union Democratisation and Independence

As the interviews conducted for this report demonstrate, internal union structures have been corrupted by rampant factionalism. The division between Fatah and Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has had a devastating impact on the Palestinian labour movement. Both authorities have used the split to pressure trade unions in one way or another, to exact concessions or create 'new' union structures as alternative spaces affiliated with either

faction. Palestinian labour has paid a heavy price for this split, and it has been detrimental to building unity across the trade union movement.

In this respect, many of those interviewed expressed the need for an independent and democratic trade union movement that is not beholden to political factions. While Palestinian factions have traditionally played an important role within trade unions, their transition under the Oslo Accords to governing parties—particularly the leading parties of Fatah and Hamas—has embroiled trade unions in factional schisms. In some unions, political appointments are the norm and leaderships are decided through mutually-agreed lists divided between the factions. The situation is not the same across all unions— but in general, the connection between factionalism and political appointments needs to be addressed if unions are to become an effective voice for their members. As the wildcat strike by teachers in the West Bank demonstrate, rank-and-file members hold serious grievances against official leaderships that are seen to be beholden to the PA and opposed to grassroots mobilisation.

On the other hand, some of the newer unions emerging in this factional context are moving towards a 'service unions' model. In interviews with these newer unions, some members emphasised the importance of 'apolitical' unionism as part of a rejection of the factionalism and lack of independence that characterises many unions. However, other interviewees expressed their concern with framing labour organising around a rejection of politics. Instead, these activists felt that unions needed to take a leadership role in both wider social issues and the national struggle. According to these activists,

a revitalisation of the Palestinian trade union movement requires a new kind of politics that prioritises the defence of workers' rights before factional interests, as well as democratic and independent union structures.

2. Social Movement Unionism

Internationally, there has long been a rich debate about labour revitalisation strategies in the wake of the major defeats of the 1980s and 1990s. One concept that has emerged as part of these discussions is the idea of 'social movement unionism' –the notion that unions need to be at the vanguard of larger social and political mobilisations aimed at benefiting communities more broadly (as opposed to models of business unionism).

These debates were strongly echoed through much of the fieldwork for this report. The severe impact of the pandemic on key sectors such as health and education have provided an important opening for Palestinian unions to envision new kinds of campaigns that link union demands, a stronger public sector, and community needs. Campaigns for workers can be framed beyond narrow membership demands to a broader defence and improvement of public health and education. The teachers' and doctors' strikes, for example, have been able to gain broad community support by emphasising that better conditions for teachers and doctors benefit the entire community. Issues of collective bargaining and wages, which were central to all the unions interviewed in this report, are inherently tied to issues of public policy and public interest. In turn, this conception of social movement unionism strengthens collective bargaining and brings workers' issues to the broader

public—rather than being confined to closed-door negotiations based on the labour-management relationship.

In the Palestinian context, the leadership role of the labour movement is particularly crucial within the broader national struggle. Palestinian unions have historically played a key role in supporting popular mobilisations and were major political actors in the strikes and community actions of the first Intifada. Teachers and university unions ensured education continued despite Israeli attacks, arrest campaigns and military curfews. Medical staff supported those hurt during clashes. Many of those interviewed referred to these experiences and noted that this decisive role of unions had waned since the Oslo Accords.

There are indications, however, that a new generation of labour activists are seeking to re-assert the importance of unions and worker struggles—this is particularly crucial given the wider legitimacy crisis of the PA and its crackdown on dissent and freedom of expression (especially after the murder of dissident Nizar Banat). Interviewees stressed that all of this creates important openings for a new kind of labour activism that moves beyond the closed-door lobbying of the PA.

Indeed, the election of Nadia Habash in August 2021 as head of the Palestinian Engineers Association, has been widely perceived as a move in the direction of democratising unions, as well as making them more accountable to a wider public. Habash is an outspoken critic of the PA's silencing of political dissidents and activists. In July 2021, prior to her election, she was arrested, along with two of her children during a protest denouncing PA complicity in the killing of Nizar Banat.

3. Organising the Unorganised

Even before the pandemic, the percentage of Palestinians in the informal sector had increased significantly, with 48% of waged workers employed without any form of contract.²⁰² As with elsewhere around the globe, labour market deregulation has meant that a large proportion of Palestinian workers rely on irregular daily wages and short-term contracts. Palestinian unions, however, have historically been strong in formal and public sector areas, such as health and education. As numerous workers and activists noted in this report, these changes to the Palestinian economy necessitate a re-orientation of unions towards informal workers and the unemployed. There is an urgency to 'organise the unorganised,' and for unions (old and new) to reorient their work towards membership drives that incorporate informal workers.

Union campaigning in the oPt has largely been framed around the goal of a minimum wage. In this respect, some activists pointed to the possibility of going beyond this demand to build a broader coalition around the concept of a living wage, which would enable workers to afford all basic necessities (including food, housing, education, transportation, clothing and ability to save for emergencies). This would allow unions to reach out to unorganised and informal workers. Another key theme that emerged from interviews is the stark wage differences between those in upper management and ordinary workers. With salary reductions remaining a norm in the public sector, campaigns for a living wage could also be accompanied by the idea of a maximum wage—this could help combat corruption around highly-paid managerial positions and ensure that

the heaviest burden of the fiscal crisis is not directed at the lowest ranks of the workforce. Indeed, this demand has emerged in other parts of the Middle East (such as Egypt during the upheavals of 2011).

4. Palestinian Workers across Borders

The pandemic has starkly highlighted the plight of those Palestinian workers who work across borders. Construction workers who travel from the West Bank to Israel, for example, were some of the worst affected workers, especially in the early phases of the pandemic when they were blamed in the media and public discourse for transmission of the virus. These workers did not receive any financial support when asked to remain in their homes. In this context, there is a pressing need (and potential) to think about labour organising across the Green Line. As several of those interviewed noted, this would also help emphasise the continuities that exist between different segments of the Palestinian people—working against the territorial fragmentation of the last seven decades.

Indeed, historically, the formal representative bodies of Palestinian workers (within the PLO) were organised across the entirety of the Palestinian population (including refugees and Palestinian diasporas in other parts of the Middle East and elsewhere). The Oslo process served to undermine and narrow these structures, reducing the official trade union movement to the structures of the PGFTU, organised narrowly in the oPt. According to a number of those interviewed, revitalising the union movement depends on working against this separation and rebuilding structures that can campaign and represent

Palestinian workers in their entirety.

Despite the ongoing challenges, key struggles around labour rights continue to surface within official unions (often in opposition), and through the establishment of new independent unions. Overall, a revitalisation of the trade union movement entails a rethinking and rebuilding of the Palestinian labour

movement along more democratic lines, with leaderships that are accountable to their membership. Such unions would not only make basic wage demands of the PA, but also help to push back against the neoliberal trajectory which has hollowed the Palestinian economy and undermined livelihoods. In doing so, Palestinian labour holds the potential to help renew the broader Palestinian national struggle.

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