



## **Briefing on Palestinian workers in Israeli Corporations under COVID-19 Pandemic**

*The Land Defence Coalition, The Palestine New Federation of Trade Unions, the Palestinian Postal Services Workers Union and Human Rights Defenders, April 2020*

*As the Coronavirus pandemic is used to violate workers' rights all over the world, including Palestinian workers, we stand together to challenge employers and states that aim to maximize profits by cheapening the workers' labor, undermining their rights and neglecting protection for them from the pandemic. For Palestinians working for Israeli corporations, the apartheid system based on racial oppression and denial of the workers' rights is showing unfettered cruelty. .*

*The injustices of the different but interconnected political and economic realities we are living in across the globe are being aggravated. Time is now to build networks uniting workers worldwide through which they can overthrow the ongoing economic exploitation.*

The unity of efforts is an urgent quest to save the lives of workers worldwide, including the lives of Palestinian workers as they are facing ill-treatment by Israel and at the workplace in Israeli corporations amid the spread of COVID-19. So far, tens of Palestinian workers have contracted COVID-19 while working for Israeli employers and been rejected treatment in Israeli hospitals. As Palestinians we are now fighting on two fronts to survive: COVID-19 and the Israeli occupation.

The Israeli occupation and apartheid regime is an economic enterprise that has been growing through the exploitation of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian workers forced to work at Israeli corporations, including in the settlements, as their economy has been strangling due to the longstanding occupation. Amid the spread of COVID-19, Israel is taking advantage of the moment to keep its economy going through Palestinian workers, reducing them to inhumane working and living conditions. Among others, they lack the basic protection measures from the pandemic. Protecting the Palestinian workers' rights enslaved by their colonizers to build Israel's apartheid economy, including the illegal Israeli settlements on the lands robbed of them, must not be suspended until the end of the pandemic.

We have to come together to build a post-COVID19 world that respects rights and freedoms and puts people before profits. This inherently must include an end to the tyrannical rule of the Israeli occupation violating Palestinians basic human rights and fundamental freedoms.

As an immediate action to combat not only the health crisis created by the pandemic but also its economic and social fallout, *The Land Defense Coalition, The Palestine New Federation of Trade Unions, the Palestinian Postal Services Workers Union and Human Rights Defenders* call for more pressure on the Israeli occupation authorities to protect Palestinian worker, like Israeli ones, by giving them the right to stay safe at home without cutting their income.

### **Palestinian Workers Dumped at Israeli Military Checkpoints**

Thousands of Palestinian workers leave their homes every day to work for Israeli corporations, including in the settlements. They cross from the occupied West Bank to their work places through heavily overcrowded checkpoints that are better fit for cattle that make any preventive measures against the Coronavirus impossible, and deal with constant humiliation, mistreatment, and low wages. They are only driven towards this lifestyle due to poverty and high unemployment rates in Palestine. Now, with the outbreak of the novel coronavirus growing worse, these laborers face not only the illness, but abuse and loss of income as well.

Over the past two weeks, the scene of Israeli employers and authorities dumping sick Palestinian workers at the roadside has become a pattern. On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, a Palestinian worker who was suspected to have the coronavirus was humiliated when his employer called the Israeli occupation authorities to pick him up and throw him at Beit Sira Military checkpoint. According to witnesses, the incapacitated worker was “left to die” near the Beit Sera checkpoint. He laid there in pain barely able to move or breathe for three hours until a Red Crescent ambulance arrived. The scenario was repeated yet again; when another employer left a worker who displayed flu symptoms outside Salfit, and another was left north of Jerusalem for failing to provide a “certificate” that proves he had not contracted the disease.



The sick Palestinian worker at Beit Sira Military checkpoint

Palestinian laborers in Israel face harsh, inhumane working conditions, with little to no protection of their rights. While the Israeli government has decreed a lockdown, asking Israelis to stay home, it is Palestinian workers that are supposed to keep the economy going.

