

Israel and Palestine

ICTU Delegation Visit  
November 2007



STRONGER TOGETHER

**CONGRESS**

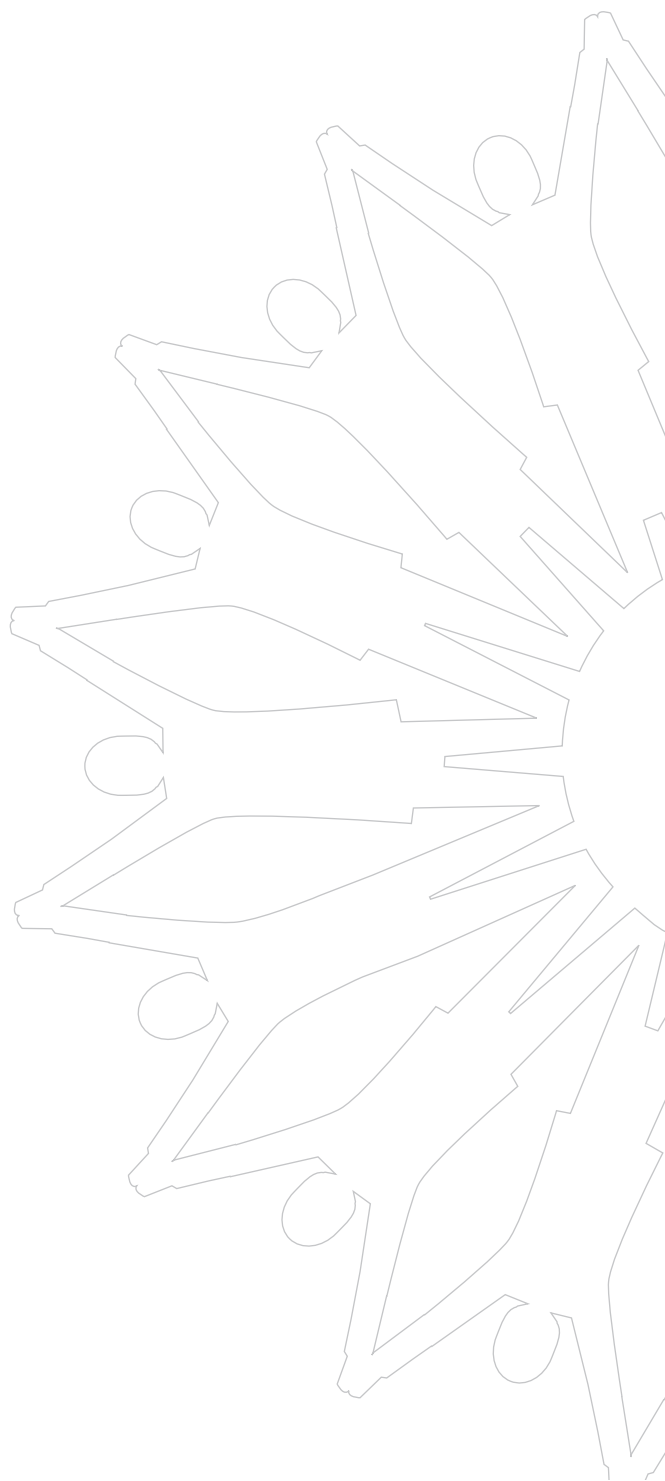
Irish Congress of Trade Unions





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## Preface

In July 2007 the Biennial Delegate Conference of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions carried two resolutions on Palestine which reaffirmed our support for the Palestinian people and committed Congress to a series of actions and high level political interventions.

These included representations to the Irish Government and the EU Council of Ministers, action through the international trade union movement, the holding of a high level conference, the building of solidarity links with the labour and trade union movement in the Occupied Territories and an economic boycott and divestment campaign.

For the first time, and as a result of their growing concern, Irish trade unionists have backed a call for an economic boycott of Israel. That, above all of our other decisions, provoked an almost immediate attack on us by representatives of the Israeli government.

Our decision was not arrived at lightly. It came as a consequence of our growing alarm at the international silence around the blatant and continued disregard of UN resolutions by the Israeli government and its intensified collective punishment of the Palestinian people. Israeli abuse of human rights extends across the Occupied Territories. It is at its height in besieged Gaza where a humanitarian crisis is in full flow.

Critics of the position adopted by Congress, were quick to point out that we did not understand the reality on the ground. However, they failed to understand that many Congress affiliates have long-standing policies on Palestine, backed up by regular contacts and practical projects with trade unions, human rights NGOs and aid agencies based in both Israel and the Occupied Territories. Within a few short months of our July conference, Congress had dispatched a delegation on a fact-finding visit to the region.

Despite our own knowledge and political analysis of the conflict and our ability to draw some parallels, however limited, with our own history, those of us who were visiting for the first time were ill-prepared for the abuses that we witnessed. This report is a reflection, in summary, of our experience.

In Israel, despite the best attempts of the trade union federation Histadrut and the government to convince us otherwise, discrimination against Arabs and Palestinians, in particular, is pervasive. We witnessed it in employment, business, trade union organisation, housing, and the provision of vital public services such as education and health and in the right to national and cultural identity. In Israel we met only 'Arab Israelis'.

In East Jerusalem and in towns across the West Bank, the Israeli occupying presence is all-pervasive. Small groups of Jewish fundamentalists settle where they will, backed up by the Israeli Army and the Israeli government inside territory to which they have no right. Their settlements become expansive complexes, the size of small towns and the apartheid wall is then re-routed to wall the neighbouring Palestinians in. Thus ghettos are continually reborn on both sides.

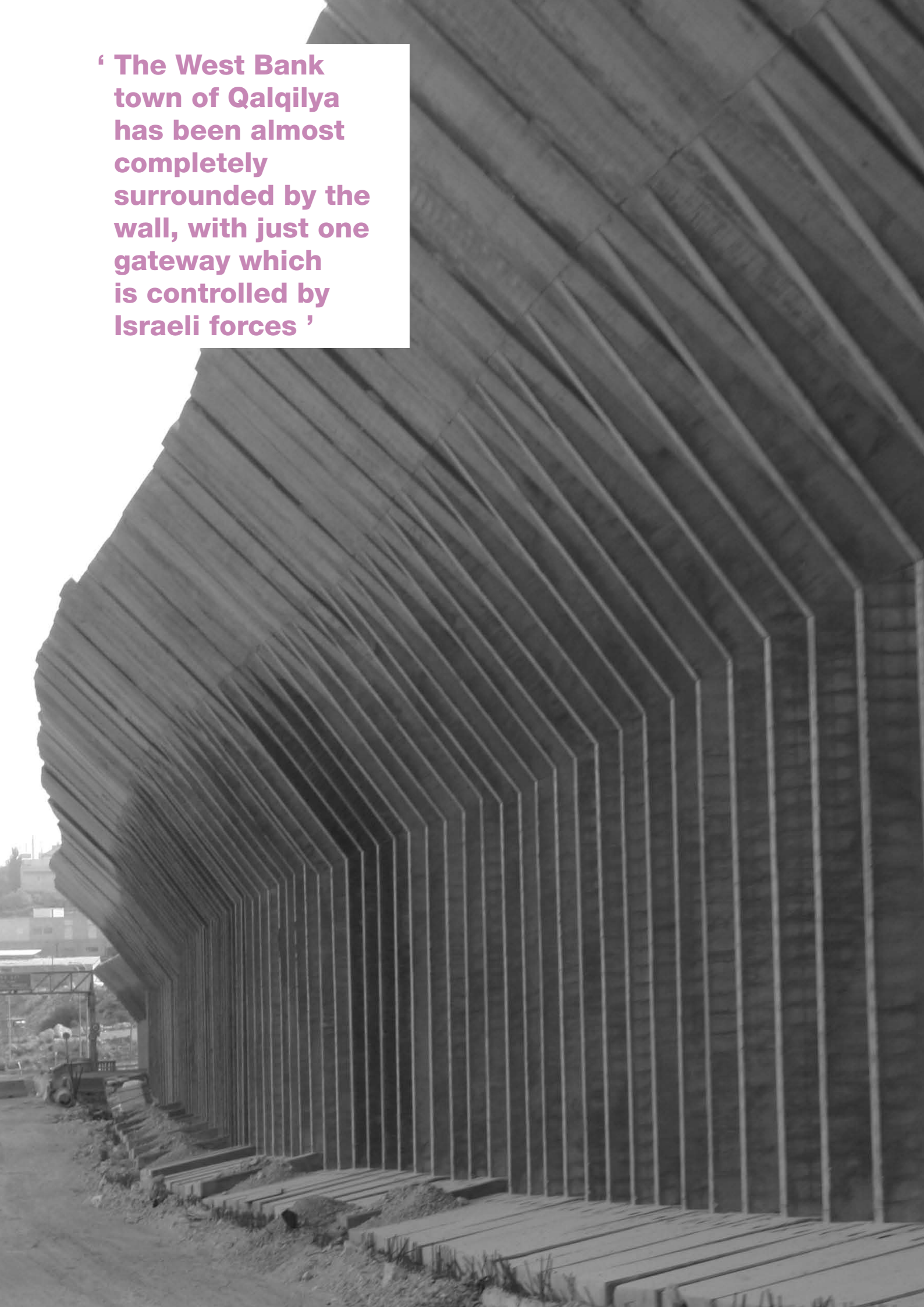
In Gaza we witnessed the consequences of a siege which international law defines as the collective punishment of a people and consequently a war crime. We witnessed anger at the silence from the West, especially Europe. 'Betrayal' by the governments of Europe was an expression we heard many times. We also witnessed the courage and determination with which aid agencies, human rights NGOs, trade unions and the government in Gaza alike were confronting the crisis. Most importantly, in the short time available to us, not only in Gaza, but across the Occupied Territories, we witnessed the resistance of ordinary people living in extraordinary circumstances.

All of this placed an imperative on us to bear witness. This report is but one stage of that process. Our forthcoming conference will be another and our lobbying work has already commenced.

**Patricia McKeown,  
President,  
Irish Congress of Trade Unions**



**‘ The West Bank town of Qalqilya has been almost completely surrounded by the wall, with just one gateway which is controlled by Israeli forces ’**





## Introduction

The genesis of this visit lies in a series of meetings that took place in November 2006, between the then Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem (Bishop Riah Abu El-Assal) and the Congress Secretariat in Belfast. The meetings were organised by the Trade Union Friends of Palestine.

Arising from these discussions, there was a request from the Bishop for a delegation of Irish Trade Unionists to visit Palestine. Subsequently, the Executive Council authorised a visit by a Congress delegation, with responsibility for organisation passed to Brendan Mackin. In doing so, the Executive Council was fully cognisant of the two motions on the agenda for the then forthcoming Biennial Delegate Conference (BDC) 2007.

The motions called on ICTU to commit to a range of domestic and international interventions in support of the Palestinian People. They explicitly called for a boycott of Israeli goods and services, allied with the promotion of a campaign of disinvestment from Israeli companies. Both were subsequently passed unanimously at Biennial Delegate Conference, in July 2007 (Appendix I).

The Executive Council would like to take this opportunity to put on record our gratitude to Brendan Mackin for the organisation of all the logistics associated with the visit and, in particular, for successfully managing such a diverse programme of meetings with so many parties, both in Israel and Palestine, to our President Patricia McKeown for her leadership and to the entire delegation for its dedication and clarity of purpose.

The delegation wishes to express its thanks to the Irish Ambassador to Israel, Michael Forbes, the Irish Consul to Palestine, Conor O'Riordan, Avital Shapiro of the Israeli Trade Union federation, Histadrut, and Ghada Abughalrym from the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU). All assisted in the organisation of meetings and in ensuring that our passage was, by and large, without undue pressures.

We also acknowledge the assistance in the preparations for our visit of: Michael Gaffney, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade Union Friends of Palestine, the Israeli human rights body B'Tselem, the London-based Jews for Justice for Palestinians and the Irish Palestinian Solidarity Campaign.

For the purposes of clarity this report has been prepared in the chronological order of meetings and events, as contained in the itinerary (Appendix II). It is neither a political nor a historical treatise, but rather a factual account of the delegation's observations. Of course it was not possible to record every comment and name every speaker. Nonetheless, the delegation was of the view that it was duty-bound to clearly and accurately record the views of those with whom it met and to report these views back to the Executive Council and, indeed, the broader trade union movement.



