

The predicament of Palestinian workers in Israel

By Senussi Bsaiqri

Introduction

The Palestinian economy is in a state of total collapse with a 31% rate of unemployment in the West Bank. As a result, despite the difficult circumstances they face, the number of Palestinians seeking work inside Israel is increasing.

Of the approximately one million Palestinian workers living in the West Bank, only a small number are allowed to legally work inside Israel. In 2009, no more than 23,000 Palestinians were given Israeli work permits. Nevertheless, around 40,000 Palestinians continue to work inside Israel, almost half of them do so illegally. As a result, most of these



workers are exploited by employers who are aware of their illegal status and sometimes they are not paid at all - if they complain, they are simply handed over to the authorities. The estimated 25,000 Palestinians who enter Israel illegally each year live in constant fear of exposure to the police. According to Moshe Ben Shi, a spokesman for the Israeli Border Police, 15,000 illegal Palestinian workers are arrested annually.

Difficult living and working conditions

- In a report by Al Jazeera-net last November, a Palestinian worker from Tulkarem in the West Bank described the occupied territories as a “large prison, lacking in the basics of life” from where tens of thousands of Palestinian workers enter Israel without permits on a journey that takes up to 24 hours, even though Tulkarem is only a few minutes from Israel as the crow flies. Another worker told the same source that staying in the West Bank was tantamount to a “slow death”, which is why he and people like him “go into the unknown [in Israel] without work permits”. A third man said that men are not “scared of jail, nor the oppression of the occupation”, Palestinian migrant workers fear being unemployed more than anything else.
- According to the report, many workers stay in fields without any of the basic necessities of life. There are neither cooking utensils nor water for washing and bathing. They hang their clothes on trees and when they sleep, it is on the ground with their shoes at the ready to run if an Israeli police patrol should appear.



- “We leave our families for months. Sometimes you forget the facial features of your children... who grow up while you are away... we are humiliated and face prosecution... we work from sunrise until sunset for very low wages,” said one worker. “Imagine,” added another, “going through this day in, day out, or working for someone for several days only for him to refuse to pay you and threaten to report you to the police.”

Political decisions make conditions for Palestinian workers worse

- The Israeli authorities frequently make decisions that have a serious effect on Palestinian workers inside Israel. For example, Israeli pension funds are no longer allowed to insure Palestinian workers, and an annual tax of \$1,000 has been imposed on every Palestinian working inside the old Green Line (the 1967 ceasefire line).
- In 2007, the Israeli government decided to subject Palestinian workers to Jordanian law, which resulted in dozens of workers being deprived of what few privileges they had, while Israeli workers in similar positions continued to enjoy the benefits of Israeli law. Observers claim that these decisions will force many workers out of their jobs as they will not be able to pay the tax.
- Despite a Supreme Court decision making it mandatory on employers and the Israeli government to guarantee Palestinian workers social security and all pension rights as long as they have made the necessary contributions, the Israeli authorities have not implemented the Court’s directive. Even so, it has been revealed that the average Palestinian worker pays 17.5% of his salary towards such benefits, without receiving them. This is seen by many as one way for the Israeli government to get large sums of extra income for the treasury without increasing expenditure, at the cost of depriving Palestinian workers of their entitlement.
- This reflects the level of discrimination against Palestinians and violates all international labour standards. It also breaches the Paris Economic Agreement signed by Israel and the PLO, which does not allow any reductions in salaries and privileges without the consent of the two parties.



Israel's policy regarding Palestinian workers

- The Israeli authorities have weakened Palestinian workers, in the West Bank (and Gaza Strip) and inside Israel. There is no union or other collective labour movement to look after workers' rights.
- It is noticeable that Israeli employment policies have encouraged young Palestinians to leave school and find work with Israeli enterprises. Significant financial incentives are on offer which have resulted in large numbers of young people leaving further and higher education to work in factories, farms and construction sites. To many observers this is not without its dangers, particularly after the first intifada in 1987. The emergence of a largely uneducated workforce will have a major effect on the structure and nature of Palestinian society. Nevertheless, Israeli restrictions on Palestinian economic activity over the past 60 years of occupation have weakened the Palestinian labour market; this discourages young men in particular, from looking to gain better jobs through education. The internal Palestinian economy has failed to accommodate a large number of job seekers.
- The establishment of the Palestinian Authority has not improved the situation for workers. On the contrary, conditions have deteriorated. The number of employees in Palestinian Authority institutions has reached 160,000, a figure that does not represent the actual requirements of the sector. Meeting the salaries of this huge labour force has deprived the PA of the ability to provide workers with the support they need.
- The Israeli policy of closures across the occupied territories, and the siege of Gaza, has badly affected the Palestinian people and their ability to find employment. As part of its general crack-down on the Palestinians, the Israeli government has encouraged the use of cheap labour from other countries, making an already bad situation much worse for Palestinians.
- Strict measures are in place on the employment of Palestinian workers in the territories controlled by Israel, including the following:
 - They must obtain security clearance in order to work;
 - They must have a magnetic identity card containing the full personal details of the employee; and
 - They must pay a fee of up to \$500 per month, whether they are working or not.



Such restrictive measures mean that a black market for labour has emerged, with Palestinian workers facing open and blatant exploitation.

- Crossing security barriers are among the worst obstacles even legal Palestinian workers have to face. Every day, they have to queue for hours to cross and then find the means of transport to their workplace. Security measures include physical inspection and screening, similar to that used in airports. A serious medical consequence of the frequent exposure to radiation during security screening is the high rate of cancer among Palestinians. On many occasions, workers are prevented from entering Israel without any explanation being given. Hence, many choose to stay overnight in their workplace to avoid having to pass through security daily. This, of course, means that they are apart from their families for long periods, even though in terms of distance they are very close.

Psychological and social effects

- Existing between hope and despair, and having to deal with severe instability and humiliation, many Palestinian workers suffer from psychological problems.
- Many are reported to be disturbed, angry and full of hatred for what the Israelis are forcing upon them. Such difficulties and intimidation help to create a complex human being who is incapable of sharing family responsibilities, particularly the upbringing of their children.

Victims of fraud

- According to the Ma'an news agency, Israeli officials – including a security agent, a senior civil servant and an employee in the Israeli Interior Ministry – along with 23 other Israelis and 11 Palestinians, together form a gang which has defrauded thousands of Palestinian workers over the past three years. The gang smuggles Palestinians into Israel and facilitates the issue and sale of counterfeit work permits, charging up to 40 percent of workers' income.
- The report prepared by Ma'an says that within two days of workers with such bogus documentation entering Israel, their names are given by the gang to the Israeli authorities who revoke the permits on the basis of there being no work. The cancellation of work permits results in the loss of benefits, estimated to be worth millions of Israeli shekels.

Conclusion

Most Palestinian workers employed inside Israel are in need of support to prevent financial and psychological suffering and exploitation. Many feel lost, abandoned and alienated from the community in which they live and are desperate for help to be able to make an honest living without losing their dignity. The international community has a duty to urge the Israeli government to abide by international laws and labour agreements and thus ensure that Palestinian workers are not being discriminated against.