Muhammad Al-Blaidi, the Secretary General of the Palestine New Federation of Trade Unions, explains that “amid the spread of COVID-19, the Israeli government gave an unemployment grant only to Israeli workers, where they can receive income without going to work, although in theory even Palestinian workers would have the right by law to get such a grant.” Israeli authorities instead declared that Palestinian workers would be allowed to remain at their place of work and away from home for up to two months during this crisis. There is no clear info about where they would stay and what kind of protection they would receive, or if they will be provided medical attention in case of sickness. Yet, the hundreds of workers who started to return to their homes before the end of the two-month period determined by the Israeli authorities, were struck by how their Israeli employers reneged on their obligations to secure them proper accommodations to mitigate the precariousness of the pandemic. According to Muhammed Al-Blaidi, “Israeli employers have not even provided Palestinians working during the pandemic with protection from the virus. Currently, Palestinian workers sleep in under-construction buildings and other overcrowded places.”



Places were Palestinian workers are forced to stay in in Israel

Workers are forced to continue their work with Israeli employers as rights such as ongoing payment of salaries during the COVID-19 crisis are simply not an option for them. Muhammed Al-Blaidi emphasizes that “a lot of Palestinian workers working in Israeli illegal settlements don’t get pay for their pension, vacation pay or paid sick days. Some of them are paid not for the number of hours they work, but for how much work they achieve.” Under these conditions, stopping to work means not having how to provide for livelihood for the family.

As the exploitation and negligence of protection from COVID-19 for the Palestinian workers continues, more Palestinian workers are being caught in the grip of the virus, almost on a daily basis. Few days ago, fifteen Palestinian workers working in a chicken factory in the illegal settlement of “Atarot” were tested positive for COVID-19. Seven of these infected workers went to their homes in their villages, which are Deir Al-Sudan, Shuqba, and Khirbet Al-Musbah and mixed with some people. The mistreatment of the Palestinian workers by the Israeli authorities endangers not only their lives but their families’, too. The increased number of people contracting the virus puts their lives and the lives of others in precarious conditions as the medical facilities for Palestinians enduring a long-lasting occupation are very limited. According to the fourth Geneva Convention, Israel as the occupying power has the obligation to guarantee the Palestinian people, as an occupied population, the needed healthcare, including protection from pandemics such as the COVID19. Yet, Israel, as a country well-known since its creation in 1948 for its discriminatory and apartheid practices against the occupied people, continues to

trample over the Palestinian workers' basic rights, the rights of the entire Palestinian people and the international law.

### **Palestinian Workers: Shall They Stay at Home Healthy and Let their Families Starve?**

While Israelis exploit the need of Palestinian workers for work providing them with nothing but troublesome working conditions, Palestinians accept such conditions embittered by the fact that staying at home might deprive their children of basic needs, like subsistence. The Israeli occupation's systematic apartheid and settler colonial practices exploit Palestinians' natural resources and have made hundreds of thousands of them lose their land, which used to be a main source of income. The economic treaties between the Palestinians National Authority and Israel; mainly, the Paris Protocols have also made the Palestinian economy crippled depending heavily on the Israeli one. The splintering of the Palestinian economy has forced hundreds of thousands of Palestinian men, women and children to seek work in Israeli companies, including in the illegal settlements, as cheap wage-laborers without the minimum rights respecting their humanity as a way out of the high rates of unemployment in the Occupied West Bank, which increased after the pandemic.

The unconditional US support to Israel's settler colonial practices embodied in the so-called 'Deal of the Century' has given Israel the green light to escalate and accelerate its settlement expansion. The Jordan Valley, a fertile strip of land rich of natural resources that would suffice to uplift the Palestinian economy, is the main target of this unilateral 'No Peace Plan.' Annexing the Jordan Valley will stunt the Palestinian economy even more and will push more Palestinians to accept being exploited as wage-labor to survive serving the Israeli economy and the sustainability of its apartheid regime while distancing the Palestinian people even further from its aim of self-termination. Trump's 'Deal of the Century' promises Palestinians economic prosperity if they give up their basic rights. However, a viable Palestinian economy can only be fulfilled when Palestinians reclaim their lands and natural resources appropriated for Israeli illegal settlers and when the forced economic linkage with the Israeli economy is completely cut.

