

## Palestinian Labour Organising Under COVID-19

This publication was originally published at [jadaliyya.com](http://jadaliyya.com)

The following interview features Nidal Ghaben, Executive Director of the Workers' Development Association (Amel). Amel is one of the main labour advocacy and research organisations in the Gaza Strip, and has a board of directors that includes labour activists, academics, and jurists. Abdulrahman Abu Nahel interviewed Ghaben on 1 December 2020 as part of fieldwork for the "Labour in Palestine and COVID-19" project funded by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (Regional Office in Palestine and Jordan), and led by Riya al-Sanah, Rafeef Ziadah, and Adam Hanieh. The interview has been abridged and edited from the original Arabic.]



A roadblock checking for COVID-19 in Qalqilya, Palestinian Territories, Palestine (14 April 2020). Photo by abu adel - photo via Shutterstock.

**Abdulrahman Abu Nahel (A):** Can you tell us about the situation of workers and the role of trade unions in the Gaza Strip before COVID-19?

**Nidal Ghaben (N):** Workers' conditions have been catastrophic since 2000, the beginning of the second intifada, and they continue to deteriorate. Unemployment rates have risen terribly. We had about 130 thousand labourers working inside Israel prior to the intifada, and most became unemployed following the closure of our borders and the thirteen-year siege that has since affected all aspects of life in Gaza. Israel's ultimate control of the movement of people and goods cuts us off from the rest of the world. We are besieged by air, sea, and land, with our lives tied to the instructions of a soldier, officer, or civil affairs coordinator. We have faced three wars that have systematically destroyed our economy. During the 2014 war, for example, about 1,200 economic and commercial facilities were destroyed, and about 30,000 workers were laid off.

It is very important to place the current situation in Gaza in the context of these multiple pre-ex-

isting crises related to the occupation. All of these pre-dated the pandemic and have compounded its effects.

The last report of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) indicates 52% unemployment in the Gaza Strip. We have 69% unemployment among youth, especially university graduates, whether male or female. We have seventeen to eighteen thousand graduates annually from universities in the Gaza Strip, who mostly join the army of the unemployed because the Palestinian labour market does not have the capacity to absorb them. At best five thousand jobs are created annually in the regular and irregular job markets, meaning the majority are not stable or do not have fixed work contracts. Even PCBS' numbers only account for those who have been unemployed for a period of three or four months, which excludes those who have intermittent work.

The siege and numerous wars have heavily affected the Palestinian agricultural sector. In 1994, agriculture made up thirteen percent of the GDP, but fell to 3.4 percent in 2017. In the same period of time, the industrial sector declined by five percent. These were the most important economic sectors in Gaza Strip in terms of employment and ability to absorb labour. Seven thousand workers in fishing have also lost their jobs due to the Israeli-imposed restrictions, which limit fishing areas to within 6 miles.

In short, there has been long-term structural erosion of the productive base of the Palestinian economy for nearly two decades. All of this placed Gaza in a very precarious situation prior to the pandemic.

**A:** You have noted that the high unemployment rates we often hear about do not always reflect the full reality. In light of what you've said about the Palestinian economy and unemployment, how has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted workers in Palestine and the Gaza Strip specifically?

**N:** Since March 2020, COVID-19 cases began to appear in Palestine—first in the West Bank, and later in the Gaza Strip. But, this is not simply a health crisis. The series of necessary preventive measures taken to curb the spread of the virus have compounded into a general economic crisis.

About forty thousand establishments have closed across the West Bank and Gaza, putting about 105,000 people out of work. 71,000 in the West Bank and 34,000 in the Gaza Strip. Only about twenty-six percent of commercial, industrial, and economic establishments are still operating at capacity. The reality is much worse than unemployment numbers indicate. PCBS statistics do not account for informal sector workers, daily labourers, and street vendors. All of these workers are not calculated as part of the official figures.

The Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute (MAS) expects unemployment rates in the West Bank will rise to thirty-five percent. As for the Gaza Strip, I think we might reach sixty-five or seventy percent, up considerably from the fifty-two percent unemployment rate prior to the pandemic. There is no exact estimation, but it is clear that many establishments across the board have been disrupted—from hotels and tourism, to agriculture, construction, and other commercial and administrative services.

There is also a decline in the value of wages, which has deeply affected standards of living. Prior to the pandemic, the typical worker in Gaza averaged only two to five dollars per day. These wages do not adequately cover basic necessities, and the decline in wages since the pandemic has severely disrupted the wider social fabric and family relations.

**A:** We will talk about this important point later on. But you mentioned institutions. Are the incomes of civil society and NGO employees affected, and are they still receiving salaries normally according to the available data?

**N:** In practice, civil society institutions mostly operate on a temporary employment system, that is, with fixed-term projects that are externally financed. They depend on projects financed from abroad by international institutions. The maximum length of these projects does not typically exceed one or two years. Civil society institutions have been heavily impacted by the general economic downturn following the pandemic. Some have been forced to close down and lay off a large number of their employees, adding to unemployment levels.

Funding for civil society institutions from the European Union (EU) and international donors has decreased by seventy percent. There are two reasons for this: first, some international institutions have begun directly operating in the Palestinian territories, replacing Palestinian civil society institutions. Second, funding priorities have moved to other countries, such as Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. Even the United Nations (UN) has significantly reduced its Palestine budget.

**A:** In light of the crisis in working conditions, unemployment, the informal sector, and so on, have you seen any changes, or new initiatives among unions or workers?

**N:** Unfortunately, trade unions have become largely ineffective. There are no substantial campaigns serving the workers and protecting their rights. This is because 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. To a large extent, they are loyal to their own parties and factions within the Palestinian Authority (PA). For example, most union employees or leaders are employees of the PA, meaning they work according to the dictates of the Ministry of Labor or even the security services. So, how can you ask union leaders to defend workers' rights from the PA while they are essentially an employee of that same authority?

The private sector, the Ministry of Labor, and Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU) signed a tripartite agreement to compensate workers or pay them minimum wage. But, even this agreement was never implemented. PGFTU should have pressured the government and the private sector to compensate those unemployed due to COVID-19, but the official unions did not undertake such a campaign.

**A:** Given that the unions are part of the problem, by virtue of their connection to the PA and various factions, are there examples of activities carried out by workers at the level of workers' committees, for exam-

ple, to defend their rights and achieve solidarity with other sectors?

**N:** Historically, there have been a number of important initiatives carried out by unions outside the framework of PGFTU. The Union of Workers' Committees, for example, was born out of the siege, after the closure of the Erez crossing in 2000. In 2002, the union organized marches and protests in the Square of the Unknown Soldier and in front of the Legislative Council Square with empty bowls and plates to symbolise our hunger. These protests won some gains, including the exemption of workers from health insurance fees as well as an end to basic education fees for our children. The union had demanded more, including reduced cost of electricity, scholarships, and better social security coverage. Only some of these demands were fulfilled.

The Union of Workers' Committees decline warrants consideration. The workers' movement encountered problems upon entering the political space during the Legislative Council elections in 2006. The union's political involvement led to a separation between its members and leaders, weakening its social demands. More institutionalized unions also attacked the movement for its grassroots nature.

Today, we need a social movement that fights for the poor and the causes of workers, like the suspended Social Security Bill. This bill tackles three items: pensions, health insurance, and maternity insurance. It excludes unemployment insurance, however. Despite this limitation, the bill has wide public and institutional support. Yet, the Palestinian Authority has not moved on this issue.

**A:** Can you tell us about the phenomenon of workers in Gaza registering as 'merchants' and how this differs from the West Bank?