## Delegation

**Patricia McKeown**

(President ICTU, Regional Secretary UNISON)

**Peter McLoone**

(ex President ICTU, General Secretary IMPACT)

**Brendan Mackin**

(ex President ICTU, AMICUS)

**John Douglas**

(Executive Council ICTU, General Secretary MANDATE)

**Anne Speed**

(Executive Council ICTU, National Organiser SIPTU)

**Noirin Greene**

(Executive Council ICTU, AMICUS)

**Mags O'Brien**

(SIPTU Education & Training)

**Brian Campfield**

(Deputy General Secretary NIPSA)

**Joe Bowers**

(Trade Union Friends of Palestine)

**Eamon McMahon**

(Trade Union Friends of Palestine)

**Peter Bunting**

(Assistant General Secretary ICTU)



**‘ This huge wall separates the local Arab population from their mosque on the other side... clearly visible to us all ’**



The wall dominates all aspects of life





## Day One, Monday November 5

### Israel

#### 09.30hrs **Visit to Na'amat Peace Nursery, Jaffa**

This bi-lingual nursery (Hebrew/Arabic) caters for 36 pre-school children – Jewish, Muslim and Christian. The Muslim and Christian children are Arabs. The delegation was advised that 20 percent of the population of Israel is of Arab ethnicity. The nursery is financed by both Histadrut (Israeli Confederation of Trade Unions) and the District Municipality. Out of 17 nurseries established by Histadrut in Israel this is the only multi-ethnic, bi-lingual one. Its ethos is praiseworthy and the teachers and board members we met are convinced that this project ingrains into the very young both awareness and respect for those from other traditions.

*This visit was organised through the international department of Histadrut.*

#### 10.15hrs **Visit to separation wall at Qalqilya**

The West Bank town of Qalqilya, with a population of over 45,000, has been almost completely surrounded by the wall, with only one gateway for entry and exit, which is controlled by Israeli forces. On our way to view the wall at Qalqilya, the delegation was joined by Noah, a captain in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), who is attached to the IDF publicity department. The delegation was advised by Noah of the reasoning for the erection of the wall which was outlined in a document distributed to delegates: *Israel's Security Fence; Defending Innocent Civilians from Terror*. We have included extracts from this publication to illustrate the view of the IDF that these barriers have contributed to a massive reduction in suicide bombings and the obvious reduction in indiscriminate death and injury to Israeli and Arab citizens residing in Israel. (Appendix III).

*The visit was organised by Histadrut and the delegation was accompanied by a representative of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF).*

### Conclusion

It was very difficult at this point in our visit to ascertain the validity of the presentation we received. There was a realisation that the presentation was highly subjective, particularly with reference to the issue of dividing landowners from their land, separation of villages and, primarily, the expansion of Israel through the illegal annexation of Palestinian territory.

#### 12.30hrs **Meeting with Mr Ofer Eini, Chairman of Histadrut; Mr Shraba Brosh, Chairman of the Federation of Economic Organisations and senior Histadrut and business leaders at Histadrut headquarters, Tel Aviv.**

At the outset, Mr Eini complimented the presence of so many women on the delegation and made reference to the visit of Histadrut and the Federation of Economic Organisations to Ireland, in October 2007. Mr Eini stated that Israeli trade unions, employers and government were optimistic about the prospects of establishing an Irish model of social partnership. Mr Eini commented on the good relationship between Histadrut and the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, (PGFTU), whose General Secretary is Sharer Sa'ed.

On the issue of a boycott, Mr Eini said such methods contradicted the principles of trade unionism by harming workers, irrespective of location. He maintained that the PGFTU opposed not only the ICTU resolutions but also resolutions passed by trade unions in Great Britain.

Mr Eini truly hoped that at the next Congress Biennial Delegate Conference (2009), the resolutions would be rescinded. He urged the ICTU to call for dialogue between Histadrut and the PGFTU and stated that pursuing a boycott would damage inter-federation relationships. He further hoped that our engagement with Histadrut would strengthen our relationship and that we would learn from each other.

Mr Shraba Brosh, Chairman of the Federation of Economic Organisations, then addressed the delegation

and dealt initially with the establishment of a committee designed to create a social partnership model in Israel.

Mr Brosh informed the meeting of his support for the Palestinian people, of whom he employs 100, including his company's chief engineer. All employees are on the same terms and conditions of employment, regardless of nationality. Mr Brosh stated that everyone wanted peace and had to find the solution together. He spoke of how Israeli and Palestinian employers had a good relationship and that there should be much more interaction by companies in the private sector. Economic relationships contribute to building the peace, was the theme of his message. Mr Brosh referred to an upcoming meeting, hosted by the Turkish President in Ankara, at which the Israeli and Palestinian Presidents would be in attendance along with employer leaders from the three countries. It was his view that the government in Ireland should launch a similar initiative to assist the peace process.

In reply, the President of Congress, Ms Patricia McKeown, outlined the nature of Congress and the jurisdictions it covered in both parts of Ireland. She commented on the number of women in the delegation as an illustration of how Congress placed great importance on recognising and addressing discrimination. The President informed the meeting that human rights and equality were central to our policies and, in our experience, essential to create and maintain the conditions for peace. Consequently Congress has a responsibility to support those suffering from the absence of either, or both.

The President reiterated that Congress has long standing policies to bring pressure to bear on Governments to ensure fundamental human rights for the Palestinian people. These rights cannot be undermined or negated by security considerations. She outlined Congress policy on the two state solution and said that the observations of the delegation would go back to the Executive Council and the Irish government.

Brendan Mackin addressed the meeting and spoke of how repressive measures and physical barriers are

contrary to the achievement of a two state solution in which both nations are secure, treating each other with mutual respect and dignity. He emphasised that the non-alignment of the 790km wall with the agreed Green Line boundaries amounted to 'land-grabbing' by the Israeli Government.

Mr Brosh replied that the wall was purely for security purposes and that the Israeli Supreme Court had ruled on its route, where disputes had occurred.

There followed a robust debate on the matters already mentioned, of which the following comments provide a flavour:

*'40 percent of Palestinian people exist on \$2k per annum';*

*'Why are the rich Arab nations not aiding them?';*

*'We believe you come in bona fides, do not encourage evil people...don't be used as a tool.'*

**Mr Eini** Agreed with the President that repression is wrong and stated that it was not Israeli Government policy to repress the Palestinian people. He was of the opinion that the terrorist acts against Israel had an adverse economic impact on both the Palestinian people and state. Many of the former could no longer get work in Israel and there was no hope for investment in Palestine as a result.

**Local Business Representative** Explained how his hotel had been bombed, killing and injuring both Israelis and Palestinians. He stated that the 'minority groups' involved in the Intifadah had destroyed the tourist industry. It was only following the building of the wall that growth in the economy had taken place.

In reply, Peter McLoone commented that the delegation was not there to be part of the problem, that international opinion does have an impact, and that the trade union perception in Ireland was that of extreme Israeli measures being taken against the Palestinians and triggering consequences and that Israeli policy was moving on a wrong trajectory. The motivation of all should be to secure a political settlement.



## ‘ It is obvious that Histadrut... were strongly opposed to a boycott ’

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### Conclusion

It was quite obvious that both the Histadrut and Federation of Economic Organisations were strongly opposed to any boycott. It was also quite evident that these organisations supported the policy of the Israeli government on security issues, but they advocated and stated they enjoyed good relationships with their Palestinian counterparts. While Mr Eini claimed that it was the violent acts of Palestinians against Israel that caused the economic collapse in Palestine, most would argue that repressive Israeli measures and general policy have been the major factor in the collapse of the Palestinian economy. For example, following the erection of the wall in Qalqilya, unemployment rose from 25 percent to 65 percent. This view is supported by the World Bank which issued a report in May 2007, calling on Israel to ease restrictions on movement in the West Bank and Gaza, in order to aid local economic development.

The report noted that: “Sustainable economic recovery will remain elusive if large areas of the West Bank remain inaccessible for economic purposes and restricted movement remains the norm for the vast majority of Palestinians and expatriate investors.” (*Movement & Access Restrictions in the West Bank: Uncertainty & Inefficiency in the Palestinian Economy – World Bank, May 9, 2007*)

The delegation received a Histadrut information pack immediately before the meeting and an information sheet relating to boycotts is included. (Appendix IV)

### 1600 Rabin Memorial Tel Aviv

Following this meeting the delegation visited the site where Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated by Yigal Amir on November 4, 1995. Our guide Ori informed us that the public square nearby had been filled with 100,000, mostly young people, attending a peace rally, on the night of the assassination

### 1800 hrs **Meeting with Irish Ambassador Michael Forbes, Irish Embassy, Tel Aviv.**

*The delegation met with the Irish Ambassador to Israel for a briefing and to set out the Congress position.*

Members of our delegation advised that our current policy position was not taken lightly. It was not, as had been suggested by the Israeli Ambassador to Ireland, a minority hijacking of ICTU. We explained that at our meeting with Histadrut we had quite an hysterical response to our policy. It appeared to us that since the Palestinian elections there has been a race to complete the separation wall.

We referred to the influential report of Alvaro de Soto (UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy to the Quartet\*) who has written of President Abbas’ pragmatic approach to Hamas and who criticised the Quartet for imposing sanctions on a people under occupation.

*\* The Quartet on the Middle East was formed in Madrid, in 2002 and comprises the UN, the EU, US and Russia. The former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair is the Quartet’s Special Envoy).*

### Conclusion

We noted that the Israeli government believes Ireland to be the least friendly EU government. However, from our history Ireland can make a contribution to the Peace Process. We noted the finance Ireland puts into Palestine and the extensive role of Irish aid agencies and NGOs. We also noted Ireland’s opposition to the fundamental breaches of Palestinian human rights by Israel.

It is obvious the Irish government prefers a policy of engagement in dealing with the Israeli government and is totally opposed to the idea of a boycott. Ireland made a full input into the Quartet. Ireland’s trade with Israel is about US \$0.5 billion both ways. One obvious avenue of influencing the government’s intervention is by lobbying at EU level on the issue that cutting off aid, as happened in Gaza, constitutes the collective punishment of the population. This action by the EU, of itself constitutes a breach of human rights. In addition the Irish government does not engage with Hamas. However, from its own experience of a peace process it does recognise that all parties need to be at the table if progress is to be made.

## Meeting with Histadrut



## Day Two, Tuesday November 6

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*The meeting took place in the Ministry of Social Affairs, Dept. of International Relations, where we also met with Avraham Lavine, Director of International Relations*

### 08.15hrs **Meeting with Mr Yitzhak Herzog, Israeli Minister of Welfare**

The Minister opened the meeting with a welcome and stated his clear opposition to trade unions who would try to impose sanctions on Israel. He also said that he was happy we were meeting with Palestinians. He went on to make a number of points:

- There can only be a two state solution;
- This nation (Israel) is the realisation of Biblical prophecies;
- Palestinians always miss opportunities (1967);
- Arafat could have delivered peace;
- Brutal take over by Hamas in Gaza;
- Abbas doesn't want Israelis to talk to Hamas;
- Israel will go to Annapolis to see if possible to agree solution;
- Israel has an aggressive, developed economy;
- The most liberal Supreme Court in the world and a free press;
- Hamas is part of a 'coalition of hatred' that includes Iran and others, this coalition wants a fundamentalist Islamic system throughout the region;
- Waves of suicide bombers have been stopped by security measures;
- We (the Labour Party) advocate peace but warn you of those who attack.

**ICTU President** Expressed thanks to Minister for taking the time to meet with us and said our experience and lesson from history was that discrimination and the absence of human rights and equality contributed to ongoing conflict.

## ‘ He said the wall was successful as a security measure and allowed the Palestinian economy to grow ’

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**Minister** Referred to the 20 percent Arab population in Israel and said Orthodox Jewish and Muslim Arabs inhibit women from empowerment. He mentioned the fact that the gap between women and men was closing, that he had introduced a new policy plan for children at risk and that his Department gave more to the Arab community than the Israeli.

**ICTU President** The President remarked on our visit to the wall the previous day and said that such barriers created mental blockages as well as physical ones.

**Minister** Concerned with that view but it was the one solution left, a last resort. He said the wall had achieved 100 percent success as a security measure and allowed the Palestinian economy to grow. He related an incident of a 50 year old woman (at that time women over 40 years of age were not searched) who brought a bomb across the checkpoint and passed it on to a young male, potential suicide bomber. Israel had to protect its people and we should remember they (Israel) had shaken the hand of the “worst terrorist” in the world, Mr Arafat.

**ICTU Delegate** Raised the issue of the route of the wall, in particular its deviation from the 1967 Green Line. He acknowledged the need for security, but commented on the consequences of the barrier, such as health and economic well-being of the Palestinian people, as well as explaining that Congress has no time for violence and was opposed to fundamentalism.

**Minister** Hamas are a threat to everyone including Abbas. The wall was restricted in places following Supreme Court ruling. We withdrew our settlers from Gaza. We built houses for the Palestinians there. Since then we have been bombed every day from Gaza. The Palestinian national movement failed to display leadership. We owe our people protection. We are using back channels (re Gaza). We do not want to go back in there.

**ICTU President** Requested the support of the Minister for our delegation to visit Gaza. The Minister replied that the Trade Union movement had built Israel and he would be supportive of the delegation going into Gaza, although ultimately it was a decision for the IDF.

### Conclusion

It is quite evident that the Minister was reiterating Israeli government policy in emphasising security as the motivating factor for policy. The reader should note the reference by the Minister to the fact that the Israeli nation “is the realisation of biblical prophecies.” This comment is illustrative of a belief system that is strong in sectors of Israeli society, including those in leadership.