Amid this situation, Palestinian workers are not to be blamed for choosing to work for Israeli employers. However, as many of them have contracted the virus at their workplace, their neighbors and the larger Palestinian society treat them with distrust, where more attention and criticism has been put at them. In a video that went viral on social media, one worker complains about a shopkeeper who refused to let his son buy groceries and sent him home. The situation has since intensified, after the first death due to coronavirus in Palestine was recorded on March 25<sup>th</sup>. An elderly woman from the village of Biddu died shortly after displaying symptoms, having contracted the virus from her son who works at an Israeli settlement. More and more people are contracting the virus in Biddu and in other areas of Occupied West Bank. Meanwhile, the dismay of workers continues to increase as their livelihood is cut and more people are bullying them.

### **Workers Lack Unionization and Legal Protection**

The current conditions the Palestinian workers are encountering did not deteriorate due to the spread of COVID-19 but due to Israeli apartheid. Their conditions have never been tolerable as the systematic exploitation of the disenfranchised workers is a key element of apartheid and colonial practices and allows these systems to survive and thrive. Israeli employers constantly deny Palestinian workers their rights, even if they are due to them by law. Al-Blaidi also adds that “in some Israeli factories Palestinian workers are paid minimum wage according to the Jordanian pay scale, instead of the Israeli minimum wage.”

Imad Temiza, a human rights defender and the representative of the Palestinian Postal Service Workers Union asserts Al-Blaidi’s observation stating that “in theory, Palestinian workers are entitled to the same rights the Israeli workers enjoy as enshrined in Israeli law since 1970. Yet, in practice, Palestinian workers are denied such rights.” Speaking about the workers’ dire working conditions, Temiza added that “Palestinian workers work for 18 hours a day with the fear that they might lose their jobs at any time. Also, Israeli employers don’t provide Palestinians working in construction with protection measures where the number of those dying at the workplace is notoriously increasing.” Al-Blaidi stated that in 2019, “over 60 Palestinian workers in Israel died at work due to the lack of protection measures” stressing that every year there is a loss of tens of workers.

Palestinian workers face extreme difficulties when they want to demand their rights or any enhancement in working conditions. Temiza relates this to the fact that “Palestinian workers are unaware of their basic rights. The role of labor unions either in Palestine or in Israel is limited.” Al-Blaidi argues that Palestinian workers lack awareness of their rights as “the Palestinian labor unions, like the organization he works in, are short of the financial means through which they can raise awareness amongst workers of their rights and employ lawyers protecting the workers’ rights in Israeli courts.” “The role of the General Federation of Israeli Trade Unions (Histadrut), which the Palestinian workers are required to pay for every month,” Al-Blaidi observes, “is tenuous providing no legal protection for Palestinian workers especially nowadays amid the spread of the pandemic.” In fact, the Histadrut, Al-Blaidi argues, “is part of the Israeli settler-colonial project that has been entangling with the Israeli occupation authorities to violate Palestinian workers’ rights.” The treatment of Palestinian workers as second-class labor that has intensified since the spread of the pandemic shows how important supportive steps towards the unionization of workers are in order to protect their rights.

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## Notes

(1) A phone interview with Muhammed Al-Blaidi

(2) A phone interview with Imad Temiza

(3) <http://english.pnn.ps/2020/04/01/15-new-coronavirus-cases-bring-total-number-to-134-in-palestine/>

(4) <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-palestinian-workers-israel-reneges-deal-contains-pandemic>

(5) <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-palestine-west-bank-records-first-death-case>

(6) <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-palestine-labourer-found-near-west-bank-checkpoint-covid19>