**N:** Yes. Workers register as merchants, yet they work as day labourers in Israel and work informally. They pay a fee, but they are not registered with the Israeli Ministry of Labour. This means they have no records and no rights. Their wages can be less the minimum, and they have no injury insurance. Their work-related injuries are often recorded as accidents, rather than work injuries. Employers are supposed to be fined 20,000 shekels if they hire someone on a merchant's permit, yet the practice continues because it is a source of cheap labour. All parties turn a blind eye. Consequently, these Gazans work without any rights and retire after years of work without any benefits. Of course, these jobs also tend to be very dangerous.

**A:** Does the pandemic affect labor sectors differently,

for example, unorganized day labourers or women workers?

**N:** The sector most affected is the informal sector—the self-employed, bus drivers, hawkers, vendors, and retailers. The economic downturn has also hurt the tourism sector. The least impacted sectors are health care and education. In some instances, smaller retailers benefitted from shifting to making masks and selling medicines. These small initiatives helped to employ a few, but the sectors related to direct services, trade, and investment are all disrupted.

The pandemic has also impacted labor sectors with a high proportion of women workers. For example, all kindergartens remain closed. Women receive lower wages and work in worse conditions. In the childcare sector, wages do not exceed five hundred NIS (155 USD) per month and do not include transportation, which must be covered at the expense of the worker.

According to the most recent PCBS reports, the share of women in the workforce is only 19.2 percent, yet the number of female university graduates is the same as male graduates. This reflects a serious decline in female employment. Education, administration, tourism, and civil society sectors have the highest rates of female employment, but even these sectors show a lower participation rate for women than men.

In all cases, women do not have adequate opportunities in the labour market, which is a structural defect. The general attitude that "my father goes to work and my mother goes to the kitchen" is still widespread and impacts daily life and family relations.

**A:** What kind of support did the Palestinian Authority provide through the pandemic, and how effective was this?

As a government, the PA should support the public during times like these, but they have not provided any effective assistance to either the unemployed or those who are working. In the Gaza Strip, thousands of merchants have gone bankrupt. Thousands of checks have bounced. Some factors and companies have declared bankruptcy. Our government did not provide any adequate support, even though they collect our taxes and receive significant revenues from these establishments.

For the current level of unemployed workers, the government has only fed us crumbs—such as a voucher or a coupon. Even more, the distribution process lacks transparency and fairness. We witnessed clear clientelism, partisanship, factionalism, and regional

This interview is part of fieldwork for the “Labour in Palestine and COVID-19” research supported by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine & Jordan and sponsored with funds of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the Federal Republic of Germany.

This publication or parts of it can be used by others for free as long as they provide a proper reference to the original publication.

The content of this research is the sole responsibility of the authors and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of RLS.

Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine & Jordan  
Responsible: Ute Beuck  
Al Tireh St. /Nile St., Attari Bld #67, 2nd floor, (Opposite of the Chinese Embassy), Ramallah, Palestine  
Phone: +972 297 3302/06/46  
Fax: +972 297 3345  
Email: [info.ramallah@rosalux.org](mailto:info.ramallah@rosalux.org)  
[www.rosaluxemburg.ps](http://www.rosaluxemburg.ps)  
<https://www.facebook.com/rlspj>

favouritism. Many of the poor in Gaza did not receive any financial or in-kind assistance.

The West Bank has had a similar experience. Even the Waqfet Ezz Fund failed. The fund received only 10% of the goal and was distributed unfairly. Workers received just seven hundred NIS (217 USD), a sum that can barely cover a family's grocery expenses. The Gaza Strip only received 5% of the fund, and in the end, most of the money was actually transferred to the Ministry of Finance and the ruling authority in the West Bank. The cost of living is almost equal between Gaza and the West Bank—indeed, our prices are comparable to those in Israel.

The World Bank also conducted a project with the PA Ministry of Labor. The project aimed to provide compensation for about 64,000 workers across the occupied Palestinian territories. But, again there was discrimination and regional bias, and only five thousand people in Gaza will receive compensation.