### 09.30hrs **Yad Vashem Museum**

The delegation visited the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem which is dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust. The tour described the history of the Nazi regime’s conduct towards the Jewish population of Europe and beyond. This was a very emotional experience for the delegation, particularly when we laid a wreath at the Eternal Flame section of the museum, which was closed to the public during our brief ceremony. The most poignant part of the tour was the visit to the memorial for the over one million children who died at the hands of the fascist regime. This memorial necessitated the visitor walking in total darkness through an area surrounded by thousands upon thousands of small lights, representing the young victims. Although members of the delegation had extensive knowledge of the Holocaust, this proved quite a harrowing experience for all. In addition, two issues stood out:



- The accusation we heard during the course of the tour that if organisations like the Catholic Church or the International Red Cross had intervened in defence of the Jewish people, many would have survived the period,
- For some the confining of people to ghettos, as in wartime Warsaw, resonated uncomfortably with aspects of the contemporary situation in Gaza, although both are not directly comparable or analogous.

#### 12.30hrs **Meeting with Employee Committee of the Jerusalem Municipality (Histadrut)**

As we arrived at the Municipal building where the meeting was to be held we witnessed a demonstration protesting the demolition of homes in East Jerusalem, by the Israelis and other alleged transgressions. (Appendix V). The committee represents some 7,000 members in the Jerusalem Municipality and also services 5,000 pensioners. There are 1,800 Arab workers in the Municipality with a 50 percent gender balance. We were informed that there is no distinction as to how the committee deals with members – all are equal. The President queried as to how equality works in reality, are both traditions treated equally in employment and in the trade union?

**Jamil, Deputy Chair** In this state Arabs have no nationality, we only care about our lives as shopstewards, credibility comes with having a job. We bargain collectively for everyone - not for Arab or Jew. We don't want influence from outside to wreck our work.

**Naseem, Female Shop Steward for Teachers' Assistants** Equal rights are here in the employment but there is some discrimination politically as Palestinian compared to Jewish.

**The Chair** in response to a question on whether the Branch hold discussions on civil liberties, discrimination, housing, etc, replied that the Committee does not engage in issues other than those directly related to the workplace. They do not discuss any political issues.

#### **High School Vice-Principal, Committee Member**

Informed the delegation that he has an ID card which allows him to work and live in East Jerusalem and vote in local government elections but not for the Knesset (Israeli Parliament). He does not feel discriminated against in work but Arab schools are discriminated against in terms of overcrowding and poor infrastructure. Politics were not debated at union meetings and he said that he had to join an Israeli union.

**Naseem** recounted the story of her son, now studying dentistry in Belgium, who had married a woman from Nablus (West Bank) and was in the process of applying for her right to live with him in East Jerusalem. It transpires that men over 25 can bring a woman from the Palestinian territories into East Jerusalem but women cannot bring young men.

#### **Conclusions**

It was noted that the Committee certainly seems to function well as a multi-ethnic group but all discussions at committee level are restricted to industrial matters only. The local government workforce in Jerusalem is comprised of 50 percent Arab workers. But Arab workers, for example teachers, may only work in Arab schools. Reference was also made in discussion to the fact that the Arabs of East Jerusalem feel they have no identity (they cannot vote in Knesset elections) despite that fact that East Jerusalem is under Israeli occupation. It is important to note that there is a prohibition within Histadrut on Palestinian members (non-Israeli) from occupying full time, paid positions in the union.

#### 14.30hrs **Tour of Jerusalem**

The delegation was led by Mutasem Aweidah, a tour guide and highly educated Jerusalem Arab whose family owned a substantial quantity of land and a large hotel in the city. From a distance it appeared to be closed.

Jerusalem's Old City contains many historical sites of the Christian, Muslim and Jewish religions. While walking the Via Delarosa, Mutasem explained the

16 composition of the population of the Old City and pointed to a Jewish settler family walking with a 'point' (husband/father) and 'rear' person, both armed, with mother and children in between.

We were informed that Arabs who live outside the walls of the Old City require special permits to enter. These permits specify only one particular entrance which is frequently the entrance that is furthest away from them. Consequently they may have to spend many hours travelling to enter a city whose nearest entrance is within metres of where they live.

On completion of the tour of the Old City we were brought to a massive wall in Jerusalem, the proportions of which cannot adequately be described in words. This huge wall separates the local Arab population on one side from their Mosque on the other, clearly visible to us all.

### Conclusion

It was unnerving to see so many young armed Israeli settlers who had taken up residence in what was a predominantly Arab area. Some were there illegally. Mutasem was quite despondent about the prospects of peace ever being realised in the region and this view was reflected in the opinions of many of the Arab people we met, particularly with regard to the (then) impending talks at Annapolis.

### 20.00hrs **Dinner hosted by Irish Consul to Palestine, Mr Conor O'Riordan**

As there was no specific minutes taken at this very informal dinner, members of the delegation will have different memories of conversations which took place. The Irish Diplomatic staff, at all times, expressed their understanding of our position but emphasised that, as Ireland was part of the European Union, policy was determined as such.

## Day Three, Wednesday November 7

### Palestine

*The programme in Palestine was co-ordinated with the assistance of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU)*

### 09.30hrs **Bethlehem - Meeting with Mahoud Abu Odeh, Senior Official, PGFTU Bethlehem Council**

**Mahoud** Welcomed the delegation to this famous city with a population of 150,000, with some 40,000 employed between the tourism sector, Jerusalem and the settlements. He informed us that inhabitants of Bethlehem can only move freely within a 5km by 5km radius. To work outside this area they require a work permit and must attend at the checkpoint at 03.00hrs to gain access to Israeli-controlled areas, to work for a given day. They return home no earlier than 19.00hrs, so family life is severely disrupted.

Mahoud pointed out that permits are also required to attend hospital in Jerusalem and for the import/export of goods, all of which are considerably difficult to attain. Those workers who work in the settlements are greatly exploited and have no rights. It may surprise the reader to learn that Palestinians work in construction and services (domestic) within the Jewish settlements. The explanation is purely one of economic necessity and survival.

According to Mahoud the Israeli Government talk about peace, but more and more settlements are being built and more checkpoints erected. He said that you may think you are getting progress in negotiations but on the ground you get nothing: "the suffering is very bad here in Bethlehem, we are in fact under occupation." He said there was no peace on the ground, workers held at checkpoints for 2-3 hours at 03.00hrs. "Sometimes they close the roads causing hardship to women and sick children."



### 11.30am **Holy Family Hospital, Bethlehem**

*The delegation was received by Dr Robert H Tabash, Director of Administration, Dr Jacques M Keutgen, Director General.*

This maternity and paediatric hospital provides quality care for women and infants without regard to religion or national origin. It is run under the auspices of an International Board of Trustees comprising Daughters of Charity Sisters and members of the Order of Malta. It has very close links with the National Maternity Hospital, in Holles Street, Dublin, whose Director of Nursing was present during the visit. The hospital's motto *The Poorest Deserve the Best* is very commendable given its location and it has, unsurprisingly, become something of an oasis located in a conflict zone. (Appendix VI).

On behalf of the delegation Noirin Greene presented a money order to the value of US \$5000, which was greatly appreciated.

There followed a visit to another part of the massive wall surrounding a Bethlehem refugee camp (Dheishah), a hugely intrusive monstrosity in the lives of the local citizens.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident that the segregation of Bethlehem, which is really a suburb of Jerusalem, has adversely impacted on the local population with over 70 percent unemployment and no social security. It is quite obvious that the dire economic situation in Bethlehem results directly from restrictions on movement in and out of this area. This is especially true of the tourist industry on which the economy of Bethlehem was reliant. As things stand, the population is dependent on aid from the international community. This situation has forced a huge reduction in the Christian population of Bethlehem, down from 10 percent to 2 percent, thus creating a more polarised population.

The May 2007 World Bank Report - *Movement & Access Restrictions in the West Bank*- cited a recent study on the

wall, which found that its route "almost totally ignores the daily needs of the Palestinian population."

The study was jointly funded by the New Israel Fund and the British Embassy in Tel Aviv and carried out by Israeli organisation Bimkom. It concluded that the wall was "focused almost exclusively on the desire to maintain the fabric of life of Israeli settlers."

### 13.30hrs **Visit to Ramallah**

The delegation laid a wreath at the tomb of President Arafat. This was followed by a meeting with Rafique Hussein, the Chief of Staff to President Abbas. The delegation was accompanied by Conor O'Riordan, Irish Consul to Palestine.

### **Summary of Address to Delegation by Chief of Staff, Rafique Hussein:**

The political problems here (Israel and Palestine) are similar to those experienced in Ireland. There are huge problems to resolve: just the other day the Israelis raided Nablus arrested 20 people and destroyed a house. We are aware that Israel would welcome a violent Palestinian response to this. But, in our view, such a response would contribute to destroying the Peace Process. You should be aware of the serious pressures we are under. For example, the Palestinian police/army are spat on by some as they do not resist these Israeli incursions.

We have already made a major compromise: 22 percent of the land mass of historic Palestine for a Palestinian state and 78 percent for the Israeli state. But now Israel wants a further 50 percent of our remaining 22 percent. They want to control the resources and fate of Palestine. We are extremely angry but it is controlled, we do not want to ruin the chance of peace.

It is crucial that we attend peace talks (reference to then upcoming Annapolis talks) otherwise we are accused of not wanting peace. But there are major problems just in agreeing an acceptable agenda. Our agenda issues are: water resources, security, the settlements, Jerusalem and refugees.

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US policy and actions in the Middle East have been catastrophic. We see Palestine as suffering the ills of occupation. Israel needs to move out of the Golan Heights, Lebanon and our 22 percent of Palestinian land (West Bank and Gaza Strip). In Iraq and Afghanistan the US and Britain have shown that they have not learned from history.

We desire a peaceful co-existence with Israel and the right to live in our own state - but the Israeli lobby is a major power in the USA. If Annapolis does not happen soon then the US President will be a lame duck, with pending elections. But a lame duck can still lay eggs.

I believe there is no peace in the mind of (Ehud) Olmert (the current Israeli prime minister). It is believed that Barak (Defence Minister) and other major political leaders want his position. And Minister Lieberman talks of directly exporting all Palestinians out of our country (*Minister Lieberman Calls for Separation from Arabs, IsraelNationalNews.com, November 11, 2006. At his first Cabinet meeting the Minister for Strategic Affairs, Avigdor Lieberman, had also advocated that the Israeli military operate in Gaza "like Russia operates in Chechnya." Lieberman resigned from government in January, 2008.*)

The Irish Government makes no noise and, if it does, it is accused of being anti-semitic. Europe now is no different from the USA on policy towards Palestine. It has lost its (independent) role on the Middle East - the USA says and the EU pays is an expression you hear. We had traditional allies in Europe once, but not anymore.

But we are to blame as well - we shot ourselves in the foot in Gaza. If Hamas creates a ceasefire, that allows them to exist but the Israelis tell the Palestinian Authority 'after you deal with Hamas, then come back to us'

Palestinians are a moderate people. We have Christians and Muslims living in a tolerant society. We don't believe religion and politics should mix. We (Fatah) are a secular party, and say religion should not interfere with the state. Fundamentalists were created by the enemies of Muslims. The Muslim Brotherhood and Bin Laden were created by USA. When the PLO was strong, the Israelis supported Hamas.

We are a democratic people and accept that the elections gave Hamas the right to form a government (in Gaza). But I assure you that the Palestinian voter is not completely free - they are influenced by Israeli treatment of them. If Israelis behave in repressive manner then people are radicalized - they respond to repression and vote for Hamas. The Israelis should have supported a moderate party, removed their checkpoints and released the prisoners. (Ariel) Sharon said it is easier to deal with Hamas.

The wall seized an additional 12 percent of the West Bank: they grab land, they grab water (sources) and have not stopped the settlements, the confiscation of land or further annexation of East Jerusalem. We are still determined not to be blamed.

The Arab world is on fire: Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and some deranged person could use nuclear weapons. We could all kill each other. Israel is not thinking strategically by painting us into a corner, they will be the losers if the Palestinian Authority falls tomorrow. And what will happen then? Israel will have to occupy us again and administer the police, the health service and education. Their wall will be of no help to them then.

We are being deliberately pushed into a corner. The EU is not doing what it should do diplomatically - everybody is praising Israel! But I invite you, come here and live here for two minutes and see the truth. Israeli strategy is influenced by racist, right wing people who do not compromise and that is the way to disaster. We may have to change our minds and go back to before the Oslo agreement (signed in 1993).

**President** Outlined ICTU policy and said we would bring Mr Hussein's to the attention of the Irish government and others. We have witnessed a people who are being repressed, we hope other trade union federations will follow ICTU.

**Mr Hussein** If I encourage you today (re the proposed boycott), President Bush will ring my President and tell him I am encouraging anti-semitic activity, but I want to encourage you to do what is right.

## ‘ This has forced a huge reduction in the Christian population of Jersusalem ’

### Conclusion

The delegation felt the political analysis provided by Mr Hussein was thorough and captured the PA desire for a peaceful negotiated solution that would see the recognition and acceptance of a Palestinian State, albeit a geographically reduced one. In relation to any future action by Congress, it is worth noting Mr Hussein's encouragement to 'do what is right.'

### 1500 Meeting with Al-Haq, independent Palestinian human rights organisation

*The delegation was accompanied by Irish Consul Conor O'Riordain. Al Haq receives funding from Irish Aid*

**Shawan, Director General, Al Haq** Al-Haq was established in 1979, the first independent human rights organisation in the Middle East. We take evidence from eyewitnesses and victims of human rights abuse. In our experience, 90 percent of the violence comes from the Israel side. There is land confiscation, construction of the wall, restrictions on movement.

We submit information to UN bodies and also the EU, which has established an EU Human Rights Network. Al Haq staff are not office-bound but go directly to field as events happen and take evidence from people. We do not just listen to institutions and other professionals. Permits are required to visit families, the injured can't get out to hospitals. Israel controls the area, the wall pushes people outside their community. Thousands of young people have applied to leave Palestine.

Israel has allowed 3,500 settlers to stay in West Bank, the wall is now the new international border. In 2-3 years, Israel will have completed new roads/settlements which will have annexed 20 percent of existing West Bank territory. (On March 9, 2008, Israel announced it had granted permission for construction of a further 530 houses in an existing West Bank settlement, Givat Ze'ev, with a further 200 houses to follow when the initial tranche have been completed)

We see no hope for real solution for peace, for two reasons:

1. The talks are based on power not international law. There will only be peace if it is based on international law.
2. Israel is ignoring all UN resolutions. There have been responses from Palestinians and some horrible acts, but you should ask why: the occupation affects all aspects of our life. Go to checkpoints at 0300 hrs and see people seeking permits lying face down on the ground. Some are pressurised to become collaborators. If you agree to spy you get a permit to work or cross over into Israeli-controlled areas.

The Palestinian Authority is like a toy. It has no authority to govern: the PA government ministers need permission to visit Nablus or Jerusalem. Israel dominates the Palestinian Authority.

It is a complex environment for us. There is torture in Gaza. For internal political reasons both sides torture/mistreat each other. For example, Al Haq released a paper on a detention centre controlled by PA. The PA closed down 100 Hamas organisations and now Al Haq is representing them.

We have 31 staff members and are part funded by Irish Aid. We have good relations with Irish government. Ireland is a prominent neutral nation with a history of occupation. You (Ireland) have good relations with the US and Israel. Get your government to comment on abuses of human rights and also at EU level.

**President** We understand the importance of human rights work. We are currently working on a Bill of Rights in Northern Ireland, working closely with our own human rights NGO, the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ). Do other NGOs from around the world assist you? Have you any process at international level? We have been with the Israelis for the past two days and have informed them that security does not take precedence over human rights. There are no excuses for human rights abuses. We will inform others of these abuses.

## ‘ Olmert says the wall is for security. I am convinced it is a new border ’

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**Shawan** We are waiting for a ruling from a London Court, in a case against the UK Government (see Note 1). We are preparing to submit other cases, checking out other countries. There is no will from the UN to establish a special court, so we check national laws and attempt to use them. We have taken a case re the denial of coal and electricity to Gaza, the first session is today in the Israeli Supreme Court (see Note 2). But there is no justice before this system, all they want to know is did the military commander follow proper procedures or not. For example, if we raise the expansion of settlements the Court tells us that this is a political decision and it can't deal with it.

**Note 1** On 19 November 2007, the UK High Court of Justice denied the claim lodged by Al Haq, in cooperation with Public Interest Lawyers. This had requested the UK government to clarify its position on its arms-related licensing agreements with Israel. The claim sought to require the UK government to reveal how it satisfies its own criteria that material sold under these agreements is not used in the commission of human rights abuses. However, the initial ruling was appealed and, on February 11, 2008, the UK's Court of Appeal found there to be strategic questions with regard to the dismissal of the claim and granted Al Haq's appeal.

Laying a wreath at the tomb of President Arafat



**Note 2** In January 2008, the Israeli Court ruled that since Israel was no longer in effective control of the Gaza Strip, it had no responsibility to supply fuel and food, but had only to abide by international humanitarian law on permissible means and methods of warfare. The Court did not address the issue of collective punishment, in a substantive fashion.

**John Hanna (a young Irishman working for Al Haq)**

Only when you live here do you see what is going on: the house demolitions, targeted killings. The Israelis have a long term policy plan, we are studying it for legal reasons. Olmert (Israeli PM) says the wall is for security. Now I am convinced the walls are new borders, it makes you despair at times. Israelis control everything. On the internal Hamas/PA situation, the scale of this is sad to see. Overall, it is hard to review the situation here without blaming Israel.

**ICTU Delegate** What Hamas organisations were closed down?

**John Hanna** They were humanitarian, human rights research bodies. They were registered NGOs. The Islamic Club that was closed by the Israelis is now run by Fatah. Two nights ago the Israelis arrested seven people in Ramallah. The PA Ministers here have nothing to do and one third of their MPs are in Israeli prisons, many of them interned. This is a bad time for Palestinians. Over time, people lose hope and there is fragmentation due to having no protection from the occupying power. It seems as if the international community is impotent.

**ICTU Delegate** What is your view on EU withdrawal of aid and the Euro-Med preferential trading status for Israel?

**Shawan** There is no political will from the EU, who just find technical excuses to escape responsibility. We are concentrating on building up civil society organisations. I have worked in Ireland for a year, so I know something of the political/economic situation there. Ireland could have played a stronger role on our issues, specifically when holding the EU Presidency.

## ‘ Gaza was ‘locked down’ the following day, making entrance impossible ’

Discussion followed on the role of churches on these issues.

**Conor O’Riordan** Freedom of access to religious sites is a problem. Many Christians are leaving Bethlehem. The Catholic Archbishop of Jerusalem is dealing with Europe’s failure to speak up for rights of Palestinian. He stated three reasons:

- EU quiet as mice due to fear and guilt over Holocaust;
- EU fear of anti-Semitic allegation/smear
- Fear in certain quarters of EU regarding ‘Israeli expansionism’

All Muslim men in Jerusalem under 45 years of age are denied access to Friday prayers at mosque. They pray from the nearest vacant property to the mosque, the municipal dump.

In reply to a question re a new Trade Union Federation, Shawan stated this organisation had sought a company licence not a trade union negotiating licence. He stated he supported real trade unions who have names, officers and are amenable to real contact.

Presentation being made to the Holy Family Hospital, Bethlehem

### Conclusion

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Al Haq is an independent human rights organisation, working in difficult and very complex situation. Interestingly, the analysis of the current situation provided by Al Haq, bore clear similarities to that provided by Mr Hussein, Chief of Staff to President Abbas, with the important exception that the former were extremely pessimistic about the prospects for a real and lasting peace. Their commentary on the current state of play in Palestine is one of:

- Continued military occupation;
- Expansionist role of Israel through increasing settlements;
- IDF repressive measures on the population a daily occurrence;
- Europe has abandoned the Palestinians;
- The wall is a strategic attempt to annex more Palestinian land;
- There is an economic policy of driving out young Palestinians and one of prohibiting any growth of Palestinian economy;
- UN Resolutions and Human Rights Conventions breached daily;
- PA lacks authority.





## Day Four, Thursday November 8

### The Gaza Strip

Prior to entering Gaza we were informed that Histadrut had been lobbying in support of our request to visit the territory. That visit had been planned for Friday, November 9. In the interim, we were advised by Irish Consul, Conor O'Riordain that Gaza was to be 'locked down' on November 9 and 10 and that gaining entry to the Strip would be impossible. He also advised that a smaller delegation would enjoy easier access and movement. As a result, the Gaza visit was brought forward one day and the delegation divided into two groups, with one entering Gaza and the other visiting Nablus to fulfil a previously arranged engagement. The delegation to Gaza consisted of the President, a former President, an Executive Council member and TUFF.

Ironically, as we were leaving Gaza on the Thursday, having completed our visit, we were contacted by Histadrut, who informed us that the whole delegation would be allowed to enter Gaza the following day, Friday. They were unaware that we had already visited. As it transpired, Mr O'Riordain's advice proved correct and Gaza was indeed 'locked down' the following day, making entrance impossible.

The Gaza Strip has been characterised as "the largest prison on earth" by Uri Avnery the Israeli peace activist. *(Mr Avnery is a former member of Irgun, has served three terms as a member of the Israeli Parliament and is a founding member of Gush Shalom, the influential Israeli peace group).*

Approximately, 1.5 million Palestinians are crowded into the 360 Km<sup>2</sup> stretch of land that is the Gaza Strip – or just under 4,000 people per square kilometre. While, some 500,000 of the inhabitants are indigenous, over one million are refugees living in eight separate camps.

The Strip has a coastline of just 40km and land boundaries of 62 km - 51 km with Israel and 11 km with Egypt. There are seven border crossings into the territory, all controlled by Israel. One crossing at Rafah

was previously run by the PA in conjunction with Egypt, alongside EU monitors whose access was controlled by Israel. However, since Hamas took control, this crossing has been closed.

Israel controls all movement, in and out of the Strip, including imports and exports.

Since the election of Hamas in January 2006, and particularly since June 2007 (when the Hamas Government was dismissed by President Abbas) the Israeli Government has imposed severe restrictions on the movement of people and goods - including food and fuel - in and out of the territory.

Gaza International Airport no longer functions and there is no operational seaport. Israel's air force constantly enters the airspace and Israel retains the ability to interrupt radio and television output.

Statistics made available to the delegation showed that since Israeli 'disengagement' from Gaza, in August 2005, until November 2007, some 2,800 rockets had been fired into Israel from the territory, killing four and injuring hundreds more. Over the same time period, Israel has killed 668 Palestinians in Gaza. A further 357 Palestinians were killed in clashes between Fatah and Hamas.

**Note 3** In March 2008, three months after the visit of the Congress delegation, the respected and internationally renowned Israeli human rights group B'Tselem revealed that 106 Palestinians were killed in the Gaza Strip, between February 27-March 3, when the IDF entered the territory following rocket attacks on Israel. In a direct contradiction of claims made by the IDF, B'Tselem pointed out that at least 54 of those killed were civilians who had played no part in the fighting. Of that number, 25 were teenagers or children, including one six month old baby. In its end of year report for 2007, B'Tselem said that 131 Palestinians that had no involvement in the hostilities had been killed by Israeli forces. Palestinians killed seven Israeli civilians, "the lowest number of Israeli civilian casualties

## ‘ Children are going to school hungry ’

**since the beginning of the Intifada,” B’Tselem reported. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights continues to monitor and report the deaths and human rights breaches, on a regular basis.**

The physical reality of the border crossing at Erez, the point at which the delegation entered, illustrates the severity of the situation for Palestinians. Located south of Jerusalem, this comprises a huge building, akin to an airport terminal, that straddles the crossing.

There is a low visibility of security staff and passage through is electronically controlled through passport checks and a covered walkway or tunnel, which is also electronically gated midway through. No door or gate opens until the one behind you is closed.

We crossed early in the morning at 8am and only one other person entered, a UN official, as we did. Coming back, the procedure is more intense with an electronic personal property search and a full body x-ray, finished off with a passport and identity check.

All passageways are constructed with bullet proof glass and no two people will be in the same place at the same time, each space being controlled by a series of connecting doors. Instruction for movement is given over an intercom and there is no physical contact except with the civilian property searchers.

On our return, three members of an NGO commented that this was the fastest crossing they had ever experienced. The Irish Consul had advised in the event of a security alert, individuals, usually Palestinians, are subjected to a more intense and physically rigorous search and in the event of a ‘lock down’ they can be detained within the post for hours on end.

### **Meeting with John Ging, Director of Operations, Gaza Strip, United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA)**

*In the midst of such poverty and despair, the importance of the relief and humanitarian work done by UNRWA cannot be overstated. The delegation met with*

*John Ging, its Irish-born Director of Operations in the Gaza Strip.*

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Mr Ging was very welcoming and said that our visit to the area was of great importance. He told us that the situation was worsening almost daily and that a real humanitarian crisis was emerging.

Mr Ging explained that due to the Israel’s closing of the borders, some 70 percent of humanitarian supplies had been cut off. Fuel supplies had been cut by 40percent despite the Israeli claim that it was only 15percent. Much of the agricultural produce destined for export or import was ultimately destroyed.

Some 870,000 were now dependent on food aid and there were serious difficulties in accessing that aid. Whereas previously, some 600 trucks a day would enter Gaza, this was now down to a trickle.

He reminded us that UNRWA is not a peacekeeping force and was engaged with trying to secure the means for dignified survival of refugees. Approximately 50 percent of the population is under 20 years of age. UNRWA provides some 200,000 children with education and employs over 7,000 teachers. With such high rates of unemployment, each teacher can often have 17/18 dependents relying on their small salaries.