On the topic of discrimination, PA salaries differ between Gaza and the West Bank. A Gazan PA employee earns twenty-five percent less than their West Bank counterpart. Released Gazan political prisoners also receive only half of the support payment allotted to West Bankers. Yet, our President tells us, "Prisoners are a red-line." Of course, this has a domino effect throughout society. If someone only receives a portion of their salary, they will spend less in shops and on services.

Most salaried employees suffer from debt. About eighty percent of PA employees borrow from banks—for housing, cars, and general expenses—and their loans are directly deducted from their salaries. With pandemic-induced salary reductions, a PA worker's monthly salary comes out to only three or four hundred NIS (90-120 USD). Who can live on such a paltry amount? Who can meet their family needs? Indebtedness is a key reason behind the destruction of our social fabric. It affects shop owners, merchants, and so forth. COVID-19 has accentuated the effects of debt, significantly widening class disparities and social differences.

It is very important that people understand these structural inequalities and discrimination we face in Gaza.

**A:** You mentioned the education and health sectors have been less impacted, but we see that workers in such vital sectors are subject to a scheme called "financial retirement." What does this mean?

**N:** "Financial retirement" describes a new scheme

rolled out during the pandemic. The scheme allows workers to declare their retirement while they continue working. The workers receive seventy percent of their salaries, continue to work, and do not accrue any pension benefits for the remaining time worked. There are many teachers and doctors in this situation, working and performing their duties yet not earning retirement salary.

This scheme is not governed by any laws or regulations. It is simply a decision that has been taken at the highest levels of the PA to save money at the workers' expense. This mostly impacts education and health-care workers, and of course, the scheme needs to be understood alongside the structural discrimination against Gaza that I have discussed.

**A:** Did the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) or any other international parties provide support during the COVID-19 crisis?

**N:** UNRWA barely covers the salaries of its employees. Recent salary payments have been delayed. The Commissioner-General of UNRWA and the General Union of Agency employees recently held a meeting in the Gaza Strip, and the union issued a statement asking for a full salary for UNRWA employees.

As for UNRWA services, health services, various types of in-kind assistance, and refugee employment services have all experienced cuts. The supply of medicines and medical supplies to clinics and health centres across Gaza have also been cut. UNRWA's work during the pandemic has been limited to emergency services or chronic diseases. The one positive development is that they now deliver medicines for chronic diseases directly to homes.

**A:** In your opinion, what long-term impact will the COVID-19 pandemic have on social and political life in the West Bank and Gaza?

**N:** Its impact will go beyond the immediate health challenges. Crises such as these serve to widen pre-existing social and economic inequalities. This is certainly what we are seeing unfold now in the Gaza Strip, where tens of thousands have lost their jobs, had their wages cut, or lost opportunities for the future. To reiterate, official statistics do not capture a very large stratum of the working population, including casual and day labourers. These informal workers constitute around forty percent of the total workforce. These workers will be the most impacted by the pandemic, and official relief efforts have overlooked them. This is a global crisis and will likely involve a very severe global economic downturn even as the health dimen-



---

sions improve. This longer-term crisis will also hit places like Gaza in a very significant manner.

Palestinian politics, on the other hand, was not operating at the appropriate level even before the pandemic. We have a national crisis afflicting the entire Palestinian national movement—from the PA and political parties to unions and federations. In this context, we must go beyond individual thinking. Right now, the unions put out an action plan, then the government puts out an action plan, and then civil society institutions set up an action plan... and on and on. In the absence of a collective strategy, and in the absence of a comprehensive, inclusive strategic plan, we will remain dispersed. We are in a situation, where, as we say “each one plows his own plot.” This is a structural crisis and COVID-19 is not the cause. Rather, COVID-19 revealed the weakness, impotence, and fragility of our national struggle, highlighting the pre-existing political and organisational problems—whether in the West Bank or Gaza.