Children are going to school hungry. They are not yet starving but they are going hungry. Some 75 percent of Gaza workplaces have closed, over 80,000 have lost their jobs as companies simply cannot trade. Mr Ging highlighted the case of some 600 young students who had visited Gaza for holidays but were trapped since the borders were closed in June. Exit and entry is only possible with Israel’s permission and, at the time of our visit some five months later, the students remained in the Gaza Strip, denied the right to return to their education which, for some, is within European educational institutions.

Mr Ging also spoke of the harrowing experiences of ill people exiting the Strip for medical treatment, of the delays at crossings and resultant stress for the patients.

**‘ A peace that is not  
based on justice  
will always fail ’**







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He confirmed that a man had died the previous day lying on the ground on a stretcher at the Erez crossing, most likely as a result of delay in emergency medical treatment. There is no chemotherapy or dialysis in Gaza. He characterised Gaza as suffering a long, slow and agonising death.

We asked for a comment on the wall and he replied with a quote from former US President, Jimmy Carter “this is not a security fence - it is a wall” and that in war truth is the first casualty. He confirmed that there were regular Israeli incursions and ‘targeted assassinations’ and that if this happened in other jurisdictions, it would be called murder. He also stated that Israel is using security as an excuse – that they have a massive security file on everyone, and that the whole of the Gaza Strip was under effective occupation. (Appendix V11)

### Conclusion

The importance of the UNRWA presence should not be underestimated. There is no doubt that the level of violence would increase if they were to collapse or withdraw. The level of Israeli aggression would also increase. We should press hard for increased funding from the Irish and UK aid budget. John Ging stressed that the increased Irish aid budget had not yielded anything more for their operations.

### Meeting with Raji Sourani, Advocate and Director of the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR) and Jabr Wishah, Deputy Director

Mr Sourani is a board member of the International Federation of Human Rights and an Expert Member of the International Council of the International Human Rights Law Group.

He was elected to the International Commission of Jurists in 2003 and to its Executive Committee in 2006. He was awarded the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial for Human Rights Award in 1991. He has been subject to numerous arrest, imprisonment and torture by the Israeli authorities. He has also been imprisoned by the Palestinian Authorities.

At the time of our visit he had not been granted an exit visa from Gaza, despite numerous invitations to speak abroad, including an invitation to meet with Tony Blair, the Special Envoy of the Quartet. He cannot see his wife and children, who live in Egypt. Following international pressure he recently visited Ireland for a series of public speaking engagements.

The meeting opened with both Directors advising of their previous political life as activists in PFLP, with both serving prison sentences as a result of their activities.

The delegation considered that this gave them considerable authority and credibility within their own community, as well as an insight into complexities of the situation on the ground.

Mr. Sourani described – at times very passionately - the situation in Gaza from the human rights perspective of PCHR. He explained that as a human rights worker everything that he said would be ‘on the record.’ He commenced however by making the following general point which he strongly emphasised:

“The peace process is going to fail, because it is not based on justice. A peace that is not based on justice will always fail.”

He then provided an overview of recent political developments. He told us of the call for national unity when President Arafat passed away. The Council and the Presidential elections were a legitimate process during the period 2005-2006, even under occupation. Palestinians had created democracy and had felt proud, he said.

All parties and civil society participated. He referred specifically to the elections of January 2006. There were 700 observers and it was judged to have been very fair – a gold standard election. For the first time ever all the political parties joined in the election. He saw this as a huge achievement, and referred to how all the parties took part in democratic electoral politics at local, council and parliamentary levels: “It was fantastic...,and we believed ‘we can make it as democrats – even under the occupation’.”



## ‘ They feel betrayed by the EU ’

He then referred to how it was decided (by Israel and the West) that the result should be ignored, that Hamas would not be permitted to rule. The outcome was to punish Hamas and the Palestinians by:

- 1) Boycotting Hamas
- 2) Sanctions imposed by the West, which meant that funds which should have been Palestinian Authority “were diverted to the corrupt...to the ‘Banana Republic’
- 3) A ‘siege’ imposed by Israel, which reduced the movement of people and goods by between 50 percent and 85 percent
- 4) Organised security chaos – ‘messing up the entire situation’ and a massive security presence. In Palestine now there was one police officer to every 60 civilians (In RoI it would be closer to one police officer to every 4,000 civilians).

He spoke of how all the international diplomatic missions had left, and all the international NGOs, that Gaza was now classified as Grade 4 by the UN, the same as Somalia.

Yet at one stage there had been signs of real progress, with the signing of the Mecca Agreement (March ’06) to establish a Unity Government between Hamas and Fatah: “Hamas made compromises I could never have dreamt of...they accepted the ABC of politics in the region.”

Mr Sourani claimed there had been ‘severe provocation’ by Fatah. He said Hamas responded in June ’07 when they successfully ‘flushed’ 54,000 Fatah security troops: “But they didn’t grasp the political moment – they should have stated loyalty to Abbas’s Presidency, and offered to continue.”

What followed, said Mr Sourani, was “a black, bleak, ugly period...a misuse of civilian institutions... [there was] something broken inside us...”

In terms of the PCHR, he said that “nobody liked our position ...what we wrote. With Hamas we criticised them from day one.”

He said they had been able to do that because they had previously spoken up in defence of Hamas. He characterised them as “like romantic revolutionaries and they were not geared up for government, so most of the time they shoot themselves in the foot.”

He spoke of how “we do challenge them, but we also challenge Ramallah (Abbas and Fatah) on matters of health, education and the judiciary: Gaza responded and Ramallah resisted.”

There was only one choice – dialogue and reconciliation among Palestinians, “the unity of the people is very important.”

He thought there was a great need for reconciliation, but that Abbas was under great pressure from Israel not to speak to Hamas, but “there should be zero (pre)conditions for any peace talks.”

He thought that Ireland had a strong role to play in terms of influencing international opinion, that support from Ireland was very important.

He said he was also irate however at the “failure of Europe.”

He spoke passionately about how Europe failed to develop its own foreign policy, how it was led by the USA and Israel into supporting the sanctions against Hamas. He could no longer respect Europe because of this stance: “Europe is demanding preconditions from Abbas and excluding Hamas.”

He said he was aware that “among some there is support for dialogue without preconditions – this view has to be given a voice. The Irish experience is important, something to introduce to others. There is an obligation to share. Your struggle had charismatic leaders.”

“Hamas is not in total isolation – there are back channels but these are not enough. Why is Europe practising selective democracy?”

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He then shared sensitive information about engagement with the diplomatic corps of seven European countries, which Fatah and Hamas responded to but Europe did not, despite promises.

They feel betrayed by Europe – “Europe did not deliver.”

He cited the example of a German delegation who he said had met with Hamas to encourage them to join a National Unity Government: “They said they would recognise them the next day – but they didn’t.”

He thought that the ongoing situation, with the lack of external pressure on Israel, was in danger of pushing them towards a third Intifadah.

Mr Sourani was asked about his assessment of Hamas’s capability to withstand these challenges. He said Hamas was now “three times stronger. They are five times stronger militarily. Economically they can live with it for ten to fifteen years...They are part of us for the next twenty years.”

He thought the PLO was very weak: “Fatah is weakened, the PLO is decimated... there are few signs of leadership and authority.”

He referred to how in the past, with the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine): “We controlled the Occupied Territories...but now the Israelis control everything - where is the leadership...where is the organisation?”

In response to a question about Hamas’s view of the Fatah government he thought Hamas was extremely pragmatic. He referred to how at present Abbas was under much pressure. He referred again to the Mecca Agreement, in fact he thought they “gave too much in Mecca.”

He also thought that Hamas was now prepared for a very long struggle: “Hamas is not in a hurry.”

## International Humanitarian Law & the Geneva Convention

Mr. Sourani referred a number of times to the fundamental importance of upholding international law. He stated that there is a legal obligation on the High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Convention to “ensure protection for civilians in time of war.”

This applies to civilians under occupation and therefore to the West Bank and Gaza: “If they control our civilian life they are occupying us!”

He spoke about the suffering of civilians in Gaza resulting directly from the closing of the borders: a shortage of essential foodstuffs and medicine; that a friend’s daughter needed chemotherapy but could not receive it; he said people were being denied access to hospitals in Israel for life-saving treatment, that people were dying as they waited to get through the border checkpoints.

The Israeli government went through what he described as a pretence of “dumping some food and some medicines, turning us into a nation of beggars” but Palestine “has the highest percentage on earth of university graduates!”

Mr Sourani talked about the historical background to the establishment of the Geneva Convention, primarily the 48 million people killed in World War II.

The Palestinians were now being punished as a people because they had elected Hamas: “We made a real democracy in the Middle East and we have been punished. Punishing civilians is a war crime. This is a war crime...but nobody on earth will turn us into good victims!”

He spoke of what he described as the silence and complicity of Western governments – “the conspiracy of silence of free people” and stressed that international law must be applied.

“To ignore international law is the rule of the jungle...all we want is the rule of law. After 40 years of occupation

we have no freedom of movement. This is a shame on human society. This is the law of the jungle... We are not asking for revolution. We are asking for:

- Freedom of movement of people and goods;
- Independence;
- Right of Return for refugees;
- Jerusalem – Our Holy City;
- Unity of the Palestinians;

“We are asking for your help.”

As the meeting ended Mr. Sourani summarised the mission of the PCHR as being “to speak the truth and not to be politically correct.”

Both Directors emphasised the crucial role that civil society organisations had to play focussing the attention of the world on the situation. Mr. Sourani referred to the Madrid Forum and the possibility of building a major international campaign and asked that ICTU join in this campaign. The Directors also asked that we return to Gaza and that hopefully we would be able to stay for a longer period, the next time.

## Conclusion

This was a quite a critical meeting with the two Directors of a courageous and world-renowned human rights organisation, which forced us to confront our responsibilities on this issue. Despite the difficulties, the PCHR has been able to maintain a critical human rights’ perspective on developments in Gaza and the Palestinian Territories, often doing at great personal risk. They were very critical of the weakness and corruption of Fatah. They appear to see Hamas as more principled and committed, but recognise that the Hamas leadership is inexperienced and that Hamas itself, like the Palestinian Authority, has been guilty of many breaches of human and civil rights. Despite the deep disappointment about the lack of intervention by Western governments, the Directors still retained a strong belief that a positive Western intervention could

be achieved, and that civil society organisations could play a vital role in bringing this about. There was much praise for the position that Congress had taken, and a plea from the Directors that we continue to offer support – that Ireland had an important leadership role to play. There was a sincere request that we join the Madrid Forum. The importance of the application of International Human Rights Law was referred to throughout the meeting, and how this – and not the balance of power - could be the only secure foundation on which a lasting peace settlement could be achieved.

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## Meeting with the Gaza leadership of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU), including the President and Deputy President

*Also at this meeting were representatives of municipal, health and agricultural workers, as well as the International Relations Department of the PGFTU. This meeting was held in temporary accommodation, belonging to the Public Service and Commercial Workers Union, who are officially affiliated to Public Services International (PSI).*

At the outset, we heard a brief history of the PGFTU, which was established in 1965 and was comprised of five trade unions. However, it was closed down as an organisation between 1967-1980. When it reopened there were considerable restrictions imposed by the Israeli military – it was difficult to have meetings, there were numerous detentions, equipment was confiscated.

With the establishment of the Palestinian Authority trade unions had greater freedom to act. At this stage, the PGFTU had 15 national unions in membership. However, with the onset of the second intifada, workers and trade unionists experienced serious difficulties, as unemployment rose with the destruction and closure of businesses and a large drop in exports.

## ‘ The emergence of sectarian trade unions would be a serious setback ’

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### Election of Hamas

We were then informed of the challenges faced by the PGFTU since the election of Hamas, with the organisation coming under considerable pressure, up to and including an attack on PGFTU headquarters.

In March 2007 Hamas destroyed the PGFTU radio and in June 2007 they took full control of the PGFTU headquarters and five branch offices. IT resources were burned and destroyed. The Executive Committee of Hamas now has full control of their buildings. The PGFTU appealed for help on this issue.

The PGFTU tried to negotiate with Hamas. They claimed Hamas wanted to become involved in the trade union movement and offered to allow them (PPGFTU) to work under Hamas supervision or joint leadership of the movement. The PGFTU resisted this, and said that leadership could only be on the basis of being elected by the members and that some Hamas members were already in elected positions. Most trade union leaders have also had to meet with Hamas ‘for investigation.’ They said that Hamas is now attempting to establish an ‘Islamic Workers Block’, but they are also using the name of the PGFTU as a cover for these activities.

They said the occupation of their office by Hamas has been very bad for working people. Some 120,000 people used to have free health insurance, but this is now gone. However PGFTU had received help from Public Service International (PSI) in training activists, and there are some moves to restart negotiations with Hamas.

Since the loss of their premises they have experienced considerable difficulty in functioning. They are currently renting offices from the General Union of Health Services Workers. The occupation of their building by Hamas has made it very difficult to represent the membership: for example they had been involved in hundreds of cases regarding the rights of workers in Israel that are now very difficult to process.

They informed us that there had been two types of Palestinian workers in the Occupied Territories outside of Gaza – those with permits and those without. The latter,

e.g. those who were forced by poverty to work illegally in the settlements were extremely vulnerable to exploitation. Those with permits had trade union dues automatically deducted at source, but this money went to Histadrut and not to PGFTU, even though Histadrut did not represent them (see below *Relations with Histadrut*).

We also heard from the representative of the municipal workers about their lack of resources, as 90 percent of the workers no longer pay union dues because salaries have not been paid regularly. They are now facing bankruptcy. They have also had a number of strikes. People were facing considerable hardship due to non-payment of salaries coupled with very high price prices – the price of milk had more than doubled, and most prices had risen by between 50-200 percent.

The General Secretary of the Agricultural Workers Union followed this up with comments about the huge difficulties the sector faces because of the siege. He gave an example of how a large section of the industry is based on the production of flowers for export, that very large quantities of flowers had been harvested but they were prevented from exporting them and now the cost of transporting them was too high. Most of these flowers would therefore be destroyed. He also spoke about the losses of agricultural land due to the Israelis having bulldozed large swathes of land near the borders. We were also told that the lives of workers and their families in Gaza were made very difficult because of the frequent attacks and incursions by Israeli Forces.

### Relations with Histadrut

We were informed that 25,000-26,000 Palestinians worked in Israeli industrial zones and paid dues to Histadrut. They are entitled to rights and representation arising from this, but this has not transpired. PGFTU lawyers are working on this. There was an agreement between the PGFTU and Histadrut stating that 50 percent of the money received from Palestinian workers would be returned to the PGFTU but this has not happened.

They are also very concerned about unorganised Palestinian workers in Israel (Palestinian workers in Israel

are not permitted to be represented by the PGFTU, but often don't want to join Histadrut unions). Palestinian workers in the settlements, which are illegal, are not subject to any law and have the same status as illegal immigrants, i.e. they are denied any rights.

In response to a question as to how Congress could help we were asked to try to make representations to Hamas: to evacuate the PGFTU offices and return them to the Federation; to stop the violation of the rights of the trade union leadership: to inform them that leadership positions are elected and open to all; that they respect trade union freedom and allow unions to carry out their work; to stop the harassment of workers, for example transferring workers from posts because they are not Hamas members.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that the PGFTU are severely challenged on two different fronts: from the closure of the border crossings and the continued, heavy restrictions of movement of goods and people. Secondly, they have come under considerable pressure from Hamas and have had their union accommodation expropriated and their property destroyed. The claim that Hamas is considering developing an Islamic trade union has been difficult to corroborate, but due to the intense inter-party rivalry that presently exists it would not be surprising if partisan or even overtly sectarian trade unions were to emerge. This may have happened to some degree already throughout Palestine. The emergence of sectarian trade unions would be a serious setback for the Palestinian labour movement and could have very significant repercussions, well beyond the confines of Gaza itself.

## Meeting with Dr. Basem Naim, Minister for Health and Deputy Leader of the Hamas Government, Gaza

Dr. Naim welcomed the delegation to Gaza, particularly at a time of such tension and with Gaza under effective siege.

He presented a detailed political analysis of the situation in the Occupied Territories and particularly in Gaza. He emphasised the importance of Hamas's commitment to the electoral process, and how the massive popular support for Hamas was reflected in the electoral turnout that saw them win power.

The response of the Western governments was to ignore the result of the democratic process, and then attempt to undermine it. He said it was hypocrisy for them to reject the democratic choice of the people. He also referred to the alliances being made by Fatah – with Israel and USA - to help bring about the collapse of the Hamas government. Dr. Naim stated that he was particularly angered and also shocked at the response of Europe, that he would have expected the European nations to have an independent foreign policy, but instead they had colluded with Israel and the USA in the attacks on the Palestinian people and Palestinian democracy.

Dr. Naim then proceeded to outline the human costs of the ongoing crisis. He related a number of harrowing stories of suffering that resulted from the decision to close the borders. He said people were dying because chemotherapy drugs were difficult to obtain or access specialised treatments, such as dialysis. He mentioned the loss of one of Gaza's most experienced paediatricians, who he said had died of a heart condition while waiting at a border crossing.

He referred to another child, a boy, who could not get across for hospital treatment and who died at the crossing 'with pain through his whole body.' Dr. Naim explained that people could not comprehend how the West and especially Europe, could be silent in such circumstances.

**Congress President** The President expressed solidarity with the people of Palestine and especially those under siege in Gaza at this time. She explained to Dr. Naim the policy position ICTU had taken and the reasons for our visit. She explained however that we had also been meeting with PGFTU and were very concerned about the restrictions being imposed on the PGFTU, about their ability to function as an independent



## ‘ He welcomed the intervention of the ICTU ’

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trade union, and in particular about the seizure of the PGFTU offices.

Dr. Naim also received other questions from the delegation about his government's willingness to support an independent trade union movement and further enquiries about their relationship with the PGFTU. The delegation also expressed concern about the risks of a serious fracturing of trade union solidarity and the emergence of sectarian i.e. Islamic only trade unions. Dr. Naim was also asked for his opinion on how the ICTU could be helpful to the Palestinian people at the present time.

Dr. Naim responded to these questions by pointing out that the leadership of PGFTU was behaving undemocratically and was maintaining its control by refusing to hold elections – that they hadn't held elections for office since 2000. He gave an example of a very senior PGFTU leader who gave up his position in order to join the Fatah leadership in Ramallah in the Palestinian Authority. After the election of Hamas this same individual returned to Gaza and stepped back into his old union position. He then proceeded to organise a major strike in the health service to attempt to undermine the Hamas government, Dr Naim said.

He went on to say that one of the most damaging aspects of this was the pressure that was put on health service personnel to join the strike, claiming that this intimidation was so severe that health workers and medical personnel left their posts without providing any emergency cover. He gave an example of a woman on a maternity ward who had started to be induced and was then left without medical care when the strike commenced. Dr. Naim stated that he had never before in his experience come across such conduct by health professionals, and that this created considerable difficulties for his department.

Dr. Naim also said that it would very useful if an objective and impartial body could be available to help address the present difficulties in the trade union movement. He asked if it would be possible for the ICTU to become involved and to assist in their

relationship with the PGFTU. He also asked if the ICTU could be available to offer support with training, and that this would also be greatly appreciated. The President stated that she would bring these requests back to Congress for consideration.

During this meeting Dr. Naim was also asked if he and his government could use their influence to help end the targeting of civilians by firing of rockets into Sderot and elsewhere in northern Israel. It was explained that the Delegation welcomed the maintenance of the ceasefire, but that the firing of Qassam rockets served only to devalue and undermine the achievements of the ceasefire, and made it more difficult to mobilise solidarity.

In response Dr Naim said that the people of Gaza were subjected to many incursions and attacks by the Israeli armed forces, that civilian areas were constantly being bombed, and that they suffered many casualties. In this situation it was very difficult for people to refrain from showing resistance.

### Conclusion

This was an extremely sobering meeting, held in a high security environment, with armed bodyguards outside the office and on corridors. It was greatly appreciated by the Delegation that as Minister for Health in the midst of a humanitarian crisis, Dr. Naim was able to take the time to see us. Throughout, he spoke quietly but with obvious pain and compassion about the suffering of his people. He placed responsibility for this not only on the Israeli government and the US, but also on Europe because of what he termed was their collusion with Israeli actions and their refusal to accept the outcome of the elections. He considered this a gross hypocrisy.

Dr. Naim made a number of serious allegations about the lack of democracy within PGFTU in Gaza, and of highly unethical behaviour by healthcare staff at the urging of PGFTU leaders. He stated that he believed PGFTU in Gaza to be effectively an arm of Fatah, and that Fatah-aligned PGFTU leaders are using their positions to undermine the authority of the Hamas

government. Dr. Naim also welcomed the intervention of ICTU, and his invitation to ICTU to use its offices to help strengthen the trade union movement and to improve relations with PGFTU should perhaps be seriously considered.

## Thursday, November 8

### Nablus, West Bank

#### 9.30hrs **Visit to Commercial Premises**

*In order not to compromise the security of either the owner, his employees or the premises, this is an abbreviated version of our visit.*

**Local Business Owner** Nablus was once a famous industrial area but the occupation has changed that with the town closed completely at times. Business is greatly reduced and many companies have closed down. There has been a huge reduction in employment. In 2002 there was no work for eight months. Fifty of our staff slept and ate here. We brought raw materials through the mountains and exported the finished product back over the mountains. We have lost huge quantities of goods through transport crashes, robberies etc. To export goods from here to Gaza costs 7-10,000 shekels. To export goods from China to Nablus costs 3,000 shekels. We exported goods from here in April and they arrived in Gaza in August. For exports to Gaza you require Israeli permission and we need assistance of the UN to attain permission.

One month ago, 300 Israeli military invaded Nablus and shot all night. Our Government is serious about making the West Bank safe and lawful. We feel sometimes that we are not from this world.

The Israelis come every night. Yesterday they came and destroyed buildings. Out of 40 workers required for shift only 10 turned up.

Some workers sleep here and only go home at weekends. The unemployment rate is between 45 percent - 65 percent. For young people it is greater than 65 percent. We have 5-6,000 students who graduate every year and only 5 percent get work.

Materials are held up in Israeli controlled ports. They are also held up at border checkpoints. They must go through x-ray machines at the border, even goods coming from Israel. I have had USAID officials look at this, as aid from the US is held up for days as well (USAID is the US government body responsible for disbursing official aid overseas).

For the food industry food supplies are held up for days. This is contrary to the Muslim religion. Lorries for maintenance have to go to Israel but are not allowed through the border. There was a container to be collected at a checkpoint the other day at 07.00hrs, it was finally released at 17.00hrs. Israelis don't want us to export to Israel. They don't want us to succeed. Sometimes our electricity is cut off ten times per day. We have our own generator here.

**ICTU Delegate** Informed the owner that Mr Brosh, the Chair of the Federation of Economic Organisations in Tel Aviv, had said there was good cooperation between employers in Palestine and Israel. Was this the case?

**Owner** No one has talked to us or cooperated, when they can profit we get respect – but politics no – only one percent of our product exported to Israel the remainder is sold on the internal market.

At checkpoints when going to Tel Aviv or Jerusalem I have to get two taxis and walk through various doors, sometimes as many as five at checkpoints. I must get permission to come back after 5pm, for business people can seek permission up to 12 midnight but for everyone else it is 7pm. Credit facilities are very difficult even though this company is in business for 40 years. Every time we transport goods through a checkpoint I must pay 800 shekels, sometimes we must go through three checkpoints.

## ‘ We exported goods from Nablus in April and they arrived in Gaza in August ’

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**ICTU Delegate** Would a boycott have an adverse impact on Palestinian workers?

**Owner** There are 25,000 West Bank citizens working in Israeli controlled areas, 15,000 of whom have permits. The other 10,000 use routes over the mountains. To work in these areas (with permit) you must be over 30 years of age, married and have children – otherwise you cannot work.

Even business people have to be married and have children. If not they are refused access to Israel. The richest merchant in this area is a single person of 65 years of age and he is not allowed into Israel.

I have no concern about a boycott. It would have no effect on any Palestinian workers. I do believe business relationships can promote integration particularly if we can also discuss politics.

There are twelve areas of extremists around Nablus i.e. fundamentalist settlers, who pay no tax and get free homes.

**PGFTU Legal Advisor** Many settlers meet in Sinai, those who have been evacuated out of Gaza. They received compensation of thousands of dollars for Gaza and have moved to more settlements in the hope, we believe, of receiving further compensation if they are moved on again.

11.15hrs **Meeting with General Secretary and Executive Council members of Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions**

**Mr Sharer Sa'ed, PGFTU General Secretary** It is good you are here on a peaceful day in Nablus. There are Israeli incursions every day. We had a good day yesterday in Ramallah, the media mentioned your visit and many people are very happy you are here.

**ICTU Delegate** There are similarities in the histories of Palestine and Ireland. The analysis we heard from Mr Hussein (Chief of Staff to President Abbas) was very important to our understanding of the situation,

particularly in relation to the boycott call that came out of our recent conference. We met Histadrut and employer representatives, both in Dublin and in Tel Aviv. Both organisations expressed opposition to a boycott. We have a long history of opposition to repressive regimes: we need clarification of the PGFTU position.

**Sharer** The political analysis was very good, most Palestinians do not get this analysis. Because the Palestinian and Irish relationship is so good, we show our respect to the Irish people, from a political point of view your visit is very successful.

Yesterday, I took away your conference motions to study. The PGFTU was astonished to hear Histadrut say this about our attitude to a boycott, we have a position on boycott. Yours is a brave decision to show solidarity.

After Oslo (Oslo Peace Accords, 1993) we began talks with Histadrut. We signed an agreement with them in 1995 (Appendix VIII). These were difficult meetings. Histadrut at that time was represented by some very well known Israeli citizens: the current Deputy Prime Minister of Israel (Tzipi Livni) and Shimon Peres and a previous minister in Government and the Chair of Israeli Labour Party.

In my opinion, if Histadrut had operated that agreement then it would not now be under pressure from international trade union federations. If Histadrut had shown concern for rights for Palestinian workers, the situation would be different. If Histadrut had taken a position on produce from the occupied land then there would be no call for boycott. Therefore, this decision (on a boycott) is really a decision for international federations.

The only Israeli product we the Palestinian people do not boycott is milk – the only milk Palestinian mothers can get is from Israel. But as a general policy we encourage the purchase of Palestinian products.

As a matter of fact, we appreciate your position on a boycott. This is a brave step by the Irish Trade Union Movement and the Irish people. We know that this position of yours (boycott) will bring pressure on

you. We also boycott companies who support Israeli demolition of Palestinian homes: Caterpillar build the wall and a French company assists.

**ICTU Delegate** In relation to the agreement you signed, does Histadrut owe the PGFTU money?

**Sharer** Yes. We have an agreement but they do not pay us. They take our fees (union dues) and do not pay them to us. We had more than 60 meetings, official and unofficial, on this issue. We had fourteen months of talks and then signed the agreement. We employ sixty-five people to represent our workers – we pay them wages, but no money from Histadrut. This is a legal issue but we can't go to the Israeli court. Guy Ryder (General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation, ITUC) was involved in talks to resolve this issue.

I believe, you have a good overall view of issues apart from the boycott. We cannot tell you what to do, we thank you for your policy. We will take that policy to the Executive Council of PGFTU. It would be good to have more dialogue between PGFTU and ICTU.

**ICTU Delegate** In the agreement it states that a 'Dues and Organisation Committee' be established. Has this met?

**Sharer** After the agreement in 1995, there was only one meeting. They (Histadrut) have transferred some money but we don't know how much is owed. There is no proper documentation to prove the amount due.

A Swedish Trade Union Federation requested a meeting between Histadrut and the PGFTU. I agreed but requested agenda. If Histadrut sit and discuss our agreement we have no problem with a meeting, but Histadrut put obstacles in front of us all the time.

## Conclusion

From this meeting, it is evident that the relationship between the two Federations is far from what conveyed to us by Histadrut. Indeed, PGFTU policy on a boycott is

at total variance to what was stated by Histadrut. Finally, the agreement signed in 1995 has not been adhered to. If it was to be operated fully, both the PGFTU and Histadrut could jointly make a significant contribution to the peace process.

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## 14.00 hrs Meeting with General Union of Palestinian Women of Nablus

*Deputy Chair Welcomed the delegation and apologised for the absence of the Chair and other Committee Members due to a bomb explosion and shooting we ourselves had witnessed earlier.*

As I anticipate you have already had political analysis and economic analysis of the situation, so I will talk about the role of women in Palestine.

The Women's Federation was established in 1964 – it was initially part of the PLO. Its aim was to represent and organise the women's sector in Palestinian society, the main focus then was the defence of Palestine against the occupation.

The rights of women in terms of equality and their role in society were overlooked, the main focus was not on women's issues.

After the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) women began to review where they were at. We began to engage after noting discrimination in civil rights and sections of the PA. After 1995 different groups of women came together and the objective was to create social interest for women through the Palestine Women's Federation.

*(At this point the Chair, Ms Dalal Salamah, joined the meeting).*

**Dalal Salamah** We are a general union dealing with legal rights for women and we also have a national role. People were exhausted after second Intifada (Al Aqsa Intifada, began 2000). We struggle for rights, we want to build our own independent state so our struggle is from this objective.

## ‘ We cannot tell you what to do, but we thank you for your policy ’

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There is (at the moment) no political horizon for the Palestinian people. How can we change our position? It is not easy. We request the application of international law, nothing more. We completed the first phase of the peace roadmap by creating our Palestinian Parliament – electing a President and Prime Minister. We enacted new laws on security and tried to bring law and order into our society.

The Israelis say there is no law and order in Nablus, but changes have taken place and this has helped us. The Israelis say we are disunited, but we all support the UN. Gaza has inhibited our position. We want unity and peace in Nablus, our choice collapses if the fundamentalists win.

We accept your help. A boycott of Israeli products is a great step, which we appreciate, even if symbolic. It is not the economic damage, but the moral value of a boycott. That means a lot to us. And you come here rather than us going to Ireland, you experience the reality here and hear different opinions.

We as women consider ourselves most affected in this struggle, we have been in jail several times, women and children suffer at the checkpoints.

We help women in education and Israel puts obstacles in our path. We overcome social challenges but women's participation in labour market is just 11 percent. We believe this is due to Israeli checkpoints and restrictions. We have Labour Laws but there is very high unemployment for everyone. Women do not progress unless educated – they can develop through Trade Unions. For women it is better outside home than to be at home all day.

But there is one other thing you could do for us: campaign for the release of the 124 female prisoners and 400 child prisoners under 16 years of age.

**ICTU Delegate** How does Hamas have majority in Gaza?

**Dalal Salamah** When there is a political system people collaborate. If one party is in power 20 years people want change. Fatah has worked a long time with the people against great opposition, during the political evolution of

Palestine and engaging/negotiating with Israelis. Hamas has never experienced this. They have only ever been in opposition.

**Deputy Chair** Major changes in world, since the Soviet Union collapsed. The Islamic way is increasing in Arab countries due to many reasons: the absence of democracy, people lose faith in other means and drift towards religion. In Europe too there is a movement towards the right – a rise in racism in Europe – Muslim Islamists are also right wing.

**Committee Member** Hamas is not democratic. In the election they had no political programme, they only succeeded by slogans. They want unachievable objectives. By putting down Fatah, helped by the US, Israel allowed Hamas to grow.

**Dalal Salamah** When the PA recently entered refugee camp (where I live) to stop criminality, they arrested criminals. But the Israelis (IDF) entered at the same time, so people assumed it was a joint operation. People spit at PA forces and Hamas grows.

**ICTU Delegate** Outlined ICTU policy, with particular reference to role of women in ICTU.

**Dalal Salamah** We are a General Union with representatives from various political parties and independents but no Islamic. We work with women, trying to empower them and we have different programmes around the social economy and small enterprises for women. We cover Nablus, 57 surrounding villages and four refugee camps. We are opening a co-operative store in Nablus to sell produce of women (embroidery) and campaigning on the legal status of women. We are also lobbying different institutions on behalf of women – supporting young women in University. The cooperatives make a profit that we use to subsidise empowerment.

**ICTU Delegate** Why are the prisoners in jail?

**Dalal Salamah** Good question. We are nation under occupation, we have the right to resist. They are political prisoners. We accept the state of Israel, why do they not accept us. I am a refugee. My parent's original home was



in Tel Aviv.

**ICTU Delegate** Thank you for that very detailed explanation of your work and role. Hopefully Congress will develop policies to assist you.

**Hamadi (Committee Member)** We appreciate your role and what you are doing: it is most important to us. Send more delegations, the more people who visit and witness the better. But you should beware of the power of Israel with your boycott. Are you strong enough to withstand this?

### Conclusion

Conclusions from this meeting are left to the reader with the exception of two points:

- 1) The repeated reference to the boycott as a symbol of hope and confidence to the Palestinian people
- 2) The concern for our welfare if we were to call for a boycott. And this from women already enduring quite an amount of suffering and pressure.

Israeli security corridor at Gaza



## Day Five, Friday November 9<sup>th</sup>

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### Hebron

#### 0930 hrs **Tour of Hebron**

The delegation toured Hebron, a Palestinian city with a population of 166,000 Palestinians and a Jewish settlement containing some 700-800 settlers. The area which once housed the marketplace and streets which once contained thousands of Palestinians are now eerily quiet and denuded of people. Our guide for this visit was Yehuda Shaul, an orthodox Jew, Israeli citizen and ex-member of the Israeli Defence Forces who formerly served in Hebron. Yehuda, along with other ex-military personnel formed an organisation Breaking the Silence\*, of which he is now the Executive Director. The organisation has published the testimonies of former IDF members. You are urged to read these publications and reach your own conclusions (*Appendix 1X*)

Appendix X contains a map of Hebron and on the reverse of the map is a commentary with pictures which readers are also urged to consult in order to obtain a clearer picture of reality, in Hebron.

*\***Breaking the Silence** is an organization of veteran Israeli soldiers that collects testimonies of soldiers who served in the Occupied Territories during the Second Intifadah. Soldiers who serve in the Territories are witness to, and participate in military actions which change them immensely. Cases of abuse towards Palestinians, looting, and destruction of property have been the norm for years, but are still excused as military necessities, or explained as extreme and unique cases.*

### Conclusion

The delegation wishes to acknowledge the courage of Yehuda and his colleagues in the work that they do, work which is vehemently opposed by Israeli settlers in Hebron. This we witnessed at first hand, with robust exchanges taking place between settlers and Yehuda and his colleague, in our presence. We also witnessed the police arresting one of his colleagues, following

## ‘ The more people who visit and witness, the better ’

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a (false) allegation of assault made by a settler. The settler had been very abusive to Yehuda while he was attempting to address the delegation.

Many of the delegation expressed feelings of dismay and shock that so many Palestinians could be forcibly removed from their homes and that such a vibrant area of Palestine could be quite literally transformed into ghost town, in order to facilitate a tiny minority of settlers. If there is to be any hope of peaceful co-existence then the Palestinians who have been removed or left, should be rightfully returned to their own homes, in what are now termed the ‘sterile’ streets of occupied Hebron.

This was the delegation’s last official engagement. We arrived in Hebron somewhat depressed and dispirited at all we had witnessed. While there we further witnessed

fundamental breaches of human rights, but we also had our faith in humanity restored by the courage and conviction of Yehuda Shaul and the young men and women, ex military personnel, who are breaking the silence.

Laying a wreath at the tomb of President Arafat







**‘ We accept the state  
of Israel, why do they  
not accept us? ’**



The apartheid wall guards an Israeli-only road





## Overall Conclusions

### 1. Palestine is under Occupation

It is obvious that all of the land of historic Palestine is under Israeli Occupation, including the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Despite Israel's 'disengagement' from the Gaza Strip, it clearly retains high levels of de facto control over the territory.

The settlements – which violate international law - and the Israeli checkpoints are all pervasive. Everywhere we went in the West Bank we observed settlements, some of them massive, most often located on hilltops, overlooking and monitoring the Palestinians below. The settler accommodation invariably comprised bright, modern houses and apartments and is in stark contrast to the impoverished shanty town appearance of the Palestinian homes below.

The settlers themselves are heavily armed and are protected throughout the West Bank by a strong Israeli military presence. Indeed, mobility within the West Bank between Palestinian villages, towns and cities is severely curtailed and under the control of Israeli forces: for example, entering and leaving Hebron or Nablus.

The Israeli army, as well as armed Israeli civilians, operate barriers and controlled crossings, many of which resemble the heavily fortified border checkpoints which were evident during the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Also very noticeable is the fragmented and divided nature of the West Bank itself, which is due to the proliferation of 'settler-only' roads controlled entirely by the IDF. Many are newly constructed, of high quality and frequently run in parallel to existing roads used by Palestinians. These roads provide direct access for settlers to urban areas which Palestinians are prohibited from entering (e.g. Jerusalem), or which Palestinians can only enter after long detours – often taking several hours – and after processing at Israeli checkpoints. There is little doubt that this two-tier infrastructure, both hampers and impedes any form of sustainable Palestinian development and prevents the emergence of a viable, contiguous, independent Palestinian state.

### 2. The Separation Wall

The delegation saw multiple examples of the devastating impact the construction of this massive 9 metre high concrete wall is having (Irish company Cement Roadstone Holdings (CRH) owns a 25 percent share in Mashav, Israel's only cement company, which supplies construction materials for the wall). It dominates huge swathes of the Palestinian landscape, destroying agricultural land, cutting farmers off from their livelihoods and causing the destruction of tens of thousands of olive trees. It was genuinely shocking to see the impact of the wall in urban areas, where it sunders entire communities and neighbourhoods, and imposes severe restrictions on access to essential services and employment. The delegation heard, but was neither impressed nor convinced by the argument that the wall is essential to the security of Israel.

It was noted that the wall does not follow the route of the 1967 Green Line border. It has instead snaked into Palestinian territory and seized up to 12 percent of Palestinian land, including significant water resources. The delegation believes, therefore, that the construction of the wall amounts to a land (and water) grab, while simultaneously creating a new border in advance of any possible final settlement.

In July 2004 the International Court of Justice, in The Hague, declared the construction of the wall to be illegal, ordered that it be dismantled, and ruled that Israel should pay reparation to the Palestinians affected by its construction. The ruling also found that the wall, in conjunction with other Israeli measures, "severely impeded the exercise by the Palestinian people of its right to self-determination."  
(Appendix X1)

### 3. East Jerusalem

There are severe restrictions on Palestinian house-building and movement, in East Jerusalem. The delegation is firmly of the view that that these restrictions amount to a denial of the basic human rights of Palestinian people. The Israeli authorities

are engaged in a clear policy of curtailing Palestinian growth whilst favouring and facilitating growth of settler numbers. This system of sectarian preferment can best be characterised as a sophisticated form of ethnic cleansing. Again, the very strong suspicion is that this is an attempt to create 'facts on the ground' in advance of any future settlement. It must therefore be challenged and resisted by the international community.

#### 4. Gaza

The delegation is deeply concerned that the Israeli blockade of Gaza has threatened to unleash a humanitarian crisis among the population. Indeed, in March 2008, as this document was being prepared, a coalition of eight NGOs and human rights groups released a report on the situation in Gaza. The report – *The Gaza Strip: a Humanitarian Implosion* – revealed the situation had deteriorated further, since November 2007.

It stated that: "The humanitarian situation in Gaza, is worse now than it has been at any time since the beginning of the Israeli Occupation, in 1967."

The authors noted that some 80 percent of the population was dependent on food aid (a rise of about 200,000 people, since our visit); that unemployment was between 40-50 percent and 95 percent of Gaza's industrial operations were halted due to a ban on imported raw materials and exports; that the water and sewage systems were on the point of collapse and hospitals were experiencing daily power cuts of between 8-12 hours duration.

It is the view of the Congress delegation that the restrictions on access to essential goods, services and medical supplies, as well as the restrictions on entry and access, including for life-saving medical intervention, amounts to the 'collective punishment' of the entire population. This is in breach of International Humanitarian Law and a war crime. This should warrant immediate international intervention.

#### 5. Apartheid

The delegation concurs with the assessments of both ex-US President Jimmy Carter, and UN Special Rapporteur John Dugard – a professor of International Law - that the privileging of Israeli settlements, and of settler movement in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, taken in conjunction with the repressive measures used against the indigenous Palestinian population, amounts to a form of Apartheid. As such, this policy must be seriously challenged by world opinion and should be opposed in the same way as Apartheid in South Africa was opposed.

#### 6. Economy

There is a huge and evident disparity between the affluence of the Israeli population and the Palestinians, whether between Israel and Palestine, or between Israeli settlements and the Palestinian communities they look down on. Reports from the Palestinian politicians, business and trade union leaders we met, as well as human rights groups, indicate that the Palestinian economy has suffered serious decline in recent years, particularly since the outbreak of the Second Intifadah, in 2000. This collapse appears to have been caused by the extremely harsh restrictions imposed by the Israeli authorities on movements of people and goods. This assessment has been confirmed by the World Bank in its analysis of the downturn in the Palestinian economy. Their report is referenced elsewhere in this document.

#### 7. Palestinian Authority

It is very clear that the power and authority of the Palestinian Authority is extremely limited and is itself subject to Israeli authority. The fragmentation of the West Bank, and the control and curtailment of the free movement of people and goods, is the clearest evidence possible that the Palestinians of the West Bank and East Jerusalem are under Israeli domination. The Palestinian Authority and the rule of President Abbas is also continually undermined by overt as well as covert Israeli military incursions, including arrests and

assassinations. There are frequent – in fact daily - Israeli army incursions into Palestinian centres like Ramallah, Hebron and Nablus. The standing and authority of Palestinian Authority ministers is also undermined and reduced by the fact that they require Israeli permission to move between cities in the West Bank, e.g. between Ramallah and Jerusalem. Palestinian civil authority in the West Bank is also in great danger of breaking down because of inter-party rivalry and clashes between Palestinian armed groups. There is a real danger of a collapse of law and order, which would only serve to reinforce the poverty, deprivation and hardship of the Palestinian people.

### 8. Israeli Settlements & Israeli Security

It was very evident to the delegation, in its meetings with Israeli civilian, military and political representatives, that security will dominate all other considerations and will always be prioritised irrespective of any breaches of International or Human Rights Law that might occur. The delegation is highly suspicious, however, that security considerations are being used as a pretext to justify Israeli territorial expansion and the denial of the rights of Palestinians. We note that the building of both legal and illegal settlements, or the Israeli practice of buying individual houses - in the heart of Palestinian communities in the old city of Jerusalem -and erecting Israeli flags above them, brings with it an inevitable Israeli military presence and increased surveillance and control of the local Palestinian population. In this way both Israeli settlements and Israeli security constantly reinforce one another, with devastating and frequently deadly consequences for the local people.

### 9. Political Implications

The situation that now obtains in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza lends credence to the claims of the Palestinian representatives we met that Israel is making it impossible for any viable sovereign Palestinian state to be agreed – that as a result of its interventions, Israel has allowed for the possibility only of the existence of a series of fragmented and isolated Bantustans,

denying the Palestinians any territorial contiguity or any possibility of sovereign authority.

The delegation is also strongly in agreement with the Palestinian political, trade union, women's and human rights groups we met that any peace process must be based on International Law and UN resolutions. Any settlement that is not based on justice but solely on the balance of power –and clearly power is overwhelmingly on the side of the Israelis – is bound to be counter-productive and to fail. We also recognise that any viable political process has to be inclusive and to involve all the significant parties to the conflict, in particular those with a recognised and legitimate democratic mandate. The delegation does not see it as their role to comment on the appropriateness or otherwise of a people's democratic choice of government, but we do recognise the validity of the election result. We are of the view therefore that the talks process should be inclusive of the elected representatives of Hamas and the dismissed Hamas Government. We consider that any preconditions that seek to exclude Hamas are unjust and undemocratic and serve only to undermine the entire peace process.

### 10. International Law

It was stated by a number of the Palestinian leaders we met, in both the West Bank and in Gaza, that a peaceful settlement could not emerge unless it was based on International Law and UN resolutions. There was strong criticism of Western governments, and the governments of the European Union in particular, for failing to challenge Israel on its breaches of International Law, including the collective punishment of the people of Gaza. Palestinian trade unions and human rights representatives have called on civil society organisations to demonstrate their opposition to these practices. As the largest civil society body on the island of Ireland, the trade union movement is in a strong position to offer leadership in this area. In this context, the policy position of Congress, as expressed in the motions passed at our Biennial Delegate Conference in July 2007, was particularly welcomed.

## 11. Boycott

The boycott position of ICTU has been explicitly commended and welcomed by almost all the representatives of Palestinian trade unions and human rights groups that we met. It was evident to the delegation that some of those we met were more constrained in their comments on any boycott, because of political sensitivities. Nevertheless the very clear message that we received was that the position adopted by Congress was strongly supported and welcomed.

## 12. PGFTU & Histadrut

The position expressed to us by the leadership of Histadrut, that they had a good and harmonious working relationship with the PGFTU, and that PGFTU opposed the boycott, was shown to be erroneous. In our meetings with PGFTU, including with the PGFTU leadership, it was made very clear that there are considerable difficulties in their relationship with Histadrut. The PGFTU state that there are serious issues of difference between the two organisations due to Histadrut's refusal to return to PGFTU union dues that were deducted from Palestinian workers' salaries over many years. This amounts to a very significant sum of money that Histadrut continues to withhold from PGFTU, despite written agreements to do so. PGFTU also made it clear to the delegation that they have not opposed the boycott, that they did not inform Histadrut that they were in opposition to boycott, and that they are unhappy that Histadrut attempted to mislead the delegation in this way.

## 13. Hamas-Fatah Conflict

The delegation heard many accounts from both sides of the clashes between Fatah and Hamas, and of attacks by both parties on their opponents and on the organisations of their opponents. This is to be condemned. It is especially disappointing to hear of the fracturing of trade union solidarity, and to learn of the partisan nature of the trade union movement in

both the West Bank and Gaza. The seizure of PGFTU offices and destruction of PGFTU property is also to be condemned. The possibility of the emergence of sectarian trade unions is particularly worrying, and for this reason the request to ICTU to offer assistance, possibly in the form of mediation, is worthy of serious consideration.

## 14. ICTU Solidarity

As stated above the 2007 BDC resolutions were strongly welcomed by Palestinian representatives, particularly when it was explained that Congress is the sole trade union congress in Ireland and covers the entire island. In addition, the decision to send a delegation to the region itself, with an extensive programme of visits and meetings, has also considerably strengthened solidarity links with the Palestinian people and trade unions. It is to be hoped that this will continue to be developed into the future.

## 15. Irish Foreign Policy and the Quartet

Almost all the Palestinian representatives we met with expressed dismay about they termed 'the silence of the EU' with regard to events in Palestine. They referred again and again to breaches of International Law and UN Resolutions. A number expressed outrage at the EU's decision to withhold grant aid and on its refusal to challenge Israel's failure to pay over tax revenues - worth \$50-60 million per month - that are legitimately due to the Palestinian authorities. Europe has also continued to grant Israel preferential trading status under the Euro-Mediterranean Trading Agreement, despite repeated breaches of the human rights clause in Article 2. The European stance has caused great dismay and anger among Palestinians at all levels. Their representatives have pointed out that Europe, and in particular Ireland, have traditionally maintained an objective and critical perspective but that this is no longer the case. This change they attribute to the EU's membership of the Quartet, which has resulted in the EU relinquishing any independent foreign policy, on this matter. This also applies to Irish foreign policy.

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The delegation found it hard to disagree with any of these criticisms and see it as their duty to inform the membership, and the Irish public, of the implications of Irish government policy and of EU membership of the Quartet. We firmly believe that the majority of Irish people are not supportive of the Irish Government or the EU's silence and would wish to see a return to a more independent and critical perspective.

therefore morally, politically and legally unjustifiable. Perhaps the greatest tragedy of all is that they who have suffered so much seem to have become blinded to the suffering they have inflicted and continue to inflict upon another people.  
*(Appendix XIII)*

## 16. Human Rights

The delegation was shocked to witness the appalling living conditions endured by many Palestinians, particularly in Gaza. Yet this squalor existed in close proximity to the comfort and affluence evident in the state of Israel – in land many Palestinians identify as home - and in the privileged settlements that have sprung up in their midst. The delegation recognises that the Jewish population of Israel today, whether they were directly affected or not, carries an immense burden of grief and suffering resulting from what they endured at the hands of Fascism, including the denial of their humanity and their very right to exist that constituted the Holocaust.

Thus, the repeated and insistent demands of Israelis for security can be understood, given this history. We believe that humanity has a duty to ensure that the historical experiences of the Jewish people under Fascism, both before and during the Holocaust, should never be forgotten: everyone, if they have the opportunity, should visit the Holocaust museum at Yad Vashem.

The delegation also recognises that Israeli citizens have also suffered during the present conflict. They are entitled to security and the right to life.

We agree however with the numerous Israeli human rights groups, whose moral leadership and whose courage we greatly admire, that the violent response of the Israeli authorities – the control of movement, the destruction of homes and lands, the arrests and killings and the blockade of Gaza - amounts to a collective punishment of the whole Palestinian people and is





The Wailing Wall, Jerusalem







## Recommendations

1. That the report is presented to the Executive Council and is published as a Congress document for widespread distribution throughout the Irish, European and International Trade Union Movement.
2. The Executive Council should meet with the Taoiseach and the Minister for Foreign Affairs to discuss the findings of the delegation and the content of the two resolutions carried at BDC 2007. The objective purpose of these meetings is:
  - to request the Irish government to initiate policy change on Palestine, at EU level with regard to the illegal actions of the Israeli Government;
  - to request the Irish government to oppose the withholding of EU funding for the Palestinian Authority and to call for the end of the preferential trading status afforded Israel under the Euro/Mediterranean Agreement.
3. The Executive Council should meet with the Minister for Foreign Affairs to discuss the financing of specific programmes for the Palestinian people. These should include:
  - building capacity in civic society including conflict resolution both intra and inter Palestinian and Israeli society;
  - encourage and provide expertise for Irish investment in the Palestinian economy;
  - for development of the Equality Agenda and a Rights Based Approach to the political and civic institutions in Palestine;
  - the provision of expertise from Ireland in building social partnership between the various pillars in both Israel and Palestine.
4. Following on from the distribution of the report a further meeting to be held with our sister confederations in GB with the objective of a Council of the Isles campaign on behalf of the Palestinian people.
5. Through ICTU membership of the ETUC and the ITUC to raise the plight of the Palestinian people with particular emphasis on building solidarity with the PGFTU.
6. To engage with the Israeli labour movement and the Israeli government to discuss the above policies and to lobby for a change of policy focus, from the primacy of security to the primacy of a political resolution.
7. To encourage other trade union delegations to visit the occupied Palestinian territories and Israel.
8. That ICTU pursue active engagement and collaborative working with Palestinian and Israeli human rights groups and other civic society organisations as necessary.
9. To support and promote a boycott campaign of Israeli goods and services and a policy of disinvestment from Israeli companies as a means of encouraging the Israeli government to comply with International Law and to cease the human rights violations of the Palestinian people.
10. That ICTU hosts a high level conference with international speakers, to develop trade union solidarity.



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ENABLE PALESTINIAN REFU  
EXERCISING THEIR RIGHT

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